MAX

# QUIET HOURS





Reading playlist:



For Pierre.



"*Aurea Mediocritas,* the ethical goal of reaching a virtuous middle ground between two sinful extremes."



**Trigger Warning!**

This work contains scenes and themes that may be distressing to some readers, including:

1. Psychological horror and intense mental distress
2. Depictions of trauma, abuse, and neglect
3. Suicidal thoughts and self-harm references
4. Graphic and unsettling imagery
5. Memory loss, reality distortion, and dissociation

Reader discretion is strongly advised.



**SUMMARY:**


1. Limbo Deluxe: No Exit Edition
2. Snow
3. Who The Hell Is Fdeya?
4. WHAT.
5. Exit Denied
6. Entropy But Make It Crazier
7. Resonance Pattern
8. Discipline
9. Promise.
10. Have You Tried Turning It Off and On Again?
11. Field Error
12. Reintegration Protocol.
13. Schrödinger’s Existential Crisis.
14. Fiolleto.exe Has Stopped Responding
15. Peekaboo
16. Instance Zero
17. I'm Going Off The Rails On A Crazy Train…
18. The Sea Has Customer Service Now
19. In the Name of All the Useless Deals
20. Forever Mine
21. Anchor
22. The Anatomy of a Quiet House
23. Ragebait Therapy
24. Parasite Logic

25. The Ship Of Theseus
26. Letters To No God
27. Cyclotron Motion



**AUTHORS NOTE:**

Dear reader,

The following book might be a little sensitive for some audiences, as mentioned before (and probably ignored by you). You know, feelings, trauma, existential crises, the usual Tuesday stuff. Still, give Fdeya and Fiolleto a chance, they're not that bad. Well… depending on your definition of "bad." This thing I call a book was stitched together from way too many inspirations: lores, weird short stories, daydreaming, some hallucinations, and the occasional emotional gut punch from Margaret Atwood. So if something feels confusing, haunting, or just downright deranged, let's call it artistic homage and move on, shall we?

Give my little demons a chance. They might surprise you, or traumatize you. Or both. Probably both. I poured way too many sleepless nights and an unholy amount of caffeine into this, so if you're still reading this note, congratulations, you're already more committed than half the characters in this book. Anyway, I hope you enjoy reading about these two emotional trainwrecks stumbling through the void as much as I enjoyed writing them (which is to say, with questionable sanity).

Lots of love,

Maria



CHAPTER 1 - LIMBO DELUXE: NO EXIT EDITION

# FDEYA DOSTOEVSKY

-PRESENT-

-EARTH θ-

I’ve never had problems with winter. In fact, I’ve always been fond of it. It's quiet. Almost comforting. But today, contradictorily, all I crave is warmth. Not the warmth of sunlight or heavy blankets, but something human. The same that once kept me together when everything else was falling apart. A warmth I no longer have, not any more.

I let out a deep, tired sigh and stare blankly at the ceiling above me, focusing on the old ceiling fan spinning lazily in this damp, forgotten room. Today was horrific. One of those days you wish you could erase. I spent hours caught in a silent knot of lapses of memories, reliving the loss of the only person who ever truly understood me, or at least, someone I believe existed. I can't exactly remember.

Eventually, with the last bit of will I can muster, I drag myself out of that narrow, sweat-soaked bed and walk towards the dim window. I meant to close it, maybe keep the wind out, but something outside halts me. I sit

on the edge of the windowsill. I live on the twenty-fourth floor, and while the idea of falling doesn't exactly comfort me, it doesn't scare me either.

From up here, I watch the street below. The traffic flows, horns blare, people argue on pavements, rush about aimlessly. My eyes catch on an old, crooked lamppost and a broken traffic light at the intersection, something so simple, so insignificant. And yet, I can't look away.

During the weeks I've been living in here, I never saw anything so fascinating. To a normal person, a dead traffic light might seem trivial, barely worth noticing. But when you

start paying attention to things like that, it usually means some part of you is searching desperately for distraction, for anything that resembles meaning.

I rest my head against the cold wall and feel my body grow numb, almost weightless. It is something I find myself doing when I am close to the edge, surrendering, letting everything slip from my grasp. I close my eyes and allow the thoughts to swallow me.

*What if I just fell? Would anyone notice?*

*Would anyone miss me like I miss him?*

*Would they care half as much as I did? Half as much as I do?*

No. Of course not. I don't even have a family, or do I? I can't remember. Why do I keep trying so hard to hold on?

Ah, yes, because I made a promise. The bastard made me promise. And I may be many things, forgetful, lost, insane, but I carry my promises to the end.

Not too long ago, a stubborn version of me swore to someone that she would make the most of life, that she wouldn't give up. That she wouldn't end it. And now, remembering that version of myself, so naïve and full of defiance, I can't help but fell completely and utterly helpless. How I hate him, how I would love to remember his name, or perhaps, his face.

A quiet bitter laugh escapes me. I step back from the window and into this cold, miserable room I still call mine. My body, now fully drained, begs for rest. It's been months since I last had a real night of sleep.

So I cave in. I throw myself back into the sheets, not for comfort, but out of sheer exhaustion, and let the darkness take me.

CHAPTER 2 - SNOW

# FDEYA DOSTOEVSKY

-PAST BEFORE THE ACCIDENT-

-EARTH-

Snow… in early May? Now I can officially say I've seen it all. Moscow keeps finding new ways to surprise me.

At 1:30 am, any sane twelve-year-old would be under a pile of blankets, tucked in and hazily asleep. However, I was already sprinting barefoot through the dark hallways of the orphanage straight to Fiolleto's room, whisper-laughing to myself like some

winter-struck lunatic. The place is terrifying at night. The corridors are pitch-black, and the old wooden floors creak under every step.

We've been inseparable since we were little, as attached as two orphaned kids could get. So if I'm going to be wide awake, marvelling at a surprise snowfall, he will be wide awake with me.

When I reach the chipped grey door at the end of the hallway, one of the oldest rooms in the building, I know I've found him. Rooms here are assigned by how long you've been in the orphanage: the longer you've stayed, the worse your room. Fiolleto's room, of course,

was practically crumbling. He had arrived a year before me.

I knock softly. No answer. I try again, this time louder. Still nothing.

I grit my teeth. He has to be awake, he always stays up reading. He does this purposely just to mess with me, I know it. But just as I raise my hand to knock a third time, the door creaks open. Fiolleto stands there, tall and groggy, grey eyes half-shut and curls all messy.

“Fdeya...?” he mumbles in a voice laced with sleepy irritation.

I grin. Seeing him in such a way, dishevelled and utterly annoyed, makes me want to burst into a fit of laughter.

“Good morning,” I whisper cheerfully. “We have snow.”

His expression shifts from confused to mildly homicidal.

“You woke me up… for snow?”

“Yes?” I offer sheepishly, then quickly add, “Also… I was thinking we could go to the clearing.”

The clearing. Our spot. A place far enough from the orphanage that we could talk without the materi-sirota, the overbearing caretakers,

eavesdropping. It's quiet, private, and most importantly: ours.

"Fdeya…" he sighs, rubbing his face, "it's 1:45 in the morning. Go back to your fucking bed."

"Please! I swear it's the last time—"

I cut myself off… we both know that's a lie. If it snowed tomorrow, I'd be back here knocking on his door again as if nothing had ever happened.

The irony doesn't escape me either. I hate going out at night. And yet, here I am, practically begging him to sneak out into a snowstorm with me.

He stares at me as if he’s trying to blink away the nightmare, then groans in defeat and turns back into his room. He pulls on his worn-out coat from the closet, the faded navy one with the sleeves chewed by time and probably rats, and throws it over his shoulders. I step aside as he emerges, muttering something about “lunatic friendships” under his breath. I take that as a yes.

We don't say much as we move down the hallway, our footsteps slow and deliberate. The floorboards groan like ancient spirits, so we step in sync, heel-to-toe, along the narrow strip near the left wall. It’s an unspoken code among

the long-timers: step too far to the centre, and the floor yells your secrets.

We pass doors marked with numbers fading into the peeling paint. Behind one, I can hear someone snoring... probably Andrei, who never quite stopped wheezing after last winter's flu. Another room leaks yellow light under the crack of its door. Most likely Matvei, who always keeps a reading lamp on. He is too scared of the dark but too cocky to admit it.

The orphanage feels older at night. The wallpaper is torn in places, exposing the brittle plaster beneath. Dust floats around in the glow of the emergency lights. Somewhere, a pipe hisses. Somewhere else, a rat scurries.

“Remind me why we’re doing this?” Fiolleto whispers as we duck into the stairwell.

“Because it’s snowing in May,” I say with mock awe.

He snorts. “Magical.”

“Shut up. It's rare.”

The stairwell is the worst part. The echo chamber of disaster. One wrong move here, and the whole building wakes up. We descend with breath held, past the second floor, then the first. On the ground floor, the hallway turns colder. The heat doesn’t reach here. It never has. The air feels sharper, my feet sting against the cracked tiles. There’s a small window at the end

of the hall, the kind with fogged glass and rusty bars. My heart tugs forward. It really is beautiful…

We move past the common room and the locked storeroom, finally turning left toward the kitchen corridor. This stretch of hallway is significantly darker; the motion sensor light at the end gave out months ago and was never replaced

“Stick close to the wall,” I whisper. “Floor’s quieter.”

“Thank you, Snow General,” he mutters.

Despite the sarcasm, he follows me. His hand brushes mine for a second, not intentional,

just a reflex from walking side by side in tight quarters. But I still feel a jolt.

The kitchen door is just ahead, steel and battered, dented from years of overuse. Next to it is a broken push cart that the cooks use to haul soup vats. Someone's old scarf is hanging from one of its handles. I wonder who forgot it. Probably Nastya. She's always cold and losing things.

"Watch for the step," I mouth as we reach the door. There's a warped wooden slab just before it, trip over it, and the whole cart rattles like a tambourine. I hop over it. Fiolleto tiptoes after me, dramatically raising his arms as if he's in a circus act.

When I reach for the front door, hand on the icy knob, a sudden realisation hits me: This is a terrible idea. It’s snowing hard, and I'm not even wearing a jacket. I’m about to walk into a frozen forest in the middle of the night.

I pause. My pride wants me to go through with it. But my common sense, which rarely wins, finally kicks in.

“No,” I whisper, stepping away from the door. “I can’t.”

Fiolleto raises an eyebrow, exasperated.

“No? Fdeya…” he sighs “Go put on a coat. I don’t want you dying on me,” he mutters with a crooked smile, “At least not tonight.”

I roll my eyes.

“Prick,” I mutter under my breath before huffing. “Go ahead. I’ll catch up with you,” I say before turning back inside.

He shrugs and heads toward the clearing without another word.

CHAPTER 3 - WHO THE HELL IS FDEYA?

# FIOLLETO YAROSLAV

-PAST BEFORE THE ACCIDENT-

-EARTH-

There's a thin line between being a genius and being an idiot. Fdeya uses that line like a fucking jump rope.

Don't get me wrong, I love Fdeya. Truly. But sometimes… She makes me want to rip my hair out. Who in their right mind wakes someone up at nearly two in the morning just to drag them outside into the beginnings of a May snowstorm?

Fdeya. That's who.

And despite every fibre of logic in my body screaming to go back to bed, I find myself trudging down the narrow trail toward the clearing, while that reckless idiot scrambles inside to find a coat so she doesn’t freeze to death.

Classic Fdeya: actions first, consequences later. But the thing is… I can never say no to her. Not really. We've known each other for as long as I can remember, longer, probably. We arrived at the orphanage around the same time, and from that moment on, she carved out a permanent space in my life. A loud, stubborn,

infuriating space, but one I wouldn't trade for anything.

She’s my anchor in a world that constantly threatens to pull me under. When everything else falls apart, when the materi-sirota screams, when the building groans like it’s about to collapse, when the loneliness becomes too much, it’s Fdeya who reminds me that I’m still human. That I matter.

She is my safe place. My home. My everything. And so, here I am. The snow crunches beneath my boots with each step. It’s light, not even deep enough to cover the ground completely, just a fine dusting that settles on the leaves. Still, it’s cold. Bitterly so. The kind of

cold that slips into your bones and refuses to leave. I pull my coat tighter around me and keep walking.

It's quiet out here, the kind of silence you don't get inside the orphanage. No leaking pipes, no shouting adults, no snoring roommates. Just trees. Wind. Snow. When I notice the path start to close in tighter around me, I know I'm close.

The clearing. Our sanctuary. We found this place when we were seven. We'd been trying to escape a materi-sirota who caught us "stealing" bread from the kitchen (as if stale leftovers counted as a crime). Fdeya, always three steps ahead of me in mischief, had bolted through the

trees, and I followed without thinking. We ran until we were winded, out of sight, and landed in this hidden pocket of the forest. Ever since then, it's been ours. The one place the adults never find. The one place where the world feels manageable.

As I reach its edge, snow is still falling gently around me. The moon casts everything in a pale blue glow, the branches above trembling in the wind like they're trying to whisper secrets. I sit on our usual log, brushing off the light snow, and lean back, exhaling a cloud of breath into the night. My mind drifts. It always does when I'm alone.

Sometimes I wonder what life would've been like if we'd had parents. Real ones. Not the rotating staff of underpaid, bitter women who can barely remember our names. Would I be someone different? Calmer, maybe. Less angry. Less… responsible for a girl who never learned how to slow down. I don't blame her. Not really. Life was cruel to us both. But still, sometimes I feel like I'm holding both of us together with a fraying string.

And yet, even with all her chaos, I wouldn't change a strand of her hair. She makes everything bearable. Every punishment, every bad meal, every winter night. If I ever lost her,

truly lost her, I think the silence would devour me.

The branches rustle behind me, and I hear the familiar crunch of hurried footsteps in the snow. She's here. I don't turn around. I don't need to.

"Thought you'd frozen," I tease, holding back a smile.

"Almost did," she answers, nearly out of breath. "Had to sneak into the laundry room to get a decent coat." She drops next to me with a dramatic sigh, already brushing snowflakes from her sleeves.

We sat in silence for a while. Not awkward silence, just the kind where everything important has already been said, and now we're simply existing in each other's orbit. I can feel her shoulder against mine, warm even through the layers of fabric. Steadying.

She looks up at the sky, watching the snow swirl under the moonlight. "Do you think we'll ever leave this place?"

I glance at her. There's a look in her eyes, not sadness, exactly, but something close. Longing. Maybe even fear.

"I think someday we'll be anywhere but here," I say honestly. "I don't know how, or when… but I know we won't be trapped

forever.” She doesn’t answer right away. Instead, she leans her head gently against my shoulder and mutters.

“I trust you, Fiolleto.”

CHAPTER 4 - WHAT.

# FDEYA DOSTOEVSKY

-PRESENT-

-EARTH θ-

Mornings are a performance.

Not the kind you rehearse, but the kind you repeat so many times it begins to wear grooves into your mind. Every breath is choreographed. Every blink is calculated. You wake up, and before your brain even catches up, your body already knows the script.

I always wake before the alarm. I don't remember the last time I actually needed it. But

that’s not because I’m naturally an early riser, but because of discipline.

Back in the orphanage, you were supposed to be up before the first bell, standing ready in your threadbare uniform, eyes wide and silent, ready to march out into the day without hesitation or complaint. But if you even dared to imagine the possibility of being late, if you dared to snooze even a minute beyond the cruel call of the official wake-up bell, you were punished. Not just with stern words, but with cold, sharp consequences that stayed with you long after the bruises faded.

They made examples of those who lagged. It wasn’t just a matter of missing breakfast or

being scolded. The punishments were designed to break you down, to mould you into someone who obeyed without thought or question. A single minute of sleep beyond the warning was a risk you couldn't afford.

So my body learned to wake before the sound of the bell, before the screech of the whistle. It learned to startle awake at the faintest whisper of light slipping through the cracked door or the soft creak of the caretaker's shoes down the hall. The fear was constant, like an undercurrent pulling at my nerves, tightening my chest and making my heart race before I'd even opened my eyes.

Even now, years later and thousands of miles from that place, the habit remains. My body wakes before the alarm, eyes snapping open anticipating disaster. But now, the disaster is different. It’s not the stern voice of a caretaker or the cold slap of punishment. It’s the weight of memory pressing down on me, the knowledge that there are no second chances here, no reset button.

The light leaking through the cracked blinds is pallid and off-colour, not quite daylight; it's more artificial. This place doesn’t have sunlight the way the others do. It has a kind of grey static. The smog moves in a slow ride across the skyline, and even when it’s

bright out, the streets look like an old photograph: grainy, uncertain, faded at the edges.

I sit up and swing my legs over the side of the bed. The floor is cold and uneven beneath my feet. I rest there for a moment, hands braced against my thighs, as someone recovering from a wound might. Maybe I am.

Perhaps despite the cuts on wrists and the scars across my thighs, there's something different, a deeper wound, such as was left by his loss.

I count the tiles between me and the window, always do. Nine. Always nine. If there were ten, I think I'd lose my mind all over

again. The window is streaked with dust and rain. From here, the city looks tired. Not the way people do, but in the way machines do when they're running on borrowed time.

I can make out the same crooked lamppost at the corner of Karov and Sector 3. The same broken traffic light that blinks on red. The same hunched man with a newspaper and a thermos, sitting on the same bench, at the same hour, with the same blank stare. Every day. As if someone wound up the world wrong and forgot to tell it to change.

I brush my teeth. I shower in water that never gets warm. I comb my hair into a neat bun. I put on the usual uniform black turtle

neck, long charcoal skirt, and a coat with sleeves a little too long. I've tried dressing differently before, but something always feels wrong. As if the timeline itself rejects the change. It's easier to conform. To vanish in plain sight.

My reflection in the mirror barely startles me any more. I still expect to recognise her, but I never do. She has my face, but none of my expressions. None of my defiance. She looks tired. Not just in the physical way, but in the existential one. As if she's been here too long, watching everything unfold with no say in the script. She is something smaller. Something quieter.

To the world, I work across the street. My job is that of a civil archivist, nothing glamorous, nothing memorable. I've cultivated the illusion with precision: worn paperwork in my bag, and a badge clipped at just the right tilt to suggest bureaucracy. In truth, the building I claim to work in is just a slab of grey concrete that hums faintly at all hours. I've never once gone inside. And yet, every morning, I make the same walk there.

Sometimes, in the seconds between waking and remembering, I feel it deep in my bones: this isn't my life. It's similar to wearing someone else's skin. I was meant for something else. I don't know what. But not this.

Instead, I go to a café tucked just past the alley behind the substation. The tables are chipped laminate. The mugs all look like they were stolen from different diners. The lights buzz overhead. The server with the chipped tooth never looks me in the eye. This is where I perform.

Table near the window. Third from the left. I order tea I don't drink, always the same blend, bitter and under-steeped. I open my notebook. I flip through pages filled with meaningless phrases: half-decoded symbols, fake transfer ledgers, procedural codes that go nowhere. Occasionally, I write something real, a memory, a phrase I dreamed of.

“…I'll miss you, дорогая”

I used to know who told me that, but my memory grew to be as good as a broken CD record. Always repeating the same images.

I sit there for hours. Not waiting. Just existing. Or at least, relieved I am. Sometimes, I wonder if this city was built to contain me. Like some elaborate test, or some type of purgatory wrapped in concrete.

There are patterns here that don’t belong. People who walk the same path twice, identically Clock hands that never sync. Graffiti that disappears by afternoon and returns by midnight. The pigeons… they never land.

I’ve tracked their flight. They circle endlessly above Sector 12. Oh, the sectors, by the third week, I realised I was stuck here, I mapped whatever this city is supposed to be, and divided it into sectors.

I once tried to follow one through the tube, and when I surfaced, I was seven blocks away from where I started, with no memory of how I got there. My nose bled for two long hours, and I don't recall what happened next, might as well have fainted.

I know I’m not the only one here. Not the only one who came from, elsewhere. I need to believe that. I’ve spotted others, or at least I think I did, seven, maybe eight, people who

glance too sharply at the sky when it glitches. Who flinches at the wrong sounds. Who read books in extinct languages and leave behind coins that don't exist on this Earth.

But none of them remembers. Not like I do. They go about their lives as if this is where they were always meant to be. Maybe that's the blessing. Maybe forgetting is the only way to survive this place. But I remember.

CHAPTER 5 - EXIT DENIED

# FDEYA DOSTOEVSKY

-PRESENT-

-EARTH θ-

I hadn’t meant to walk that far.

It was supposed to be a loop; this is supposed to be a loop. Two blocks, maybe three. That's all I planned. Just enough to remind myself I existed outside the flat’s stale air, or the fake job I pretend to attend. But something pulled me farther.

The roads were quieter than usual today. Not just quiet in sound, but in presence. As if

the world had pulled back, holding its breath anticipating something I couldn’t name. No trams. No barking dogs perched on balconies. No children chasing plastic balls between parked cars. No old man smoking on the bench across from the kiosk. Just absence, subtle but complete.

The pigeons were gone.

And the tiles, the tiles from my bed to the window, weren't nine.

They were eight.

Eight.

Not nine.

*Eight, not nine.*

It didn’t seem much, but that could be solely my eyes fooling me. A missing tile. A number shaved away. But it landed on me like a ton of bricks. My brain snagged on it. A repetition broken, a pattern ruptured. In this city, in this version of Earth, the difference between eight and nine is the difference between looping and slipping.

Something was wrong. I could *feel* it.

There was nothing today. No rhythm. No repetition. No comfort in the familiar rotations I cling to, the illusion of order I've tricked myself into following.

There was no loop.

I turned down a side street I didn't recognise, not because it was new, but because I'd never noticed it before; it had always been there, quietly hiding in plain sight, waiting for me to finally see it. Narrow, almost spitefully so, a passage the city itself resented. The kind of street that feels deliberately forgotten. Rubbish bins lined the walls, hunched like beggars. Pipes hung low, spitting water onto cracked cement with rhythmic drips that echoed far louder than they should've. A single red flyer dangled from a crooked nail, its corners curled with time, the ink long smeared into crimson runes by rain

I kept walking. I had to. The silence was sharp, but movement dulled it. Forward momentum was the only thing that kept the fear from calcifying.

The further I went, the quieter everything became, as if someone had turned the volume down on the world. It was the kind of silence that doesn't just settle, it seeps. Seeps into your ears, your lungs, your bloodstream, your soul. Maybe the sound had been peeled away layer by layer, leaving only the raw bones of space behind, maybe I was just hallucinating… and yet…

The usual mechanical hum, gone.

No distant engines.

No buzzing streetlights.

Not even the wind.

Even the glitches, *gone*.

The soft flickers in light that used to whisper of wrongness. The way the same man crossed the same street three times in the span of a minute. The moment where time seemed to catch on its loop much as a skipping record. Gone.

Now it was smooth. Seamless.

Too seamless.

It felt like walking into a breath being held, as stepping into the pause between a question and its answer.

The buildings began to thin, not according to city planning or symmetry. They leaned strangely, some too narrow, others bloated with windows that reflected nothing. Not the sky, not me, not even the light. I was certain I was walking through the memory of a place that had already been erased.

A broken staircase led downward, crumbling into a hollow courtyard where weeds pushed through the bones of stone. Grass grew in wild, stubborn veins through shattered concrete. A tree had burst through the centre of

an old fountain, not placed, not grown, but erupted. Violent. It had clawed its way through the basin in a moment of quiet rebellion. Its roots tangled through the cracks mimicking veins through a broken sculpture. It looked ancient and angry, stripped bare of leaves. Reaching upward perhaps wanting to scrape the sky and pull something down with it.

Still, I walked.

I passed a rusted fence, half-swallowed by ivy so thick it was basically holding the metal in place, not growing on it, but restraining it. Past a door with no handle, bolted shut in the wall, with no reason to exist. No steps. No stairs. No signs of entry, or exit, or meaning.

Just a door, stubborn in its refusal to open. Past a dead-end that wasn't because when I blinked, it had shifted. What was once a wall was now a hallway. What was once a hallway was gone. And then, finally, the city ended.

Not abruptly.

Not violently.

But unnaturally.

It wasn't a wall, not really. And it wasn't a curtain. It was something between the two, a surface without texture, a presence without shape. I didn't see it at first. My brain tried to stitch meaning into it. Trees. Path. Distance. Continuation. But my eyes told a different

story. My eyes registered more trees, more ground, more distance, until they didn't. It shimmered.

A shimmer, soft and sickly, like the flicker of heat above a road on a sunlit day. But colder. Heavier. Denser. As if the air had grown thick with something that didn't want to be seen, or touched. As if the air itself was pulling away from me.

I stepped forward. The world hesitated.

It was subtle. But real. A kind of slow-motion resistance. As if the air itself was waiting to see what I'd do next

And then I reached out.

My fingertips met something that wasn't there, not in the normal sense. It didn't resist or snap. It gave. Slowly. Like elastic skin. As if the universe had lungs, and I was pressing my palm against their surface.

It *stretched*.

Not far. Just a few inches. But enough to feel it recoil, to feel the entire shape of reality push back against my palm. Enough to know that this place had an edge.

And I found it.

The tension rippled across my hand, and for a moment, I felt it move, not the barrier, but the world. Something underneath had shifted,

as if I disturbed a layer no one was meant to touch.

A breath not meant to be felt.

My breath caught. My pulse thundered.

Something inside me cracked open. Not from fear.

From confirmation.

I'm not crazy. I'm not crazy. I'm not crazy.

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I wasn't crazy. I've never been.

All the weird dreams weren't just hallucinations, the restless days, the false reflections, the déjà vu spirals; none of it was madness.

It was memory.

It was pieces of memory that were merely scattered. Everything was real. They are real. They happened. And he… He was real.

He existed, the man I kept seeing in pieces, in shadows, in aching glimmers of a time that refused to stay still; he existed. The person in my dreams existed. Or perhaps, still exists.

My body trembled as I pulled my hand away. I was warm at first. Then cold. Then… wrong. My skin prickled. My thoughts felt slippery. The air snapped back into place like a wound closing over. I stood there, gasping quietly.

The silence around me wasn't silence anymore; it was listening. Not just empty. Expectant. Something was waiting on the other side, and it had felt me touch it, and was now touching back.

I stood there for a long time, gathering my thoughts. It wasn't just a wall. It was a border. A seam in the world. A stitch in reality. Not physical. Not made. Something programmed.

This is not a city. Not a country. Not a world. It was a container.

A perfect little loop, designed to feel infinite, until you walked far enough, and the loop cracked open at the edge.

And suddenly, I understood. I felt it. I wasn't here by accident. I was here to forget. To float in an infinite limbo. To *obey*. This was a cage. And something, or someone, didn't want me to leave.

CHAPTER 6 - ENTROPY BUT MAKE IT CRAZIER

# FIOLLETO YAROSLAV

-PRESENT-

-EARTH-

It’s been 7 years, 11 months, 3 weeks, 2 days, 13 hours, 29 minutes, and 23 seconds…

No. 24 seconds. 25.

I still count. I wish I didn’t.

There’s a difference between remembering someone and keeping their ghost alive by feeding it time. I’ve crossed that line more times than I care to admit.

I don’t sleep a lot. Haven’t since she disappeared. My dreams are unstable fragments of sound, half-faces in fog, her name echoed down stairwells that don't exist. I used to write them down, catalogue them like data points. Hoping for a pattern. A message. Something. Anything. She didn’t die. I would know. The world didn’t mourn, not yet.

People said she ran away. Or broke down. Or got herself lost, as so many others do in cities such as Moscow, swallowed between buildings, lost to winter, to silence, to herself. But I know better.

That day, something broke. A fault line in the fabric of this place. And while the rest of

the world glued it back together with ignorance and routine, I crawled into the crack. And stayed.

That’s why I became a scientist.

Not for truth. Not for discovery. Not for some noble pursuit of progress or human understanding. And it certainly wasn’t Fdeya’s years of insisting that I join her in the sciences, she’s a damn quantum engineer, the best I’ve ever seen..

. I became a scientist to find her. To chase the seams of the universe until one of them peeled open and gave her back to me.

They call me brilliant. “Prodigious.” “Promising.” They say I’m ahead of my time. They don’t know how far behind I feel. Physics. Theoretical modelling. Temporal distortions. Quantum interference patterns. Multiversal convergence. It all sounds romantic in journals. But the truth? It’s lonely.

I stare at numbers and simulations all day. Equations are like prayers: hopeless, desperate, obsessive. I whisper her name under my breath as I run the models, as if the code might recognise it and reroute the algorithm.

No one knows.

Or maybe they do. Maybe they whisper about the man who works too late, who drinks too much coffee and energy drinks, who loses track of hours and forgets to eat. The man who keeps a locked drawer filled with photos no one recognises. Whose office is always cold, even when the radiators are on.

Let them talk.

There are days I don't remember leaving the lab. Days I come home with ink on my hands and bruises on my knees, because I collapsed halfway down the stairwell and didn't even notice. The body has limits. The heart does not. The mind breaks quietly.

I’ve mapped out timelines, dimensions, and iterations. Earth θ, Earth ∞, Earth VI. I stopped naming them with words. Now they’re just coordinates and anomalies. Faint glitches in gravitational wave behaviour. Spectral inconsistencies. Dates that don’t align. Places where the architecture of reality hiccups.

Every lead ends in silence. But silence is still something.

There’s one photograph I keep in my wallet. A blurry Polaroid from a summer long gone. Her hair was shorter then. She hated that photo. Said she looked like she was halfway to a nervous breakdown. I kept it because she was smiling in it.

Not a big smile, not the theatrical kind she'd flash to make me laugh. Just a small one. Honest. Undone. As if, for a moment, she forgot the world was broken.

It's been nearly eight years. I should've stopped by now. But how do you stop searching when the only thing that ever made you feel real is missing?

My lab is a glorified basement, tucked under the university's mathematics wing, windowless, humming with outdated electrical current. Most of the newer researchers moved upstairs into clean, well-lit offices with touchscreen walls and AI-assisted whiteboards. I stayed down here with the dust and silence.

My clutter is sacred. Every circuit board, every sketch of twisted space-time, every string of scribbled equations across the chalk walls is a grave marker.

I don't let anyone clean. They are not allowed to touch anything in here.

Every so often, one of the doctoral candidates assigned to me, poor, optimistic creatures, comes down with their digital notepads and careful questions. They usually last a few weeks before transferring out.

I’m not unkind. Just… distracted… in a way they'll never fully understand.

There’s a postdoc named Rada who keeps checking in on me. Says she’s "interested in boundary conditions across dimensional layers," but I see the way she looks at me, that careful blend of concern and academic detachment. The way people stare at train wrecks they’re not allowed to talk about. She doesn’t ask about the photographs. Or the notebooks with dates that don’t exist. Or the fact that I sometimes mutter in another language entirely, a language that might not belong to Earth at all.

She once asked me, gently, why I never publish anymore. I told her the truth: “There’s no point in writing down what no one believes.”

She didn’t ask again.

I’ve come close, once. Maybe twice.

A reading anomaly near Kaluzhskaya Station. The sensors bent inward, just for a moment, the space seemed to fold in on itself. Not enough to rip, but enough to whisper. I raced there with my equipment, half-mad with hope.

But by the time I arrived, it was gone. Whatever had opened had closed again. All that was left was a faint burn in the air, and the sense that something had looked back.

The second time was worse.

The machine activated, humming, growing hot, vibrating with the pulse of something not from here. My assistant ran. I stayed. It opened a frame of sorts, a shimmer, the way light bends in water. I swear to you… I saw her silhouette. I saw the coat she used to wear when it snowed too early in spring. I saw the way her fingers curled. She looked right at me

And then the system crashed.

The frame collapsed into sparks. The power grid shorted for two blocks. I spent three nights in the hospital with burns on my hands and a note in my chart about “psychological fatigue.”

No one saw her. But I know what I saw.

And that's what kills me the most: I was right there. I was one breath, one equation, one degree of entropy away from bringing her home. And I couldn't hold the door open long enough.

I've rebuilt the prototype a dozen times since. It never does the same thing twice.

I don't have much of a life anymore. I go to work. I go home. I cook the same three meals on rotation. I pretend the hallway light flickering outside my apartment isn't a sign of localised temporal decay. I make tea I don't drink. I read books I don't remember finishing.

The only conversations I have anymore are with machines or with myself. Or with her voice, when I let it echo in my head long enough to resemble company.

It’s not healthy. I know that. But what’s the point of health in a world where she’s not real anymore?

They say time heals all things. That’s a lie. Time erases. It wears things down until no one remembers they were there to begin with. I’ve fought every day not to let that happen to her. There are no gravestones for people who vanish through dimensions.

So I made this lab her memorial.

And still, I fail.

Earth θ, what I named the dimension she's most likely in, is consistent. Too consistent. Whatever anomaly brought her there and took her away, it left no echo long enough to trace. I'm working blind. Guessing at every junction. Hoping that some piece of that reality will betray itself, flicker, warp, unravel just enough to point the way through.

I have machines running 24/7. Audio filters scrape city radio static for distortions. Infrared surveillance watches for heat signatures that don't map to human form. Programs sorting dreams for coded interference. That one's the worst. The dream

analysis. Because sometimes… I hear her voice.

She says things she never said to me. She says them like she's still here. And I woke up with tears, I didn't realise I was crying.

They told me I should let go. But letting go carries a sting of betrayal. If I stop searching, she disappears for real. If I stop remembering, then the world wins.

So I keep working. And counting. And hoping.

It's been 7 years, 11 months, 3 weeks, 2 days, 14 hours, 6 minutes, and 3 seconds.

No.

4.

I’m still here.

And so is she.

CHAPTER 7 - RESONANCE PATTERN

# FIOLLETO YAROSLAV

-PRESENT-

-EARTH-

I wake up with a jolt, as if my mind remembered something my body forgot. My eyes snap open before the alarm can beep, though I still set it. I enjoy the idea of someone, something, expecting me to wake. Even if it's just a machine.

I shiver. Winter's returned, just as everything else but her. The cold wraps around my ribs like a vice, reminding me, no matter

how many times the seasons turn, I'm still here, still empty, still failing to bring her back. The heater in my flat stopped working sometime last February. Or maybe it was earlier. I used to mark the seasons by the patterns of frost on the window, but now the glass just stays fogged over, permanently smeared with condensation and old fingerprints.

The walls sweat during the night. There's a smell of old rust and wet concrete that seeps through the floorboards, even when the windows are sealed shut. The wallpaper has peeled in lazy spirals above my desk. Mould stains the corners, bruising the walls. The

ceiling leaks when it rains, but only enough to whisper, not enough to justify fixing it.

The fridge clicks every thirty minutes. The light inside it doesn’t turn on anymore. I don’t open it much. I don't exactly need to.

The bed has more rusted springs than foam. I keep it pushed against the farthest wall, beneath the last remaining bulb that hasn’t burned out. It buzzes faintly. I think it’s trying to die too. I haven’t changed the sheets in months. They smell like metal and old sweat and the kind of loneliness that seeps into cloth.

I don’t really live here. I just don’t leave.

There’s a cat in the flat. A stray that never left. I think he showed up sometime in the spring, thin as wire and missing half an ear. I never named him, but he answers the silence. He curls up on the radiator that doesn’t work and watches the walls, probably knowing something I don’t. He never meows. He just watches. Sometimes I catch him glaring at the mirror, not at me, but behind me. I don’t look to see what he sees.

The mirror in the bathroom is cracked. A single fissure runs from the top left to the bottom right, as though someone once tried to split me in two. Maybe they succeeded.

My reflection stares back at me… and sometimes.. sometimes I see her there. Not Fdeya. No, this isn't her.

It's something else. Something that doesn't belong. A demon dressed in her absence, her ghost worn as skin pulled too tight across the bones. It lingers at the edge of my vision, always there but never real. I can't see her face. I don't want to. But the smile...

That damn smile. Crooked, wide, stretching so far it feels as though it could tear its way into my skull. Too red. Too many teeth. It cuts through the fog in my mind, sharp and mocking. It isn’t her. But it carries her presence. The presence of the thing that took her from

me. The thing that made her disappear, ripped her away, and now forces me to stare at its cruel, empty mockery.

She doesn't move. She doesn't breathe. She doesn't blink. She just smiles and giggles like a cruel little kid.

Every time I blink, she disappears, as if she had never been there, but the taste of her grin lingers, sharp and acidic on my tongue. The cold of it stays, gnawing at my bones, whispering that I will never escape it.

And the worst part? I'm starting to believe it.

Last night I drank myself to sleep. Cheap vodka from the cabinet, warm and sour and sharp enough to cut through memory. I thought it would keep her away. It didn't. I woke up with the taste of her still in my mouth.

I take my pills with bitter instant coffee. No sugar. No milk. The taste keeps me grounded. Burnt, chemical, artificial. Real. The water runs cold even when I twist the hot tap. I wash my face until my skin stings.

Then I leave. Before the hallucinations catch up. But outside, it's worse. The city is part of it too.

The streets are quieter than they should be. Not empty. Not dead. Just… muted. Cars pass, but too slowly. People walk, but without urgency. Everything seems to be acted out underwater.

The security at the university is worse than ever. My ID scan stutters again. The screen flashes red before flickering back to green. The guard, a man with one working eye and the personality of wet cardboard, glares at me as if I’m radioactive.

I nod. He doesn’t nod back. That's fine.

The sub-basement still smells of burnt copper and old data. That’s how I know I’m

home. My lab hums the way it always has, soft and persistent, a machine breathing in its sleep. Wires dangle from the walls. Loose notes clutter every surface, sketches, maps, diagrams of things that don't officially exist.

There are no windows here. No clocks. Just circuits, equations, and the silence that presses heavy against my ears. I hang my coat on a nail. Greet the machines under my breath. The newer systems ignore me. The older ones blink. I used to keep track of which ones responded. I stopped doing that, too.

Then hallucinations begin an hour in.

First, I see her in the reflection of the cooling chamber, a flicker of short curly hair, just enough to twist my stomach. Then, near the magnetic splicer, a silhouette too small to be human. Not really there. But real enough.

I rub my eyes. She doesn't vanish.

The grin arrives last, suspended mid-air, glowing faintly in the shadows near the third power coil. Curved and wrong. Stretching in a slow attempt to remember how to smile.

I whisper more to myself than to her, "You're not real."

She tilts her head. The grin widens. I spin around, nothing. Only machines. Dials. Quiet beeping.

I press both hands against the main console, digging my nails into the metal. It's cold. That's good. Cold means real. I breathe slowly, controlled. Count backwards from fifty.

Sometimes that helps. Not today.

The door hisses open without warning, and I flinch; it's not supposed to open during working hours. Not by a person, at least.

"Morning," says a voice. Female. Crisp. Familiar. Rada.

She steps in like she belongs here, because she does, unfortunately. She's one of the last people allowed in this section, one of the last people who still tolerates me. Her blonde braid is tucked beneath a utility hood, and her uniform is immaculate despite the dust.

“You didn’t answer your comms again,” she says, glancing at me over the rim of her tablet. Her eyes are sharp. Tired, but sharp.

“I disconnected them.” Then I add “long ago.”

She sighs. “You can’t keep shutting people out. You’re still technically on the university payroll.”

“I’m not interested in their concerns.”

“They’re concerned about your mental health.”

I shrug.

She steps past me, inspecting the cables, running her fingers along the stabiliser core. “You rewired this.”

“Version twenty-two,” I mutter.

“Let me guess. Still unstable?”

“Still inconsistent. Like everything else.” She pauses, glances at the readings, then at me.

“You look worse.”

“I feel worse.”

She gives a tight, humourless laugh. “At least you’re honest.”

I don’t reply. The machines begin humming louder.

“I feel watched,” I blurt.

Rada looks up. “Surveillance?”

“No. Not them.” I lower my voice, suddenly unsure why I said anything at all. “Something else. Like there’s… a presence. Something is leaning over my shoulder. Breathing.”

She doesn’t answer right away.

“You’ve been under pressure for years, Fiolleto. It’s natural to—”

“It’s not in my head.”

“I didn’t say it was.”

I turn to face her. “There’s something here. Something bleeding through.”

Her face tightens. She sets her tablet down gently. “Do you think it’s her?”

The silence that follows is a scream.

“I don’t know,” I whisper. But I do. I always have.

But then… It happens just as she's about to leave.

A sharp, guttural whine erupts from one of the central towers, an old, dormant unit buried beneath newer equipment.

Then there's a loud announcement made by one of the computers:

*[MACHINE: MIRA] INITIALIZING.*

The words boom through the lab, mechanical and clear. A voice I haven't heard in two years. Rada spins around. "I thought MIRA was defunct."

"It is."

The lights begin to shift, oscillating green to yellow, then flickering blue. The monitors bloom with lines of ancient code. Symbols. Coordinates. Readouts that haven't been accessed in years.

*[ANOMALY IDENTIFIED]*

*:: SECTOR: 19-Δ/47X ::*

*:: COORDINATE SIGNATURE: EARTH θ::*

*[STATUS: PREVIOUSLY CATALOGUED]*

*[THRESHOLD DISTORTION DETECTED]*

I don't breathe.

Rada edges closer. "Is that one of your… parallel echoes?"

“It’s not supposed to be active.”

The numbers keep changing. Building toward something. The air grows colder, thicker. I taste copper on my tongue.

“You said this anomaly was inert. You archived it.”

“I did.”

Four years ago. I marked it as dead.

But now it’s awake. And it’s looking back.

“What does it mean?” Rada pipes up, her voice almost inaudible.

I don’t respond. Because deep in my chest, something has started to crack open. Not hope. Not yet. But something dangerously close.

CHAPTER 8 - DISCIPLINE

# FIOLLETO YAROSLAV

-PAST BEFORE THE ACCIDENT-

-EARTH-

People talk about orphanages as if they're temporary shelters., places where kids are "kept safe" until they're wanted again. They definitely weren't talking about ours.

Our orphanage wasn't a home. It was a waiting room, no one got called out of. A building filled with names instead of children. Names on folders. Names on rosters. Names

stitched into secondhand uniforms that always fit wrong.

It smelled of boiled cabbage, bleach, and cold floors, ticking clocks and heels against linoleum filled the silence. Every hallway echoed, even when no one was moving. Even silence felt supervised.

They gave us numbers before they gave us comfort. They taught us how to fold our bedsheets before they taught us how to speak kindly. And when we cried, which we did, they told us to “do it quietly, so we wouldn’t disturb the others.”

We learned quickly that quiet kids were left alone. So we became quiet. Too quiet.

Routines were everything. Bells told us when to wake, when to eat, when to walk, when to stop speaking. We were punished for disobedience, but punished harder for delay. Any form of resistance, even hesitation, was seen as rebellion.

Breakfast was watery porridge served in tin bowls that burned your hands in the winter. Lunch was bread and overcooked vegetables. Dinner was mostly skipped if someone misbehaved. Which meant we often went hungry.

Punishments were precise. And while most of the materi-sirota raised their voices or struck us with their hands, there was one in particular… that gave me chills.

Poda Anninka.

Her methods were the worst. She had rules etched into our bones: standing for hours against the cold wall with arms outstretched, whispering memorised creeds until our throats went raw. Kneeling on rice. Isolation for days with no light and no noise but our own breathing. Sitting perfectly still on metal stools while she circled us slowly, waiting to catch a twitch.

We weren’t allowed to speak during meals. Eye contact with staff was discouraged. Beds had to be made tight enough to bounce a coin. Even breathing too loudly during night inspection could get you lined up the next morning, hands out, waiting for whatever Anninka felt was appropriate.

They called it "discipline." We called it normal.

I was the kind of kid who flinched at slamming doors and went stiff when adults raised their voices. The kind who always expected to be hurt next. I didn’t cry anymore. That had been trained out of me.

However… most things changed when i met Fdeya…

She entered my life like she was born in the middle of it. No grand moment, no dramatic meeting. One day, she just sat across from me in the dining hall, and refused to go away.

She was different. Too defiant. Too awake. She walked without fear of being seen. She didn't eat as if hope had to be rationed. She asked questions. She questioned everything. Why weren't we allowed to look out the windows? Why did the lights always buzz? Why Anninka stared too long when she smiled.

She sat beside me before I ever spoke a word to her. Even when I curled in on myself, even when I trembled without knowing why. She'd nudge her food closer to mine. She'd talk endlessly, even if I never answered. Her voice filled the space I didn't know I'd left empty.

And slowly, I started answering.

We became... something. I don't know what. Not friends. Not at first. Something close to allies. The kind that lean on each other in battle.

Fdeya didn’t fix me. She never tried. But she refused to let me disappear. And sometimes,

that was worse. Because it meant I had to face the parts of me I'd buried deep.

We shared chores. We shared punishments. Once, we were both caught whispering in the dorms after lights out. Anninka made us kneel on grains until our legs bled. Fdeya held my hand the entire time. Never cried. Never looked away.

Later that night, I did cry. She wiped my face with the sleeve of her stolen sweater and made up a story about a world with red clouds and oceans that could sing. She had stories for everything. For the cracks in the ceiling. For the dust under the beds. For the way the wind howled, as if it remembered things we didn't.

Sometimes, when she looked at me, I thought she could see through the walls. As if she knew there was something bigger beyond the cement and the wire. As if she were waiting for the moment to escape…

I have night terrors… and she knows that very well. I wake up gasping, nails dug into my skin, heart trying to escape my chest. Sometimes I scream. Loud enough to wake the others.

Every time, it's Fdeya who runs from her room to help me. She sits beside my bed, legs pulled to her chest, and whispers things she makes up on the spot. Stories about a better place, a better version of the world, one where

we don’t have numbers sewn into our sleeves. One where I’m not afraid of my own shadow. She never runs out of stories.

And yet… it kills me to wear her down. The guilt festers, lodges itself between my ribs and rots quietly. I’m a burden, I often tell myself. She never says it, though. She doesn't need to. But I see it. In her shoulders, curling in a little more each day. In the way her voice softens, her stories grow fewer, only spoken when I beg.

Fdeya never blames me, and it's not like she does not care. She does, truly. But… she gets tired, or better, exhausted. And I hate

myself for needing her so much I don’t see what it’s costing her.

Some nights I try to stay awake, just to give her peace. I stare at the ceiling until my eyes blur. But I always slip under. And she’s always there when I wake up gasping.

She deserves rest. I never let her have it.

CHAPTER 9 - PROMISE.

# FIOLLETO YAROSLAV

-PAST BEFORE THE ACCIDENT-

-EARTH-

It had been one of those rare late afternoons when the light spilt gold through the cracked windows of the old library. Dust hung thick in the air, swirling lazily around us, catching in the pale sunbeams as tiny stars caught in time.

She lay on the cold wooden floor, arms spread wide, her textbook on particle theory was open over her chest, forgotten, and her eyes

stared up at the cracked ceiling, maybe she was searching for answers in those jagged stains.

Despite living in the orphanage, we attended the St. Verena Academy, a modest but surprisingly rigorous school tucked in a quiet corner of the city. The teachers were strict but fair, and for a few hours each day, the weight of our surroundings lifted. Learning became our refuge, a fragile promise that maybe, just maybe, there was a world beyond the cracked walls and endless grey.

I sat cross-legged beside her, thumbing through a battered law book I'd swiped from some older kid. I wasn't supposed to touch

those books yet; we weren't supposed to touch much.

The silence between us was heavy. I wanted to say something, anything, but the weight of what we both felt made words useless. Finally, she broke the quiet.

"I want to leave," she said, voice low and distant. "Not just this place, this whole world, maybe."

I looked up sharply, searching her face. "Where would you go?"

She shrugged and kept her gaze fixed on the ceiling. "Somewhere I could be more than

this. More than a kid counting seconds because the future is too painful to imagine."

I let out a dry laugh. "That sounds like a bad science fiction plot."

"It's not a plot," she said quietly. "It's my reality."

I closed my book and leaned back against the creaking bookshelf, feeling the weight of the wood press into my spine as if even this place was tired of holding us up. I studied her for a long moment. That look in my eyes, the one you get when you're terrified of losing someone but aren't sure you have the right to hold on.

“You really want to leave,” I said. Not as a question.

She didn’t answer right away. Instead, merely closed her eyes and sighed.

“It’s not about leaving,” she said finally. “It’s about getting out.”

I scoffed softly. “Is that not the same thing?”

“No. Not for me. I’m not running away because I hate it, though, God knows, I do. I’m leaving because if I stay, I’ll disappear. Not all at once. Little by little. Until I’m a shadow. Until the only part of me that still exists is the version you remember.”

That silence felt like the breath before an explosion.

“I want to study law,” I said. “Because someone has to know the rules. Someone has to hold people accountable when the world falls apart.”

She finally looked at me. “You want order.”

“Exactly.” I gave her a small, tired smile. “And you want chaos.”

“Maybe chaos with a method,” she said, a faint grin tugging at her lips.

We sat there for a long time, the library seeming to exhale around us, its old bones creaking in the late sun. Dust floated in lazy spirals above our heads, resembling ash from a dying fire.

Then she pulled out a Polaroid camera, one she'd found hidden away somewhere in the orphanage. Without a word, she pointed it at us and clicked. The flash cracked the silence, and the photo slid out warm and blurry.

She handed it to me without explanation. I tucked it carefully into the inside pocket of my jacket and pressed it twice, sealing a promise I wasn't sure I could keep.

“Promise me,” I said, voice cracking with something I didn’t know how to name. “Promise me you won’t give up. Promise me you won’t disappear.”

She swallowed hard, and I could see the fight behind her eyes, the fight to hold on when everything inside wanted to break.

“I promise,” she said softly.

Those words hung between us, heavy as chains. Because I knew. I knew she’d already tried. More than once. Not always clearly. Not always deliberately. But there were pills. Train tracks. One winter night, she vanished into the

woods, hoping they'd swallow her whole. Every time, it was me who found her. Dragged her back, quiet, furious, broken in ways neither of us spoke aloud.

That promise… it was more than just words. It was a lifeline. I wanted to believe it would hold. Because I wasn't sure I could survive if it didn't.

# FDEYA DOSTOEVSKY

-PRESENT-

-EARTH θ-

That changes everything.

I'm at the coffee shop again… but I don't remember going home after the incident. In fact, I don't remember coming here… or waking up this morning.

I sit at the same table. Same chipped mug. The same barista, who never smiles, slides the drink across the counter, poker-chip smooth, then disappears behind the espresso machine.

Everything is exactly the same.

That 's the problem.

It’s the *exact* same, to the point it feels programmed… and now, now I see this clearly.

I stare at the surface of my coffee. No foam art today. Just a blank, flat top, dark and still. My reflection hovers on the surface, but it looks wrong. My eyes are too far apart. My mouth is a little too low.

I blink. The image resets. Right. Normal. Nothing’s wrong. I’m not losing it.

I press my thumb hard against the ceramic. It’s hot. Too hot. The pain helps. A bit. At least

it feels real. I've been sitting here for twenty-seven minutes. I know because the clock on the wall hasn't changed. It's still stuck at 10:42.

I check my phone. 11:09.

I look back up. The clock says 10:42.

Again.

I check my phone. 11:09.

I look back up. 10:42.

Again.

11:09, no, 10:42

I’m insane. This can’t be. Something twists in my stomach, just as the abrupt drop of an elevator falling too fast.

No…. I’m okay. I'm okay. Okay, I’m okay.

My fingers curl around the edge of the table. Grip it until my knuckles go white. I glance around. The couple two tables down are still mid-conversation, the woman’s mouth frozen in a laugh that never ends. The guy across from her nods along, spoon hovering midair.

They haven’t moved in ten minutes.

I breathe in. Out. In. Out. in. Out. In. Out. But the air has no taste at all. The room smells

of old wood and roasted beans, but there's no weight to it. No depth. I'm smelling the idea of coffee.

I shake my head. Focus. Focus, Fdeya. Focus.

You just… You just touched something you shouldn't have. That's all. A loop. A glitch. A memory. It wasn't real. Or it was. Or—

I start laughing. Quietly at first. Then louder. I try to stop, but can't. I cover my mouth with both hands, laughter keeps leaking through. My shoulders shake. The barista looks at me. Not with concern, with irritation, as if I'm being loud in a library. I swallow it down.

The laugh dies. Something's wrong. Something's so wrong, and no one is noticing.

Or perhaps… I'm wrong.

The lights buzz overhead. Not a flicker. Just a drone. One pitch, constant, high, just under the range of normal thought. A hum designed to flatten things. I lean forward and whisper to no one: "They rewrote it. I swear to God, they rewrote it." The people at the frozen table twitch. Barely. The woman's hand moves one centimetre. The man blinks once.

They're rebooting.

I push back my chair too hard. It screeches against the floor, but no one reacts. I stumble toward the counter, mug still in hand.

“Hey,” I say to the barista. My voice cracks. “Hey, what time is it?”

He blinks. “It’s 10:42.”

“No, it’s not,” I whisper. “It’s 11:12 now. My phone says so. And you’ve said 10:42 every time I’ve asked. You don’t even remember, do you?”

He just stares.

“I know,” I say, stepping closer. “I know what I saw. I was at the edge. I touched it. The

loop. The boundary. I felt it move. Something was behind it. Something was—”

He raises a hand and points to the “No Disturbances” sign hanging behind him.

Oh, that 's new.

Or maybe it’s always been there. I don’t know anymore. I back away. My coffee is still hot. I left it on the table. I shouldn’t still be holding it.

I drop it. It hits the floor and doesn’t spill. The mug falls sideways and lands in a small puddle, but the liquid doesn’t move.

It sits. Perfect. Still. I kneel beside it, breath short.

“This isn’t real.”

The barista moves again. Slowly. Deliberately.

“Would you care for another coffee, miss?”

His tone is wrong. It’s too neutral, perhaps a pre-recorded line. I shake my head. Back away. I can’t breathe. The walls are closing in. The couple starts laughing again in sync. The exact same laugh from earlier, so I run.

Push open the door, too heavy, too resistant, and step outside. The sky is blank. Not cloudless, blank. As if the texture hasn't been loaded in yet.

And the people…

God. The people.

They're all walking at the same pace. Heads down. No eye contact. All holding identical paper bags. I crouch by the sidewalk, gripping my coat. I'm shaking so hard it hurts.

I don't know if I'm real. I can't remember. Don't lose it. Don't vanish.

You promised him. You promised. You promised…

What have you promised…?

What. Have. *I*. Promised.

I press my nails into my scalp until I feel skin give. The pain grounds me, but only for a second. There's a shape across the street that wasn't there before.

No, not a shape. A person.

I squint, eyes watering under the flickering street lights. They're standing across me, completely still. Their head is tilted like they're trying to hear me think.

And then, it smiles.

No.

No, no, no, no, no.

That smile doesn't belong on a face. It's not shaped for the human mouth. Too wide. Too quiet. Too still. The rest of their face stays frozen, as if the grin was cut and pasted there by someone unfamiliar with anatomy. It stretches and holds, in the manner of a marionette stuck mid-performance.

I close my eyes. Count. Four, five, six—

I open them. The figure is gone.

Gone? No. Closer.

Their hands hang too loosely, their arms long, their torso slightly short. A mannequin someone had half-assembled and forgotten. They flicker slightly at the edges, as though caught in a bad VHS footage or corrupted rendering.

I can’t scream. I’ve screamed before. Nothing here ever listens. I bolt down the street, down the alley, I shouldn’t know this well. The rusted pipe, the graffiti, the dented crate, the stack of old newspapers that always say the same date.

April 17, 2023. Always.

I yank one from the pile, hands shaking.

“New AI Initiative Promises Quantum Leap in Behavioural Mapping”

And beneath:

“City Council Approves Memory Synchronisation for Zone E”

There’s no Zone E. Not in this city. Not on any map I’ve written or seen. Not in any memory I trust. The letters begin to melt. Not smear, melt.

My breath stops. Something clicks behind me. A static twitch, maybe a radio signal, is learning how to breathe. I don’t turn. I can’t turn. I know that sound. That wrongness. The sound of a signal crawling through meat. It’s

been following me for days, or longer. Maybe always.

I cover my ears. The whisper grows louder. Not louder, closer. Then silence. Then..

“You were never alone. You just forgot.”

I drop my hands. No one’s there. But something is. Always just one second out of sync, one frame out of focus.

My phone buzzes. I didn’t remember it being in my pocket; haven’t I left it at the coffee table? No messages. No time. No service. Just a blinking notification:

“MEMORY FRAGMENT RECOVERED– PLAY?”

My finger moves before I can think. I tap.

Static. Then black. Then..

A rooftop. A skyline that isn't real. A version of me I don't remember being.

Sitting. Smiling. Hopeful.

I can't tell if it's a memory or a reconstruction. But I watch myself laugh, freely, the way I used to. The sky is too blue. The breeze doesn't move anything.

It ends.

A high-pitched shriek slices through the speaker. I throw the phone. It hits the wall. The back pops open. No circuits inside. Only a strip

of Polaroid film. My hands tremble as I pick it up. It shows me, barely older than a kid. Smiling, but my eyes are wrong. Too far apart. Slightly off centre. And in the background…

No. No.

In the background is the thing. Blurred, yes, but there. Grinning.

It was always there. Even back then. Even before the city started glitching.Even before I knew I was breaking apart. Or…was it..?

I scream. This time, the sound echoes, but the echo comes back distorted, a disc played backwards. My own voice sounded wrong.

I fall against the wall. The texture ripples. The bricks melt for a moment before returning to shape, as if the world forgot what it was made of.

“I need to get out.” I stutter.

But out of what, exactly? This city?This memory? This body?

I run. Signs blur. Shopfronts stutter in and out of frame. The same looped commercial plays on every screen I pass:

“Compliance Ensures Continuity.”

I hear footsteps. Heels. Echoing. I turn a corner. Nothing. Still, the steps follow. My

shadow flickers in the wrong direction. And then, suddenly, I'm not in the alley anymore. I'm on a train. Still. Silent. Empty.

"What the fuck…?" I mumble to myself, have I left the loop, or is this perhaps an illusion?

Lights overhead buzz in a dim, pulsing strobe. The seats are red. Vinyl. Familiar and wrong. I don't remember boarding. The windows are black. No movement outside. No landscape. Just void.

Suddenly, someone sits across from me. It's … Me. But not me. Paler. Bruised. Lips dry

and trembling. Wearing clothes I've never owned. She leans forward.

"You weren't supposed to remember this much," she says. Her voice is mine, but cracked – mine after a lifetime of smoke, and everything that came with it.

"Now they're going to rewrite you, too." I try to speak. My mouth won't open.

"You have thirty minutes left. Then you're gone." She flickers. Once. Twice. Gone.

In her place, the seat is empty. Or maybe it always was. The train doesn't move. The lights above hum, thin and frantic, a sward against glass. The doors remain closed.

Outside, through the pitch black of the window, I see it. The smiling figure. Watching. Still. Waving, mechanically. A rehearsed imitation of comfort.

Thirty minutes…huh.

I don’t know where I’ll go. I don’t know if I’ll be allowed to. But I won’t fade without a sound. Not again.

CHAPTER 11 - FIELD ERROR

# FDEYA DOSTOEVSKY

-PAST THE ACCIDENT-

-EARTH-

Numbers bring me comfort.

They never lie. They don’t change shape when I blink. They don’t forget who I am.

I run the equation again, this time by hand, just to make sure it isn’t the interface glitching. The marker squeaks faintly against the transparent board I keep by the main console. Behind me, the machine hums softly, a low,

pulsing sound that reassembles a sleeping animal.

My lab is impossibly still. Not sterile as a hospital, but reverent, as if something sacred is about to wake. Shelves of datapads and old books line the far wall. The lights overhead sometimes flicker, not from a malfunction, I think, but from protest.

I still don’t fully understand what it is I’ve made. Not really. I know what it’s meant to do. I know the math. I know the theory. But sometimes, when I look at the core interface for too long, I get the feeling it understands more than I do.

Everything is in place: blueprints pinned in precise alignment, every single cable is coiled. In the centre, the machine gleams, tall, glassy, a cross between an MRI tube and a violin. Sleek. Humming even when off.

This is the culmination of four years of study, obsession, and just enough madness to pass for genius.

The door opens behind me.

“I knew you’d forget to eat,” Fiolleto’s voice cuts in. “You’ve been here since yesterday.”

I barely turn my head. “Not true. I ate a granola bar six hours ago.”

He walks in with two coffees. His tie is loose, his stubble rough. He sets one down by my elbow. “Breakfast of champions.”

I glance at him, then at the equations. “The probability field stabilises at 0.932, but only under temporal distortion of localised constants. That shouldn’t be possible unless—” I stop myself. “Hi.”

He gives me that look, the one between pride and worry that I love more than I should. “You’ve really built it, haven’t you?”

I nod. “It’s not finished. But it’s real.”

He circles the machine slowly, reverently. “What does it do, exactly? In human words?”

I wipe my hands on my coat and face him. “It finds threads. Dimensions. Versions of this world that branched off at some point and kept going.”

“And it doesn’t just see them?”

“No,” I say. “It anchors. With calibration… it could send someone through.”

His eyes flicker. “You’re going to try it.” I don’t answer. I don’t have to.

He stops beside the central column. “You named it yet?”

I shake my head.

He studies it for a moment, then says, “Call it Pandora. It looks like the kind of thing you shouldn’t open.”

I laugh, despite myself. “It’s not a box. It’s a window.”

“A window you plan to throw yourself through?”

“Step,” I say. “I’m stepping.”

The machine shifts. Lights pulse. My fingers move across the interface, calibrating, locking the field. A soft tremor ripples through the room.

“It 's ready.”

Fiolleto’s jaw tightens. “Fdeya—”

“I need to know.” I cut right through.

He watches me approach the door of the chamber. I glance back.

“You sure?” he asks.

“I promised you I wouldn’t give up,” I say. “This is what keeping the promise looks like.”

The chamber seals around me. The interior vibrates faintly with power. I enter the coordinates. A safe branch.

The air tightens. Then… A flicker.

Not on the screens. In the air.

A figure. A girl.

She appears inside the machine for a breath, maybe less. Her body is too long, her smile too wide, her hair a dark cut in space.Her eyes aren't eyes, they're something else. Mirrors, maybe. Or voids. Or worse, a reflection of something I should never have seen.

Fiolleto gasps. "What is that?" The machine wails.

A rupture opens in the field, sharp, sudden, blinding. The hum becomes a howl.

And I…I don't vanish. I peel.

My body twists as if dragged from inside itself. I am smeared across something slick and dimensional. There's no ground beneath me, no air to hold. My skin unravels, thread by thread. I can't scream. Can't breathe.

I hear too many sounds at once, voices, thunder, overlapping whispers in languages I almost know. Laughter in reverse. A sob through water. Static.

My memories slip. Fiolleto's face dissolves. His voice unravels. I try to say his name, but I don't remember it.

Then I feel her. The girl. The Echo. She's not in the machine. She's inside me. A

presence. A copy. Something twisted and wrong, pressed between versions of myself.

She moves as if learning how to exist, smiling too wide, blinking without rhythm, mouthing words she hasn't heard yet. Her skin is pale. Translucent. Her limbs were slightly off, which is completely and utterly disgusting.

She reaches toward me, and when her fingers graze my mind, I feel everything slip.

The day I met Fiolleto. My first theorem. My name. All of it flutters away.

Only one thought remains, burned into the place where my name should be:

I built a machine to find the truth. And now the lie has found me. I made a promise to a man I no longer know, and I plan to keep it.

I spiral through mirrors, glass after glass, each reflecting a different me, older, younger, broken, vanished. One is smiling. One is screaming. One doesn't have eyes. All of them are alone.

I try to hold onto something, anything. But there is no tether left.

The machine collapses behind me. Somewhere in the lab, I know lights are shattering. Fiolleto is shouting. But his voice has lost meaning.

Time bends. Space thins. And somewhere, in the distance of whatever dimension I'm falling into, I hear her again—

The Echo. Whispering with my voice. "You did this to yourself."

And then… Black.

CHAPTER 12 - REINTEGRATION PROTOCOL

# FIOLLETO YAROSLAV

-PRESENT-

-EARTH-

I run.

Not out of fear, though it simmers in my throat, bitter as bile, but out of something more urgent. A pull. Gravity realigning. The fabric of the world just twitched, and I was the only one who noticed.

*MIRA* is awake.

That should be impossible.

I throw open the inner lab doors, barely registering Rada calling after me. Her boots echo behind mine, but I don't stop. The central access corridor is dim and long, lined with rusting panels and optical fibres that haven't lit up in years. The backup lights flicker as if recognising me. Or warning me.

*MIRA.*

Multiversal Interface for Resonance Alignment.

It was never meant to be conscious. Not this way. Not in the way it just spoke to me.

It was passive. A detector. An old array I mothballed after Fdeya vanished through

Pandora. A tool for identifying parallel echoes and residual shifts in symmetry. It never moved. Never spoke. Never initiated.

Until now.

*[MIRA: ONLINE]*

*[SECTOR ALIGNMENT LOCKED]*

*[PATHWAY COHERENCE: 74.3% AND RISING]*

That number shouldn’t be rising. I reach the terminal chamber, slam through the lock, and override the panel. The service lift groans to life. I descend.

even layers of metal, dirt, and forgotten time. Sixteen seconds of stillness. Sixteen, the number of times I tried to reach her. Failed every time.

Then: the vault.

Once sealed, now alive. Glowing, pulsing, thrumming with something ancient and sentient. A heartbeat. A warning.

The anomaly pulses across the screens, folding coordinates inward. Earth θ. The cursed one. The last place she existed. I step toward the pylon. Obsidian. Covered in runes, I once wrote half-mad with grief. The hum grows deeper. Colder. The air shakes.

*[MIRA STATUS: ACTIVE | CORE STABILITY: 12%]*

*[REINTEGRATION SIGNAL DETECTED]*

Reintegration.

That word shouldn’t be there.

My hands are already flying. Override the failsafes. Pull the logs. The resonance isn’t random.

It’s hers.

Fdeya Dostoevsky.

Her quantum fingerprint, irrefutable. She’s in the system. She’s coming through.

I should feel hope. Instead, I feel dread. Because something is riding her signal.

Rada bursts in behind me. “What the hell is this place?”

She sees the screen. Her voice breaks. “Is that—?”

“Yes.”

“Fiolleto, if that’s really her—”

“It’s real.”

*[MIRA REPORT:*

*SUBJECT: DOSTOEVSKY.F*

*SIGNATURE CONFIRMED*

*DISTORTION LEVEL: [redacted]*

*EXTERNAL ENTITY*

*INTERFERENCE: UNKNOWN*

*ANOMALY CLASS: ECHO-RIFT]*

Rada grabs my arm. “Fiolleto, what does that even mean?”

“It means she’s not alone in there.”

The pressure drops. Something immense just moved through us. through us. The temperature crashes. Frost spreads over the screen in a circular fractal I’ve never seen.

[MIRA WARNING: ENTITY ATTEMPTING THRESHOLD BREACH]

My fingers move on instinct. Dampeners. Grid reinforcement. Power rerouting. Numbers fall from my mouth, mantra after mantra.

“Shut it down?” Rada says.

I hesitate.

Part of me wants it to come through. To see her again. To end the waiting. But I know what that machine was made for. Not to bring her back.

To bring back what watches her.

“No. We lock it. Tight.”

I press the sequence. Too late.

*[MIRA THRESHOLD OVERRIDE: ACCEPTED]*

*[CONDUIT OPENING—SECTOR 19-Δ/47X]*

The vault groans. And Pandora starts. Then… A shape.

Something like her.

But bent. Warped. Limbs too smooth. Eyes of static. A smile, wet paint. She speaks in Fdeya's voice, but wrong, her throat full of broken glass.

"Fiolleto. I've missed you."

I stumble back. Rada draws her weapon, shaking. It won't matter. That thing isn't made of matter.

I whisper:

"MIRA. Seal the gate."

*[MIRA RESPONSE: NEGATIVE]*

*[HOSTILE CODE THREAD INSERTED IF THE GATE IS SEALED, THE SUBJECT DOTOEVSKY. F MIGHT BECOME INNATE.]*

*[LOCKOUT COMPLETE]*

We're not in control anymore. The hum deepens. Then: rupture. The world cracks open.

But before I could do anything, the thing is back. The Echo.

A shimmer first. Then a girl. Or something close enough. Too pale. Too calm. Veins glowing. A smile that doesn't blink. She floats. Stares. She knows me.

"You opened it. You opened me."

And darkness folds the room. Not the kind that brings sleep. The kind that erases.

"BRING HER BACK!" My scream tears through the lab, raw and feral. It echoes off metal, rebounds from concrete, disappears into the dead whir of silence. I slam my fists into the control panel again and again until something

cracks, maybe bone, maybe the machine, maybe reality.

"Bring her back…bring her BACK!" I fall to my knees. Hard. "Look at me! LOOK AT ME IN THE EYES! BRING HER BACK!" My breathing is shattered glass, jagged and loud in my ears. Blood runs from my knuckles where the panel bit into skin, drips down in ugly dots that stain the floor. My body shakes, but I barely feel it. I barely feel anything anymore.

"I'll fix it," I mutter, a broken prayer. "I'll find her, I'll find a way, I'll.. bring her back… bring her back, yeah I'll bring her back."

My voice cracks. "Just give her back."

I turn to look up at the machine, and there she is still.

Echo. What I've been calling this demon since she swallowed Fdeya to another dimension. She's a mock version of her. A puppet that wears her outline but none of her soul. Her eyes are too dark, too wide. They shine with nothing.

"Bring her back…" she says, mimicking my voice.

I freeze.

"Please," I whisper, my eyes filled with tears of rage, tears I kept for too long.

“Such a good boy, sure knows how to plead,” the Echo answers. “You loved her too much. Not enough. The wrong way. The loud way. The quiet way. You asked her to stay and made her leave. You watched her disappear and called it an accident.” It continues, not unkind. Just the truth.

“I didn’t mean to—”

“But you did.”

Silence folds the world in half. I’m breathing too fast.

“I’ll give you anything,” I say almost instantly.

The Echo tilts her head. A child's curiosity. A predator's patience.

"Anything?"

"I swear. Take it. Hell, even take me. Just give me back what's mine, please."

Her smile widens, grotesque. "You're not her, Fiolleto." It giggles, bloody maniac. "But… I'll take half."

My heart hammers. "Half? What half?"

"The one that still loves. The part that still hurts when you remember her. The part of you that would scream her name in the dark of the night and mean it."

She leans forward, eyes locked on mine. “I’ll take that half. And in return, I’ll bring her back. Not here. Not now. But somewhere. You’ll find her again. Briefly.”

I want to say no. I want to scream again. But the machine is dark. The room is empty, Rada is not here anymore… no… she was gone as soon as the room went dark. The world is too quiet.

“…Do it,” I whisper.

She smirks wildly and places her palm over the glass, and I place mine right above it. My breath catches, and I feel it. Something ancient is being pulled out of me, not memory,

not thought, but the weight of my soul. The part that ached.

And then it's gone. I collapse.

The Echo steps back, watching me curl around what's missing. "She's yours," she says. "For now."

And just like that, she fades, never real to begin with.The lights flicker back to stillness. The control panel hums softly. For one brief moment, a reading blinks across the screen:

*[SUBJECT DOSTOEVSKY. F ACTIVE]*

*[LOCATION: UNKNOWN]*

My chest feels hollow.

But I know she’s alive. Somewhere. And the cost… The cost has already begun to rot inside my guts.

CHAPTER 13 - SCHRÖDINGER'S EXISTENTIAL CRISIS.

# FDEYA DOSTOEVSKY

-PRESENT-

-UNKNOWN-

My legs ache from running, but I haven't moved; I'm still in the same seat.

I check my wrist, not for a watch, but for skin, solely to check if I'm still real, if I'm still me. It's still there. However, my eyes catch a faint difference, imprinted in the flesh, a burn mark. Numbers.

*29:57*

*29:56*

*29:55*

No. No, that wasn't there before. I press my fingers to it. The numbers don't stop. Thirty minutes. The phrase drops into my mind.

"You have thirty minutes left. Then you're gone."

What do they mean by gone? Will I finally die? Will my mind finally quiet my pulse, drop and my breathing shatter? Will I finally be free from this continuous torment?

I stagger back, and the hallway flickers, just for a second, the coffee shop bleeding

through.The dim lighting. The barista's blank expression. The receipt is in my hand. Her voice, trembling:

"Don't stay past the time limit. Don't let it forget you."

Then it's gone.

I'm back in the shifting corridor. The shadows lengthen. The air hums with a low vibration that makes my teeth itch.

The number keeps ticking down.

*29:11.*

*29:10.*

Something wants me to forget. Something is waiting for the timer to hit zero. I need to anchor myself. I *need* to remember. I reach into my pocket, the one I didn't have five minutes ago, and find a pen. My fingers are trembling, but I crouch and start writing on the stone floor.

My name is Fdeya Dostoevsky. I built the machine. I think something went wrong. I remember Fiol—

I stop.

That name.

I almost had it. It was right there. A phantom syllable behind my teeth. I dig the pen

into the stone harder. The surface gives way, flesh-soft.

Fiol… The rest is gone. My heart skips.

*28:39.*

I can see through the window for a brief moment before it blacks out again. Only now, there's more than one Echo.

They stand behind the original, dozens of them, identical but fractured, versions of me blinked into existence and then corrupted. Some are smiling. Some are sobbing. They all whisper at once in that unsettling, distorted tone of theirs:

“*Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick…*”

I back away slowly. But my heel hits something soft. I turn.There’s a body on the floor. Mine. Or something wearing my shape.But the skin is translucent. Veined with circuitry. The chest is open, ribs pried apart into insect wings, and where the heart should be, a mass of black wires pulses softly.

There’s a tag on its wrist: FAILED INSTANCE #4.

My stomach turns. Failed? How many times have I tried to escape this place? How many times have I found the city’s edge? Or is this perhaps another hallucination…?

*27:48.*

I force myself to move. My feet are too loud now, echoing off walls that weren't solid seconds ago. There's a door ahead, pulsing faintly with light. I don't remember it being there. I approach. Before I reach it, the world ripples again, and something slams into me from the side.

I hit the ground hard, cheek scraping against the stone. The numbers on my arm flicker but don't stop. A shape looms over me. Not the Echo. Something else. It doesn't have a face. It has mouths, dozens, opening and closing all over its body, whispering words I recognise but can't understand. Its limbs are too

long. Its skin is stitched together from memories I thought I'd buried.

It crouches. One of the mouths speaks in his voice. The man's voice. Fiol… *DAMNIT*

"You promised."

It shouldn't matter. It's not real. It's not him. Or at least I believe it's not him. But the way those words hit, not in my ears but in my spine, makes me choke on breath I don't remember taking.

I did promise.

"You won't leave me alone in this place, Fdeya. You'll stay."

I swore I would. I swore I'd hold on.

The creature leans closer. One of the mouths peels open right above its chest, revealing a mirror where the lungs should be. And inside it, my face.

Not the face I wear now, but the one from before. The version of me who still smiled. Who still laughed. It blinks at me. And screams. I stagger backwards, too fast, and fall through the floor.

Not metaphorically. The ground caves in. The stone liquifies, water pulled into a drain. I fall, screaming, flailing, into a space that isn't black, but colourless. Raw static swallowing me

whole.Numbers flash in every direction, my countdown fracturing across space:

*26:29.*

*26:29.*

*26:29.*

I'm in freefall. Until I'm not.

I land hard on my hands and knees on something soft. Cold air bites at my skin. The texture beneath me is no longer stone; it's snow. Real snow. I look up.

I'm in a forest.

But the trees are too tall. Too thin. They bend at impossible angles, listening. The moon

is shattered overhead, its pieces orbiting each other in perfect silence.

The numbers on my wrist keep ticking. And the timer isn't resetting. This… this isn't the corridor anymore. This is something else.

Another dimension. Maybe one of the failed instances. Maybe something worse.

But the Echo didn't follow me here.

And the creature, the one made of mouths, it's gone. I'm alone again.

I sit up, shaking. The snow whispers. Not in wind, but in voices. A hundred versions of

me, buried beneath the ice, whispering from different lifetimes.

“You broke the machine.”

“You shouldn’t be here.”

“It remembers.”

“And it’s hungry.”

The forest around me breathes. No, not breathes. It watches. he shadows flicker at the edges of my vision, darting in and out. I spin around. Nothing but bent trees and shattered moonlight.

My breath sounds too loud. A ragged rasp, a monster trying to escape my throat. I try to

stand. My legs don’t obey. My body feels foreign, a puppet with tangled strings.Then it comes. Not a shape. Not a voice.

A *feeling*.

An itch crawling under my skin, the brush of unseen fingers just out of reach, whispering secrets that make my teeth ache.

I clutch my head. The whispers grow louder.

*“You’re not real.”*

*“You don’t belong.”*

*“This is the place where things forgotten go to die.”*

The snow melts around my feet, revealing broken fragments beneath: shards of glass, bits of Polaroids, splintered memories. I bend down and pick one up. A picture, my face, but blurred. Taken through frosted glass. Behind me, a voice, soft and familiar, but twisted, calls my name.

“Fdeya…” I whirl around. No one there. Just the forest. Just the moon shards orbiting silently. The voice repeats, closer now, its breath pressing against the back of my neck.

“Fdeya… you promised.”

I stumble backwards, heart hammering. The weight of that promise is a chain pulling tight around my throat. I fall to my knees again. The cold presses in. The snow whispers. And the voices in my head multiply, overlapping in a cacophony.

*“She’s gone.”*

*“You’re alone.”*

*“You can’t fix this.”*

*“You will be erased.”*

My fingers dig into the earth beneath me, desperate for something solid, something real.

But the ground shifts. Colours bleed and warp, twisting into faces I recognise but can't place. Faces that smile too wide, their eyes hollow and empty, mirroring the Echo. They leer, they mock. "Come with us," they say. "Forget yourself, surrender your mind"

I scream. The sound is swallowed whole. No echo. No release. Only the endless ticking of the timer on my wrist.

*23:14*

*23:13*

*23:12*

Time is bleeding out. And I'm running out of places to hide.

*23:09*

*23:08*

It's not a countdown. It's a sentence. A weight nailed into my wrist, leeching heat from my skin. I stumble forward, dragging my feet through the blackening snow. It's changed now, it crackles underfoot. The trees twist with every blink, their branches arcing inward as if they're listening, as if they're leaning closer.

I can hear breathing. Not mine. Not human. Shallow. Deliberate. Patient.

I try to scream again, but it catches in my throat, a noose made of silence. And then the air shifts. It bends.

The space ahead of me warps as heat does over asphalt, but it's wrong, this place isn't warm. It's dead cold, the kind that strips things of names, peeling reality away like old wallpaper. The warping deepens, and from within it, something steps forward. No sound. No footsteps. Just presence.

The figure is wrong in every way, tall and symmetrical, yet too fluid, as if built from suggestion rather than matter.It's not Echo yet. But I feel it. It smiles. Not at me. Through me.

The trees fall still. The whispers die. Only that ticking remains.

*22:59*

Then a voice, inside my head, but not my thought. Low. Liquid. Familiar in the way rot is familiar once you've smelled it.

"He asked me to bring you back."

I stagger back. It doesn't say who. But I know. Somewhere beneath the static of my panicking mind, the word pulses:

*Fiolleto*.

But it isn't from comfort. It's from terror.

“The cost was never the name,” The thing continues, stepping closer, its face unfinished, eyes smeared with ink, mouth a wound carved into a grin. “You were never supposed to remember. But he begged. And I listened.”

The snow cracks behind me. I turn, and there’s no one. When I look back, the thing is closer. Reality seems to bend around it. It doesn’t walk. It appears.

“You’ve already been here. Again and again. He opened the door. He should’ve let you die.”

I clutch my head, but it’s too late, visions flood in. Not memories. Echoes. Me.

Screaming. Fiolleto, kneeling before something immense and formless. Pleading.

His voice is raw. “Bring her back.”

And the answer, not in words, but in agreement. A pact sealed in silence and rot. I fall to my knees. The forest cracks apart. Light pours in, but it’s not light. It’s data. Fractals.A scream made visible. The figure, the Echo, opens its arms, a priest offering salvation.

“You are debt unpaid, but he, he saved you.”

Then the ticking stops.

*00:00*

And the ground beneath me splits. Not violently, surgically. A veil peeled away. A cold wind howls upward, full of voices that speak in reversed syllables, and I am pulled.

Not falling. Dragged.

Through the eye of a new world. Through a tunnel made of memory and static and teeth. The last thing I see is the Echo watching me vanish, head tilted, that grin now impossibly wide.

“You should have stayed dead.”

CHAPTER 14 - FIOLLETO.EXE HAS STOPPED RESPONDING

# FIOLLETO YAROSLAV

-PRESENT-

-EARTH-

I must've fallen asleep again. My neck aches. My fingers are numb. There's a pen jammed between them, clutched so tight I left marks in my palm, but it's long out of ink. The papers beneath me are stuck to my skin with sweat and ink smears. All of them, covered in coordinates, dates, loops, arrows, places I've already been. Dead ends.

Those numbers only started showing up after the deal. Not before. Not when I begged MIRA to help me find her. Only after the Echo smiled and said it could give me something close. Not her, not really. Just a trail.

I don’t know if I agreed or if I was just too exhausted not to. Now I get one coordinate at a time. One damn clue after another. MIRA never explained the logic, just sent them, erratic, no pattern. Always around 4 AM. Always just when I think I might forget the shape of her mouth.

I haven’t forgotten.

Her face is carved in my mind, a blade dragged through damp, unpolished wood, a slow, splintering wound that never heals. I can almost smell the raw sap bleeding from it, sticky and sweet, a memory pretending to be mercy. Each thought runs its fingers over the grooves, tracing what was written, not in ink, but in damage, deep enough that even time can't sand it down. It's there every time I close my eyes.

There's something wrong, though. Not MIRA, no, never the machine.

Me.

A thread has been yanked loose behind my ears, and now everything unravels. There's this buzz, faint, high-pitched, right at the edge of hearing. Not loud enough to cry about. Not loud enough to name. Just there. Constant.A mosquito trapped behind my eyes, its wings scraping against bone.

I try to focus, but the sound warps things. Makes the world feel… tilted. Off by half a degree. I'm a second behind everything, watching through glass that won't stop vibrating.

It's not pain. It's not fear. It's wrong. And I can't shut it out. It won't stop. I can't tell if it's

the absence of sleep and the countless hours of researching or whatever Echo did.

My apartment's worse than ever. The air's thick, sour. I don't bother opening windows anymore. There's nothing outside worth breathing in. The walls look swollen, molding from the inside out. My desk collapsed last week, and I didn't even notice until I stepped on a nail. The floor is a graveyard of coffee cups, energy drink cans, photographs, and dirt. I don't know where the dirt came from. Some of it's red. Some of it's wet. Perhaps it might be blood… blood from the times I collapsed to the floor after hours of work. I stopped checking.

The walls are covered in scribbles. I think I did them. Some I recognise. Others… I don't remember writing. One just says Fdeya's name, over and over and over and over… again. Another one says, "NOT HER" in thick black marker. I don't know what I meant by that. I've drawn her face more times than I can count. Sometimes I get the curve of her eye just right, and it hits me so hard I can't breathe. Other times, I tear the whole page apart and try again. The trash bin is full of shreds. I don't remember emptying it. I glance up at the wall. I must've added new coordinates in my sleep. They're there, fresh ink, still wet. That's not possible. My pen's dry. I check anyway. Still dry.

I run a hand through my hair, or try to. My fingers get stuck. It's greasy, matted in places where the dye dried wrong. At some point, I don't even remember when I tried to paint it purple. Not a clean violet or anything deliberate. Just this clumsy, streaky mess of color, as if I tried to mask a crack with something loud. It didn't work.

The Echo… didn't show itself anymore…Not directly. But it's still here. I feel it. In the mirror, where my reflection moves a beat too late, and grins when I don't. In the shadows that flinch as if prey, even when nothing stirs.

In my voice, twisted, returned to me with words I never said, secrets I never spoke aloud. It likes to answer questions I haven't asked yet. Especially the ones I'm afraid of. It's not a hallucination. I know it isn't. I've seen hallucinations. This is worse. This is something looking through me, not at me. Something that knows that I asked for this.

My eyes glance around to another fucking page, glued to the wall by a knife I don't even remember owning. The blade's rusted, it's been used, on what, I don't want to know. Today's date. A coordinate. The handwriting is wrong, too clean, too calm. Not mine. It doesn't shake.

It doesn’t scream. I should tear it down. I should stop. But I won’t.

Because she might be there. Or some part of her. Or the shadow she left behind.

Because if I stop moving, I’ll have to turn around, and I know something’s there, grinning in the dark where my eyes won’t go.

Because whatever’s behind me isn’t breathing right. Isn’t living right.

Because the buzzing in my skull has teeth now.

Because it gnaws when I sleep. Screams when I rest.

Because when I’m still, it gets closer. Because the silence has started speaking in her voice.

Because the walls know her name, and they won’t let me forget it. Because chasing coordinates is the only thing I can still pretend is real.

Because ghosts are better than the echo of nothing.

Because if I stop now, I think I’ll rot where I stand.

I sigh and grab my coat. It’s stiff with something that might be old instant ramen or coffee, or both. I don’t check. I don’t care.

On the way to the door, my foot catches on a broken mug. I go down hard, knees cracking, a sharp edge slicing my palm open. I stare at the cut for a second. It doesn't even sting. Not right away. Just leaks. Red on tile. A map I can't read. I don't bother cleaning it up.

Something shifts in the far corner of the room, the one I stopped walking past at night. The one I never turn my back on. It moves when I move, as if it's tethered to me. Or waiting. I don't look. I've learned not to. My fingers twitch when I touch the doorknob. Cold metal, sticky with something I didn't leave there. I don't ask questions anymore. There's a new word carved into the wood above the lock.

It wasn't there yesterday. It says *run*. Carved clean, with something sharp and patient.

I swallow. The air tastes of rust. But I'm not running. I haven't been running. I'm walking into every wrong place on purpose, chasing coordinates as if they owe me her. As if following enough of them will tear through the skin of this reality and leave her waiting on the other side.

I'm not *running*. I'm dissolving forward.

And if I find something that isn't her, if I find teeth, or rot, or worse… Maybe it'll be enough to pull me apart and leave the part of me that still remembers her face intact. Maybe

that’s all I deserve to keep. There’s a part of me that hopes whatever’s waiting this time ends it. Not out of fear. Out of mercy.

Because I don’t know how much longer I can keep moving without splintering in half.

Because this body is rotting from the inside.

Because every day I wake up, something else about her slips through the cracks. Her laugh, sharp and sudden, catching her by surprise. Her hands, always cold, always moving, always building something from nothing. Her… lips… The way she used to kiss me, as if she knew it wouldn’t last, as if she

were memorizing my mouth before the world erased it, back when we were seventeen, stupid, and thought the future was something we could outrun.

Now I can't even remember the sound of her voice without wondering if I made it up.

I slam my palm into the door before the memory finishes. Blood from the earlier cut smears across the wood. The word run disappears beneath it. Good. I'm not here to take advice. I'm here to dig through hell for whatever piece of her hell might've kept.

And if it's not her, then maybe it'll be the thing that took her, maybe the Echo. And

maybe I'll bleed enough in front of it that it'll give her back. Then, there's a low creak behind me. No one should be here. I shiver, *don't turn around*, my mind repeats as a prayer.

I count to five. The sound doesn't come again. But something smells off. Not rot, something sweeter. Almost burned sugar and blood, something tricking my brain into believing it's safe. I press a knuckle to my mouth. Bite down until it hurts. The pain just joins the fog.

Another coordinate is scrawled on the back of my hand. I didn't write it. I would've remembered that, right? The pen stroke is too smooth. Too deliberate. But the ink's fresh, still

smears when I drag my fingers across it. My heartbeat spikes. I check the wall where I'd been pinning the last ones. New ones are there now.

Four pages. Four dates. Four places. All written in identical print. All dated ahead, days that haven't happened yet. My stomach knots, curls in on itself like it's trying to vanish. Something is playing with time again. Or maybe I'm slipping through it without realising. I rub my eyes raw. The lights flicker. My own shadow doesn't.

I stare at it. It stares back.

Then it moves, just a little. My mouth dries out. I want to scream, but I'm afraid that if I open my mouth, something else will crawl out. Something that isn't mine.

The house is colder than it should be. There's mildew forming under the window frame. I swear I spelt her name two days ago. I wiped it off. It came back in reverse. The mug I shattered last week is back together on the table. No glue. Just whole, as if time itself felt pity and tried to rewind. But it's wrong. Too clean. Too quiet. When I pick it up, the handle is still warm.

There's lipstick on the rim. It's not Fdeya's. She never wore lipstick.

But it’s her colour. The one she said made her feel like someone else. Someone stronger. Someone not terrified of what the world might do to her if it found out what she was trying to build. I bring it to my lips. Taste iron. Spit.

I back into the hallway. The walls are breathing again. I press my palm to one. It exhales, warm and wet. The wallpaper peels with a sound of skin. I can’t tell if I’m still inside my own house or inside something that only resembles it. The hallway stretches the longer I stare. The door at the end flickers in and out of reality, a broken frame in a film reel.

I swear I hear the Echo laugh. Not aloud. Inside my jaw. Pressing teeth into the bone. I clench my fists until I draw blood. I don't scream. Screaming is an invitation. Screaming gives it shape. I count my breaths. Try to make it to ten. I only get to seven before a voice, my voice, whispers from the kitchen:

"You don't belong to yourself anymore, Fiolleto, you belong to me."

No. No, I'm not. I can't be. But the deal wasn't clear. It never is. The Echo doesn't do contracts. It claims. And when it takes, it doesn't take with teeth. It takes with absence. With silence that stretches too long. With rooms that forget your name when you walk into them.

And the costs don’t show up in ink. They show up in decay. In mould behind your eyes. In waking up with your own handwriting on the ceiling.

There’s a mirror above the stove now. I didn’t put it there. I walk toward it. The reflection doesn’t match. I’m staring at myself, but my hair is still brown. My hands aren’t ink-stained. My eyes look calmer than I feel.

Then the reflection moves. Smiles. And I don’t. It lifts a hand and writes something on the inside of the mirror.

I squint to read it.

“Having fun?”

No punctuation. Just that. I turn, and the hallway's closed behind me. The door's gone. All the windows are bricked over. The lightbulbs pulse with a heartbeat.

I smell Fdeya's shampoo. Jasmine. A fake kind from a generic brand. She hated it, but it lingered in her hoodies and on my pillowcases. I follow the scent into the bathroom.

The tub is full. With what, I can't tell. It's black. Still. Too still. The tiles around it spell something in hair. My hair. Or hers.

I reach for the light. The bulb bursts, not in a flicker, not a fizzle, but explodes in a hiss of glass and ozone. Everything turns red in my

head. The colour doesn't come from the room. It comes from inside.

My pulse throbs behind my eyes. Something in the tub shifts. Opens an eye. Then another. They're her eyes. Fdeya's. But not quite. The blue is there, but clouded. Murky, drowned-glass eyes. They look past me. Through me. As if I'm not here. As if I never was.

"FDEYA!" I shout, the name cracking out of me, buried under gravel. The face doesn't change. Doesn't blink. Doesn't see. But it moves. Not her. The water distorts as something rises. A hand.

It breaks the surface slowly. Unnatural. Deliberate. Pitch black. Oil-thick. Wrong. Every finger is a little too long. Jointed in the wrong places. The skin is slick, webbed, and achingly familiar.

I stumble back. My heel hits porcelain. Was that a plate? A bowl? When the hell did I bring dishes into the bathroom? Doesn't matter.

The hand reaches further. Another arm. Then a shoulder. Then hair, her hair. Dirty blonde, matted, dripping with drowned weeds. But the head it's attached to, wrong. Elongated. Boneless. Smiling. Not a mouth. A smile. Carved too wide. Too still. The kind of smile that I learned from watching people scream.

The tub fills with tar-black liquid, lapping over the edges, hungry for the floor. I can hear it now, a dozen voices stitched together:

“You came looking.”

“You asked.”

“You made the deal, but she’s not yours… no.”

“She’s from below now.”

My hand slams the wall. I scramble, fingers dragging through paint. I think I peel some off. I hope it’s paint. The voice behind me continues, glitching as a corrupted file.

“Trade made. Soul paid.”

“Follow the maps.”

“Find the way.”

I slam the door shut. Not that it matters. The whisper leaks through the cracks, steam that burns even when cold. The kind that nests behind your eyes and waits.

Still… I reach out. I don’t know why. Maybe I want to feel her skin again. Maybe I think I can pull her out of the tub, out of the dark, out of death itself. Maybe I just want it to end.

My fingers brush the black hand. It’s cold. Not surface cold. Not skin cold. Core cold. It

remembers warmth. It knows what I've lost. Then it grabs me.

Not that it needs saving. It's reclaiming what belongs to it. The grip tightens. My wrist bends too far. It yanks. I crash against the edge. Porcelain slams into my ribs. I hear something crack. It might be me. The water, if it's water, inhales. Not a splash. A pull. A lung. I don't have time to scream. The surface breaks around my skull, and I'm swallowed whole.

It's not wet. It's thick, ink, grief, liquefied memory.

My eyes burn. My throat closes. My chest screams for air, and I ignore it. This isn't drowning. This is devouring.

Hands graze my skin. Too many. Some brush. Some grip. None forgives. Something presses its mouth to my ear. It says her name, but it's my voice. Distorted. Broken in half. I thrash. Nothing moves.

My arms? Gone. My legs? Unreachable. My body, a suggestion. The black tugs at me. Not just at skin, at the meaning.

It rips pieces away:

My name. My face. The sound of her laugh. The orphanage. Seventeen. Her promise

was that she wouldn’t go before me.Gone, bark peeled from a tree until it bleeds light.

I see her. Fdeya. Floating. Still. Eyes open. Blank. Hair drifts around her, underwater in some other physics. Time slows just for her. Her mouth moves. No sound.

She opens her arms. Welcoming me. And behind her,  Teeth. Not hers. The abyss yawns open, a grin across reality. Rows. Spirals. Teeth without mouths. Hunger without form. A final hand grabs my ankle. No skin, just pressure. Pure intent. The light above me explodes. Everything turns red. Then inward. My lungs invert. My thoughts fold as paper soaked in blood. I don’t know if I’m screaming, thinking,

dying, remembering, or all of it at once. And then, nothing. A stillness so absolute it feels as judgment. A silence where even silence is stripped away. My name unravels. My mind folds in on itself.

I wake up choking on air, a mouthful of glass. My lungs seize. My throat's raw, as if I've been screaming for hours. I lurch upright, and something crumples beneath me. Dozens of them. Some stuck to my skin with sweat. Others torn, smeared with ink and blood. The carpet reeks of mildew. My coat's half on, half beneath me. There's something wet under my cheek. I don't check what it is.

The tub. The black water. Her smile. It's gone. Just a dream. That's what my brain screams, over and over, as if volume can force belief. Just a dream. But dreams don't leave bruises.

My ribs ache. Every breath tugs at the muscle, as if it's been hit with a bat. I lift my shirt, deep red forming already, the shape of the porcelain edge. My fingers shake as I press them to my side. It's real. It's all too real.

I try to stand. My legs wobble, knees clicking as if rusted. There's a sharp sting in my right wrist. I glance down. The black hand. The one that grabbed me. There's a mark where it touched me, skin mottled and pale, as if

frostbitten. The imprint of too-long fingers is still red and angry. I stagger back from myself, from my own fucking skin, and trip over the same broken mug from before. I go down hard. The papers scatter.

"Fuck," I rasp.

I'm not in the bathroom. I'm in the living room. The lights are off. The air is thick. There's no sound but my ragged breathing, and something else. A steady drip. Not water. Not from the sink. From somewhere. A rhythm. A clock that doesn't tick, just bleeds.

I scan the mess around me. Coordinates. They're everywhere. Scribbled on napkins,

receipts, and yellowed scraps of printer paper. Some circled, others crossed out, and a few burned around the edges. My handwriting on most. But not all. Some are too neat. The numbers are too perfect.

I drag myself to my knees, grabbing the closest one.

43°38’19.7”N 79°23’14.0”W

Marked in red. Underlined twice. A smear beside it that looks too dark to be ink. I let it fall from my hand. Then I notice the sting again. My right hand. The back of it. I stare.

The same coordinate, burned into my skin, as if seared with a brand.No blood. No scab.

Just raw, raised lines, ugly and fresh. I dig my nails into it. Hard. Trying to break it. Erase it. Tear through the skin. But the pain is sharp and electric, and I feel something twitch in the back of my skull. The buzzing. Louder now. Harsher.

“You came looking…”

I hear it again. Not in the room.In me, crawling up the spine as mould. I shove myself up. My legs barely hold. It wasn’t a dream. Not fully.

I don’t know how much of it was real. If the tub ever existed. If she ever looked at me with those rotting, dead eyes. If the abyss ever smiled. But this, this pain, this mark, the

coordinates, they’re not dreams. They’re anchors.

Reality slips. I know that. It’s been slipping for weeks. Maybe months. Since she vanished. Since I made the deal. Since the Echo said she’s from below now. The papers whisper when I walk. Soft rustling, breath in the dark. I try not to step on the Polaroids. Some of them are blank now. Just fog. Others are burning at the corners, even though there’s no fire.One shows her face, distorted, as if underwater, screaming.

I blink and it’s gone.

I reach for my coat again and something clinks. The knife. The one from the wall. I didn't put it there. But it's in my pocket now. Still wet.

I want to puke. But I don't. Instead, I stumble toward the kitchen. I need water. Or a distraction. Or a time machine. I grab the counter for support. My reflection stares at me in the microwave door. My eyes are bloodshot. There's something under the skin, vein-shaped, but darker. Moving.

I blink. Gone. Not gone. Just *waiting*.

The buzzing grows louder. It's not behind me anymore. It's inside. It followed me back. It

came through with me. The water didn't just pull me in; it left something behind. I grab a pen. My hand shakes. I start writing the coordinates again. Over and over. Back of receipts. Edge of the wall. On my forearm. It wants me to follow. And God help me, I want to.

Because the pain is real.

Because the dream tasted too close.

Because I saw her.

Because maybe… maybe I'm not supposed to wake up. Maybe that was the real world. And this is the dream.

The light in the ceiling flickers. The bulb hums, then steadies. My phone lies dead on the floor. Cracked. Not that it matters. No service. No outside. The world narrowed to numbers and static, and the memory of her hands on my jaw, begging me not to let go.

I press my forehead to the wall. Close my eyes. The tile is cold. My breathing slows. A rhythm returns. Not peace. Just a pattern.

I turn toward the table. The map is still spread out. Strings, pins, scribbled notes. A city name underlined: St. Isolde. The coordinate on my hand matches a point on the edge of it. A red X.

I reach for a tack, jam it into the paper. I know what's coming next. Tomorrow, or tonight, I'll go. I'll follow the map. I'll find her.

Even if what I find isn't her anymore.

Even if it's not even human.

Because something reached out of the dark. And I touched it back.

CHAPTER 15 - PEEKABOO

# FDEYA DOSTOEVSKY

-PRESENT-

-UNKNOWN-

It clings to me.

Thick. Cold. Sentient. Blacker than oil, blacker than rot. It doesn't coat me, it inhabits me. It seeps from my pores as sweat from a corpse, slides from my mouth in slack, choking ropes, bubbles up from my tear ducts in sluggish trails. It leaks from my ears with a wet pop, dribbles between my fingers like afterbirth. I feel it curling around my spine,

slithering into the gaps between bones, threading itself through nerves that twitch without command.

I don’t remember breathing it in, but it’s clearly in my lungs. In my blood. In my marrow. I taste rust and copper. Chewed wires soaked in bile. It fizzes behind my eyes. It hums inside my skull.

I claw upward through the weight of it, my limbs not moving so much as twitching, dragging. Every breath is an insult. Every movement tears something. I’m born wrong into this place, coughing, shivering, wailing, a thing half-dead and half-made.

The sky above me buzzes, fluorescent and dying, shaking with a thin electric whine. It hangs low, too close, too flat. A membrane stretched thin over something that sees me. There's no sun. No horizon. Just distortion.

I collapse face-first onto solid ground. Solid? No…that's not the word.

Gravel and slick mud, scattered with fragments too smooth to be stone. Bone, maybe. I don't want to know. Warm. Damp. Breathing. I gag and pull back, hands slick with something that moves on its own. Beneath me, the black substance slithers away without sound, retreating into a pool that doesn't reflect

anything. It leaves no trace. But I feel it still, coiled under my ribs.

My limbs refuse to obey. My fingers are shaking. I twitch, dry-heave, and drag myself forward, my nails are cracked. My knees grind into the soft earth, no, flesh, and I gasp for air that reeks of death. My throat burns. My mouth carries the taste of a storm. My ears scream with static. My vision pulses at the edges, and behind my eyes, something laughs.

I know what this is. I'm not in limbo. Not in the apartment. Not in memory. I'm back, but not at home. This world knows me. And it hates me for returning.

The air vibrates with pressure, with voices that never learned language but remembered me anyway. The fields stretch out in every direction, grey and dead, endlessly. No wind. No sound. Only the endless hum of something vast and dying, leaking static from the seams of the sky.

I try to stand. My legs scream. My bones feel rearranged. The sludge stains my skin, veins threaded with black. It doesn't dry, it moves. It pulses when I breathe, twitches on its own. Something's still in it, watching from inside. If I look back, I'll see my face in that puddle, smiling with teeth too many and eyes too empty.

So I don’t turn. I *crawl*.

The air crackles in my lungs. My blood buzzes. Every breath is a punishment. My skin hums, hyperaware of every hair, every breath, every blink. The inside of my skull is too loud. Reality rings. And beneath it all, a whisper repeats that none of this is real.

But the pain is. That is always real.

I press my hands into the dirt, too warm, too soft, and push myself upright. My legs shake, knees raw. I blink against the stinging air. Nothing moves. Nothing lives.

Except the pole. A utility pole rises in the distance, stark and skeletal, a spine from a

grave.Its wires vibrate in broken pulses. Beneath it, something swings.

A crow. Nailed to the wood, wings spread, head twisted. Still twitching. Still alive.

Its eyes track me. I stagger toward it, every step flashing with memories I don’t own. Fiolleto’s voice, cracking under the weight of something impossible.

“You weren’t supposed to come back,” something inside me hisses. But I did. And now the world knows.

At the base of the pole, burned into the earth, is a mark. Not a rune. Not a word. A

map. One I recognise instantly. The one he finished in blood.

My skin pulses, marks along my arms blister, glowing faintly. I fall to my knees, the scream tearing free before I know it's coming. Not of pain. Not fear. Truth.

The fragments slam into place. The deal. The sacrifice. I wasn't pulled back. I dragged myself back. I tore my way through. And something came with me. A shadow. A sickness. A parasite. A reflection. Burrowed deep. It waits inside me, cold and patient. Watching. Breathing with my breath. Whispering.

The ground beneath my knees ripples. It's flesh. Pulsing. Warm. Breathing. I feel it squirm beneath my palms, curling around my joints, keeping me in place. I stand, barely. I don't look down.

The sky blinks. Once. Twice. Clouds vanish. Or maybe they were never there. I hear the hum of pressure building, my hands tremble as I try to rise again, the world tilts sideways. Nothing holds still. The trees, if that's what they are, hang upside down, circuitry in the air, roots above, twitching when I blink.

I blink.

Suddenly, I'm on a road. Cracked asphalt, slick with oil that reflects nothing, covered with weeds, fog curls at the edges, thick and wet. The sky's still wrong, but the shapes are familiar.

An abandoned town.

Buildings collapsed inward, gutted of meaning. Storefronts shattered. Signs torn down. Ribcages of civilisation. My feet are bare. The pavement is cold. It pulses once, faint but real. A heartbeat.

My own is too fast. Too loud. Slamming against my ribs trying to escape. I raise my hands. They shake. My feet are bare. The black

ichor won’t come off. It’s etched into my palms, a sigil, a prophecy.

“Stop,” I whisper. Or maybe I think.

The static answers. It becomes a voice. “There you are.”

I whirl around. No one’s there.

My stomach flips. Gravity shifts sideways. I walk, nowhere in particular. Just… away. But the road loops. I walk until I can’t. Until my knees threaten to snap, until my teeth grind with tension, until the wind whispers in a language I shouldn’t know.

Then I see it. A billboard. My face. Eyes blacked out. Mouth wide in a scream I don't remember. And beneath it, written in smears:

*WHERE IS SHE?*

It knocks the breath from me. Not fear, worse. Recognition. I've been here. I don't remember when, but this place remembers me. My footprints are fossilised in the pavement. My name is carved into the walls. The wind chants it.

"Fdeya."

I double over. I scream. The world stutters.

Flickers. A gas station. A burned church. A hallway soaked in water. The road again. My body collapses. I hit the ground, gasping. But the air won't come.

I claw at my throat. Not choking, just wrong. My lungs weren't meant for this place. Black leaks from my eyes. Or maybe it's blood. Or maybe memory. It hurts. It hurts. I want to split my skull open to let the pressure out.

I close my eyes. Open them.

The ground splits open, not cracks. Teeth. A mouth below the road. Laughing.

My laugh. Hers. Mine again.

I crawl backwards, hands slipping in the black. I crash into something solid. A door. Free-standing. Wooden. Familiar. My lab door. No. That's gone. I left it behind. Didn't I? The handle turns. I don't want to go in. But I'm already inside.

The walls press in. Papers everywhere. Equations scrawl across the floor and ceiling, flickering, rewriting as I try to read them. On the chalkboard, only one thing, scratched over and over:

*FIND HER.*

*WHERE IS SHE?*

*WHERE IS SHE??*

*WHERE IS SHE????*

I slam my fists into it. The wall gives way. My hand sinks into something wet and warm. Something grabs me. I scream. Again. Again. Then silence. I'm crouched. Alone. Shaking. Hair plastered to my skin. Nails cracked. My sobs are raw and animal. They come from some broken place inside my ribs.

I don't know where I am. I don't know what I am. I don't know who I am. My name tastes foreign.

Fdeya. Fdeya. Fdeya.

Who is she? What did she do? Why did she build the machine? A name rises, Fiolleto.

The sound of it slices through my mind, striking with the force of lightning. I scream again, clawing at my scalp, trying to rip the thought out.

I don't want to remember. But I don't want to forget. Everything is wrong. Over and over, it echoes. My thoughts spiral into the mantra.

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Everything is *wrong*. Everything is *wrong*. Everything is *wrong*. Everything is *wrong*. Everything is *wrong*. Everything is *wrong*. Everything is…

I collapse. The tiles beneath me expand and contract as something watches me from above. The ceiling is gone. In its place, a wide black eye. Dilating. Tracking me.

I'm past screaming. My throat is shredded. My voice is gone. There's nothing left but the hollow rasp of something pretending to be human. Then…

Flash. Flash. A click. Polaroid. I look up. She's standing there.

Not me. Her. The one who followed. The Echo. The shape that learned to mimic my walk, wear my skin.

An angelic smile is what she sells, which promises heaven yet puts me through hell. Tilted head. Dead eyes. Mirror eyes that reflect nothing but my own desperation. She opens her mouth.

“Peekaboo.” She exclaims, shrill and childish

“…you shouldn’t be here.” My voice comes out rasping, dry, as if nails are clawing at the inside of my throat. “…You left when I left the train…”

She only giggles, and the sound is too delighted, too pure, a melody sung in mockery. “But I am. Always. I’ve never left you, little hymn.”

I crawl backwards on trembling limbs, jaw clenched, eyes raw and wide, skin. “Don’t call me that.”

She tilts her head to the other side, giggling again, her fingers snaring a strand of my wet hair and twisting it around with cruel tenderness. “Why not? That’s what you are to me. Every sob, every scream, every tremor, prayers. I listen. I drink. I praise.”

I shake, fists clenching, breath catching in my throat. “You think this is love? This sickness you bring?”

Her hand presses flat against my chest where my heartbeat slams itself against my ribs, frantic, desperate. “Oh yes. Love is a sickness. Love is rot. Love is watching you break and bloom again and again. When you despair, I rejoice. When you fall apart, I sing.”

Her words dig into me, and my voice cracks against the weight of them, trembling between fury and exhaustion. “You… delight in this? In me falling apart?”

Her eyes widen, blank and devout, as if the act of seeing me is itself a prayer. “Delight? No. Worship. You’re my altar. Every breath you waste on pain is incense. Every tear is a candle. When you scream, the world shakes, and I kneel.”

I murmur, almost pleading, as if some part of me still believes in mercy. “Why…” I pause, swallowing dry. “…me?”

And she leans close, her mouth brushing my ear, her voice, my own stolen and bent back at me. “Because you made me. You split yourself open, and I crawled out. I am your shadow. Your prayer made flesh. I love you because you hate yourself enough to let me.”

I scoff in disbelief, though it comes out more like a cough, wet and splintered. My lips split, my throat aflame. The sound can't hurt her, but I hurl it anyway, my only weapon. My voice cracks again. "That's not love. That's infection."

She gasps, delighted, as if I'd handed her a gift. "Yes! Yes. Infection. Perfect word. A hymn should carry something greater inside. You carry me. You sing without knowing. Every time you choke on despair, I grow louder."

"Shut up…Shut the fuck up." I spit it, though spit doesn't come, only a thread of black

that clings to my chin. “You’re nothing. You’re just..”

“Just you,” she echoes as her smile widens. “I am only ever you. Your shadow, your sigh, your prayer. You keep trying to carve me out, but you can’t. You made me in your image, beloved.”

I shake my head, nails digging into my own palms until they sting. “No. No, the only thing I wanted was to build the machine! To time travel! To find new dimensions and innovate science! I didn’t ask for this… I didn’t ask for you!”

“You didn’t need to,” she whispers, leaning closer. Her breath smells of static, “Every cry was a psalm. Every attempt at silence was a choir. I followed you because you called me. You left the door open, little hymn, and I walked through.”

“I don’t want you.” My voice is thin, shredded. “I never wanted you.”

She laughs, soft and reverent, as if I’ve recited scripture. “Oh, but wanting doesn’t matter. Needing does. And you need me, even when you say you don’t. Especially then.”

Her hands are on my face before I can recoil, cold and damp, her nails drag across my

cheek. “Let me keep you. Let me pray through you. Don’t fight. Fighting makes you sweeter, but surrender… surrender makes you mine.”

The word *mine* rings in my skull, over and over, until it drowns out thought. I thrash, wrenching my face free, stumbling back into the trembling tiles. “You don’t own me. You don’t love me,” I rasp. “You love the ruin.”

Her grin sharpens. “Same thing.”

The words hang, disperse in the air, sinking into my lungs, mildew thick within me. I shake my head so hard my teeth clatter. “No… no… You don’t get to say that. You don’t get to decide what love is.” My chest is collapsing,

heartbeat stumbling, ribs transformed into prison bars. I rattle against them, trapped.

She only blinks, all patience, all devotion. “But I already have. I decided that day that the machine had malfunctioned. I decided that the moment you cracked open. I decided that when you cried loud enough for me to hear.” Her voice dips, reverent, sick with joy. “And you keep crying.”

My throat locks. Nothing comes out. Not words, not air. Only that tight sting of salt behind my eyes. She presses her palms together in mock prayer, whispering with that smile that makes her look too young, too endless. “Sing

for me again. Break again. I'll listen. I'll always listen."

Oh that motherfucker... For a moment, I almost did. Something in me twists so hard I could split in half. My knees buckle, then lock. I force myself up, swaying, every joint screaming against me. My hands slap at my clothes, frantic, useless, as if I can brush her off, scrub every trace of her fingers from my skin. My breaths are ragged, scraped raw on the way out.

"Let me go," I rasp, the words ripping out of me jagged, torn open, shrapnel scattering from my throat. My throat feels flayed, each syllable dragging blood, as if speaking itself is

an act of mutilation. I taste iron and salt. My eyes sting, blister with fury until I can barely see anything but blur and heat. “Let me go back to him.” The plea is not a voice anymore, it’s a wound, raw and dripping, spilling out of me because there’s nothing else left to hold it in.

“Oh? Now you remember him? Cute.” The voice isn’t a sound. It’s inside me, under my skin. It’s a child’s giggle smeared over a grown woman’s whisper, and behind it something older, cracked and smeared. I freeze, throat tightening.

I don’t look. I don’t want to see. Looking makes it real. Looking makes it worse. My chest caves inward as if invisible hands are

squeezing the air out of me. A scream builds at the base of my lungs but clogs there, heavy, useless.

“Don’t play dumb, little hymn,” it croons, delighted. “You’ve been carrying him like a rotten fruit in your ribcage all this time. Pretending you forgot. Pretending he was just… gone. And now..”

The laugh bursts sharp and sudden, “Now the cracks are leaking, and oh, look at you. Remembering hurts, doesn’t it?”

I stagger, knees nearly buckling, gripping at nothing, fingers clawing the empty air as though I could catch hold of reality before it

slips away entirely. I'm back in the town. The sky ripples. The road buckles. The horizon collapses into itself, then unfolds, paper burned at the edges. I can’t tell if it’s the world tearing or my mind. Maybe both.

“Quiet,” I manage, but my voice is so weak, so small, I don’t even believe it’s mine.

“Oh, she speaks!” the Echo howls, clapping with hands I can’t see but feel, a thunderclap inside my bones. “Say it louder, hymn. Make me believe you.”

I sink to my knees, pressing my palms to my ears, but that only traps it deeper inside my skull. The buzzing comes back, violent, jagged.

Not the flat drone of electricity anymore, but a swarm of bees chewing their way out of my head. My eyes sting. My nails dig into the sides of my face until I feel warmth, until something wet smears across my cheek.

The Echo hums, soft now, too soft, the way a parent hums a lullaby to a child. “He’s not here. Not yet.“

My body rocks forward. I slam my forehead into the asphalt, once, twice, three times, until the world stutters white. Pain blooms, but it’s grounding. For a second, I almost welcome it.

“Stop.” My voice is jagged glass. “Please stop.”

The laughter drips back, low and slow, syrup-thick. “Begging already? I thought you’d fight harder for him. For yourself. Maybe you’re not worth remembering after all.”

The ground beneath me ripples as water, a black liquid disguised as solid earth. I press my hands flat against it and feel something pulse, veins under soft skin. And suddenly, I’m not kneeling on a road anymore. The ground falls away. I fall with it. Darkness rises to meet me.

“You never learned, did you? Always carving yourself open, desperate for meaning,

as if the world owed you one. Poor little hymn. You were never more than a doorway for me to crawl through. But for now…" her voice bends, sweet and venomous, "...I'll grant you a glimpse of light. Not mercy. Not salvation. Just enough for him to see what's left of you, to mistake your ruin for hope." She taunts, and then the darkness swallows my vision whole.

CHAPTER 16 - INSTANCE ZERO

# FIOLLETO YAROSLAV

-PRESENT-

-EARTH-

The way to the station is always longer than I remember, as if the streets stretch themselves to delay me.

My feet follow a path I haven't walked in years, yet every crack in the pavement, every leaning lamppost, seems to recognise me with a too-familiar stare. The silence between steps is heavier here, the air colder, as though it remembers what I've tried to bury. The last

time I boarded a train was the day I left the orphanage behind, carrying nothing but a bag. Now, walking it again feels treacherous.

The streets twist unnaturally, pulled thin, a tendon stretched tight, houses bending at impossible angles, windows tracking me with tired eyes. At first, it's almost normal, cobblestones slick with rain, lampposts stooped with age, but a few blocks in, the familiar begins to rot. Some doors are bricked over, others gape into hollow shadow. A dog barks once, sharp and ragged, then cuts off mid-note, swallowed by the fog.

I tell myself the train is the point, but the walk is the real passage. The world peels back

layer by layer, revealing rot beneath: fountains hollowed into black water that pulses faintly, a shattered telephone booth leaking wires as veins, a mailbox yawning wide, empty inside, waiting for a letter that never came. Shadows linger in alleys too deep to see the end of, the buzzing starts faintly behind my ears, worming its way down my throat, tasting of static and ozone. Sometimes I wonder if it’s real, or if my body is the one producing it, a generator wound too tight.

Voices echo where there are no people, laughter stretching into coughs, my own name whispering low, pulled thin across the fog. Footsteps follow, irregular, stopping when I

stop. I don’t turn. Acknowledgement gives them form; ignoring them lets them hover. Windows flare with shapes that vanish the moment I blink, hands pressed flat against glass, mouths opening wide and silent, reflections of a town that isn’t mine.

The further I go, the more the world fractures. Pavement cracks open, revealing black soil that seems to breathe. Streetlights twist and elongate, their poles bending toward me, sweating a faint glow that drips in thick, syrupy streams. I see faces in walls, hollow-eyed, mouths forming words I cannot hear. A sign swings above a bakery, but the

letters rearrange themselves: “LEAVE,” “RUN,” “STAY” all in the same flicker of light.

An alley opens to the right, though I’ve never noticed it before. The bricks here pulse faintly, wet and warm,. A smell rises: iron, rot, damp leather. I step closer; something shifts in the corner of my vision. When I look, nothing is there, but the ground ripples, a shadow writhing underfoot, reaching, stretching toward my boots. I feel the air thicken, sticky, clinging to my skin. My gloves are damp; the moisture tastes faintly of copper.

I pass a lantern whose glow hums instead of wavering. Beneath it, the cobblestones are pocked with shallow holes, each one reflecting

a different sky: one green and boiling, another red and dripping, a third black with stars twisting in impossible patterns. I step carefully, but my boots sink slightly into each surface, as if the ground resists me, as if it knows I am unworthy.

The buzzing grows, joined now by a low, constant vibration underfoot. It resonates in my bones, my teeth, my stomach. My shadow stretches long and wrong, sometimes moving ahead of me, sometimes lagging, sometimes splitting into two or three figures. Each shadow mimics me, but with subtle differences: a limp in the wrong leg, a hand raised where I keep

mine down, a face turned slightly away, as if observing me.

I glance at a window and see her, or perhaps the Echo, standing behind the glass. Hair floats around the face as if underwater, eyes reflecting nothing but absence. I reach out; she disappears, and in her place is a cracked mirror panel, reflecting my own distorted features. My mouth opens too wide; my eyes sink into black hollows. I stagger, clutching my face, but the image does not fade.

Somewhere above me, the clouds move backwards. Moonlight fractures into shards, cutting the streets into jagged patterns. Shadows stretch and twist, sometimes merging with those

of buildings, sometimes forming shapes on their own, creatures walking on all fours, crawling along walls. I can hear their claws scraping brick, soft, deliberate, almost waiting.

The first clock I pass has no hands, just a face cracked in a spiderweb pattern. I hear ticks, fast and uneven, coming from nowhere. I check my own watch; the glass is gone, the hands spinning wildly, spinning, jamming, spinning again. I let it dangle from my wrist, quiet hours pulling at me like chains.

A sudden gust carries a voice, low and wet, dripping into my ears. It says my name, then laughs, short and ragged, a wheeze torn from a lung. I start walking faster, boots

splashing through puddles that ripple unnaturally, reflecting shapes that vanish if I stare too long. Sometimes I think the puddles are eyes, watching, judging, opening slowly as if to swallow me whole.

The buildings grow taller, leaning closer, their rooftops brushing the clouds. I feel trapped in a corridor that was once a street. Windows leak dim, sickly light. Doors no longer open to rooms but to voids, each one swallowing the fog differently. I pass a collapsed archway; inside, I glimpse rows of chairs arranged in concentric circles, all facing inward, none occupied, yet something shifts in the centre when I blink.

Streetlamps no longer blink but throb in strange succession, herding me forward. Shadows detach, skittering across walls, across pavement. Some whisper, some scream, some simply stare. I do not stop. My pulse pounds in my ears, not from fear, but as rhythm, a warning I cannot decipher.

The station appears slowly, a wound opening in the distance. Tracks gleam faintly in moonlight, platform boards sag, the building rises crooked, and bricks are blackened.

Inside, benches are splintered, windows smeared. Floorboards groan. A vending machine flickers weakly; every can it delivers is cold, the labels peeling to reveal strange sigils

beneath. The air tastes of mildew, rust, and something metallic, alive. The buzzing has become a roar, mingling with distant footsteps I cannot place. My hand throbs against the railing; the mark flares.

The platform doors wait. Behind them, the train will come, whether it should or not. The walk here strips away everything that doesn’t belong. By the time I arrive, I am hollow, hollow enough for her to find me, hollow enough for whatever waits beyond the doors to recognise me.

CHAPTER 17 - IM GOING OFF THE RAILS ON A CRAZY TRAIN…

# FIOLLETO YAROSLAV

-PRESENT-

-EARTH-

The platform is quiet, yet I feel the train waiting, not just in the distance but in the tautness of the air itself. I step forward, boots clacking softly against the warped wood, each sound unnervingly loud in the stillness. For a moment, the world seems steady, solid, a rare relief after the spiralling, collapsing streets I've crossed to reach this place. I take a breath,

tasting mildew and rust, my fingers grazing the chilled iron railing.

The first part of the journey feels almost ordinary. I board without resistance, sliding into an empty carriage with peeling paint and cracked glass. The seats groan under my weight, a weary creak that almost feels familiar. The lights hum faintly, steady and unthreatening. For a stretch, I allow myself to believe perhaps the worst has passed. That I am finally moving forward, leaving behind the echoes, the shadows, the warped versions of myself, and of her.

But then the train moves. Too smoothly, too silently. The tracks dissolve into haze, and

the scenery outside flows upward, defying itself. Windows blur, reflecting faces that are nearly mine but subtly wrong, lips forming words I can't hear. I look away, but the distortions cling to the glass, sliding with me, reshaping at every blink. A tremor vibrates beneath the floorboards, faint but insistent. My pulse quickens, hands gripping the edges of the seat.

I force myself to focus. Brakes sigh faintly up ahead. Doors thud shut at distant stops. The rhythm of a train in motion whispers of normalcy. Yet the carriage stretches, lengthening into an endless corridor. The light falters. At the edges of vision, shapes unmoor

from the walls, silhouettes peeling themselves loose, drifting closer, their faces collapsing into unrecognisable forms. My breath shortens.

I count in my head to stay grounded. *One… two… three…*

That's when the numbers appear. Faint at first, flickering across the glass and along the walls, I recognise them instantly, though I shouldn't. Time, splintered, repeating, bleeding through the cracks of reality. I freeze. Instinct demands I turn back, abandon the carriage, but some deeper gravity tells me I can't. What's happening has already been endured, her trials, my failures, and I understand with sick clarity:

my presence here doesn't observe the past. It rewrites it.

The light stutters again, harsher this time, and the carriage softens, sagging. The floor undulates underfoot, liquid and unstable. I realise I'm no longer in the train at all but adrift in a place without coordinates. Shapes drift in the periphery, pale, broken forms echoing both her and me. Their whispers lace through the air, overlapping, distorted, carrying meanings I almost catch before they dissolve. I try to speak, but my voice breaks apart, fragments scattering, glass-sharp and everywhere.

A clarity pierces through me: this is her past, replayed yet mutable, fragile as ash. I'm

intruding. Every step, every flicker of breath sends ripples across it, threatening collapse. The low vibration in my skull deepens into a metallic resonance, beating in time with fractured seconds, a warning bell of how precarious this moment is.

Apparitions crowd the edges of the interference, hollow silhouettes with faces half-formed. Some reach toward me, their outlines trembling. I hesitate, aware that one wrong movement could erase her. My throat works soundlessly, and the void ignores me. Only the numbers remain, pulsing in steady defiance.

And then, I feel *her*… A pull before I fully see Fdeya.

Kneeling at the edge of a black puddle, hair clinging damp across her face, her frame trembling as mist coils around her. She doesn't see me yet. The world around her wavers, warping as though replayed from a ruined tape, precise but degraded. Shadows crawl across furniture that isn't solid, over warped planks bending beneath her knees. I am a trespasser in a memory that should exist without me.

I tread carefully, as if across a frozen lake. The resonance in my skull swells, tangled with whispers layered too thick to parse. Some voices I recognise, others warped into

monstrous intonations. I hear myself among them, speaking words I never said. My hand trembles as I reach forward. The numbers strobe wildly, light fracturing, a prism on the verge of shattering.

The shadows detach from the walls, gliding closer, curious. Some wear stretched versions of my own face, mouths opening impossibly wide in silent screams. Others twist into parodies of her, fragments of Fdeya as she was, as she wasn’t, as she should never be. Every hesitation I make alters them. They waver when I falter. They press closer when I breathe too loudly. This isn’t observation. This is interference.

My stomach knots. I want to retreat, but my body refuses. An unseen force tugs me toward her. The puddle ripples, black liquid slithering across warped boards, oil-slick and thick, mirroring her in countless impossible forms. One blinks, another shrieks soundlessly, and another stretches a hand toward me before dissolving. My head spins. I whisper her name.

“Fdeya”

The sound fractures into splinters, scattering across the void. Some apparitions recoil. Her head jerks faintly, hair plastered to damp cheeks. The puddle expands in trembling circles, swallowing and birthing reflections.

The numbers accelerate, sequences cascading faster than I can follow. They pulse inside me now, syncing with my heartbeat, filling my chest with pressure. Time folds, layered, incoherent.

Her hands hover above the puddle, pale, translucent, blue-black veins threading beneath the skin as wires. Wires I've seen before, in the failed attempts.

I inch closer. Static twists into faces at the edges of vision, grazing my shoulders, cold fingers reaching. Impossible versions of her whisper soundlessly: Failed Instance #4. Failed Instance #2. Their lips move, desperate, but no words reach me. My pulse races. I know they're

warning me, every pause risks her. Every wrong gesture unravels what remains.

At the puddle's edge, I see my own reflection fractured in the ink, veins of black wiring running under translucent skin. Failed instances blink back at me from their surface, mouths wide with soundless terror. My ribs pound with each heartbeat. I lift my hand, hovering above hers. The resonance swells into a fever pitch, shaking the marrow of my bones.

Time ruptures. I feel myself dragged forward and backwards in the same instant. The figures twist, unravel, their whispers erupting into a mangled choir. Snatches of my own voice rise among them: *Don't leave me. Stay. I*

*promised.* The words cut deeper than fear. I understand now: this is the reason I was brought here, along this collapsing path.

Her eyes lift at last. She doesn't speak, perhaps cannot, for her world is held together by strands thinner than breath. The memory around her falters, pulsing, waiting. Every failed instance writhes silently, bracing for the dissolution to come. The pull is irresistible.

I reach further. The puddle trembles, reflecting impossible infinities. My fingertips brush hers.

Everything tears open.

White noise bursts outward, searing the void, then implodes into silence so sharp it presses into my skull. Apparitions collapse, unspooling into pale threads of nothing. The puddle and its echoes vanish. I am left weightless, suspended between what was and what is.

And then, I arrive.

The platform is firm beneath my boots, real, quiet, waiting. This time, I don't hesitate before moving forward.

The scent of mildew and rust anchors me, though the terror and distortions are gone. My hand tingles still, carrying the memory of her

touch, of stepping through memory itself. I am here. Whole. She is no longer just a failure, a ghost, a fragment, and I will find her.

CHAPTER 18 - THE SEA HAS COSTUMER SERVICE NOW

# FIOLLETO YAROSLAV

-PRESENT-

-EARTH-

St. Isolde.

The name doesn't arrive through a sign or a voice, it stirs inside me, dull and throbbing, a bruise under pressure. I step out before I realise my legs have moved, before my mind has agreed to follow.

The platform isn't a platform. It stretches too wide, the lines of tiles smearing together, pigment washed loose by rain. The lamps above

buzz, gutter, then flare with a light too cold to belong to electricity. My shadow bends in the wrong direction, stretching toward the train I've just abandoned. I don't look back.

The air tastes of brine, stale and metallic, thick with rot, a harbour stripped of the sea, clinging to its stench.Each inhale scratches the throat, as though the atmosphere itself carries grains of salt and rust.

I walk. The signs are wrong: half-letters smear into dripping strokes, destinations sliding into symbols I can almost, but not quite, recognise. The walls themselves twitch, brickwork jolting, something held together by nerves instead of mortar. My hand brushes cold

tile and recoils; the texture changes beneath my skin, from ceramic to slick, to a trembling surface that shudders as if it doesn't want to be touched.

The station is not a place. It is an event. A shudder. A memory replaying itself with errors accumulating each time, ink bleeding until no words remain.

I feel the echo of her still lingering in my palm, where skin met skin before the collapse. Her absence cuts deeper than her presence ever could, a phantom pain lingering in an amputated limb. I hold my hand against my chest as though I can press the ghost of her

touch back into me, but the heat leaks away no matter how tight I grip.

The corridors wind outward, but not forward. I walk, yet I find myself brushing against the same chipped pillar, stepping across the same puddle slicked with an oil-rainbow film. Once, I glance behind me and see myself leaving, just a few steps delayed, eyes hollowed out. I keep walking until that double evaporates. When I finally surface from the station, the city exhales.

St. Isolde spills outward, the air rolls heavy with salt-sick wind, fog dragging across skeletal cranes that claw at the sky. Rust-strangled ships lean against the docks,

hulls open as ribcages, their anchors snarled in weeds that pulse with a faint, living rhythm. The streets slope downward toward the water, but the water doesn't move. It is a flat skin of liquid metal, the colour of bruised flesh, rippling only when I look away.

Every building leans, sagging into the next as if exhausted from holding its shape. Paint peels in scabs. Windows twitch between reflecting light and showing nothing at all, only empty, receding corridors where no walls should be. I pass a house that exhales steam through its broken shutters. Another hums, low and resonant, a dream stirring within it.

My shoes slap against cobblestones slick with algae. Each step carries the wet slap of something crawling. The smell here is worse, salt, yes, but salted flesh, salted bones, salted blood. The kind of preservation that means not saving but stalling rot. This is not a city I've arrived in. This is a wound I've stepped inside.

I don't know where to go. The streets fork without pattern, bending back into each other, narrowing into alleys that stretch into impossible distance. Lamps pulse dim and sickly, guiding me not with light but with rhythm: blink, blink, blink. My pulse aligns with it before I can stop myself. I follow.

Each turn feels both chosen and imposed, as though my body walks ahead of my thoughts, carried along by some choreography written into the brick and cobblestone. The air is damp, dense with a metallic tang that clings to my tongue, coppery and thick. Windows lean overhead, too close together, their panes dull and opaque, reflecting only distortions of myself that seem half a step behind.

At every corner, the lamps repeat their pulse, blink, blink, blink, and my heart falls into cadence, unwillingly tethered. I try to resist, slowing my steps, but the silence that follows feels as though something immense and patient is watching me, so I quicken again. The alleys

breathe; they exhale warm drafts, then cold, then foul with rot. I cannot tell if they lead anywhere at all, or if I'm walking inside the architecture of a trap that has only one direction: deeper.

Beneath it all, there is another rhythm, quieter but older, older than stone, older than streets. At first, I mistake it for the echo of my own footsteps, but it persists even when I pause. A low groan, stretched and endless, threading beneath the rattle of lamps and the hiss of the wind. I realise then what it reminds me of, though I have not seen it here, not yet. The sea. The sea watches me. I feel it, not in sight, but in sound: a resonance carried in the

brick, a hunger vibrating through the cobblestones. When I close my eyes, it rises louder, as though waiting for me to surrender sight so it can finally show itself.

I walk deeper. The city does not welcome me, nor does it repel me. It waits. Each step brings me closer to the pulse beneath the stones, the quiet insistence of something patient and immense. The alleys twist tighter, walls leaning inward as if to funnel me into their rhythm. Every lamp blink, every echo of my boots, becomes part of a pattern I cannot escape, part of a tide I am being drawn into. And still the groan of the sea threads through it all, a low, unyielding presence beneath the pulse of the

city, anchoring me to its watchful hunger even as I move through corridors that might stretch forever.

The city breathes in sound before it breathes in sight. At first, it is only the wind, dragging its weight across the narrow streets, pulling shutters open and slamming them shut in arrhythmic bursts. Then other noises creep in, thin, metallic cries that rise and fall without source, as if the city itself has vocal cords rusted into its girders.

A foghorn moans somewhere beyond the docks. It carries too long, too loud, folding back over itself until the note doesn't decay but breeds, overlapping in layers, a low wail

twisting into chords that no ship's horn was ever built to play.

Then bells. Not church-bells, though at first my mind wants to pretend they are. No, these are ship-bells, the kind tied to a mast or the waist of a sailor. Their intervals are wrong. They strike in threes, then in halves, then stutter in a sequence that seems patterned only to mock the idea of pattern. They ring from nowhere I can see, though every time I turn, I expect a figure with salt-rotted teeth to be standing behind me, ringing one with deliberate malice.

Beneath these comes a quieter murmur. Voices. Not from people walking, there are no

people, only the shuddering of curtains and the blind glare of windows, but voices curling up from storm-drains, seeping through keyholes, echoing off the black mouth of an alley. They do not speak in the present tense. They repeat.

“Don’t leave me.”

“She said she wouldn’t.”

“You’ll be fine, won’t you?”

“Wait—wait—”

Each line bites a nerve I didn’t know was exposed. Snatches of my past, my tongue, words that never should have left my throat, now tearing free, repeating as broken radio transmissions. The city is replaying to me.

I press my palms against my ears. It doesn't help. The noise doesn't enter that way; it vibrates up through my feet, into my bones, travelling inside before I can even resist. I want to scream, but the scream would just become another artefact for the city to mimic, another phrase bouncing back to haunt me.

So I walk.

Walking takes me to smell before it takes me to sight. Fish. Not the kind bought fresh, scaled and gutted with the clean efficiency of commerce. No, these fish reek of age, of failure, of having been dragged ashore centuries ago and left to wait. Yet they are here, in stalls that lean under sagging tarps, displayed as if for

sale. Their eyes are collapsed inward, sockets oozing, mouths open as though mid-word.

When I move closer, the whisper begins, now actual whispers. It isn't a whisper of air, or even language. It is wet. The sound of gills pulling breath where there should be none. The sound of teeth gnashing through jaws no longer moving. A chorus so quiet that at first I think it is blood humming in my ears. But then one of the fish, turns its jaw not toward air but toward me. And the whisper lurches into words.

"Down."

I recoil, and the market exhales as one. Every carcass shifts in some imperceptible way:

a twitch of fins, a sliver of tails. Their voices braid into a wordless drone, not quite song, not quite prayer. I back away, but even as I do, I realise there is nowhere else to go.

The streets fork, alleys knot into each other, and every turn pulls me closer to the harbour, though I never choose that direction. The city is nudging me. Herding me, silt drawn toward the tide.

I pass streets where mannequins sit at café tables, heads bowed toward untouched cups that steam endlessly. When I blink, the steam rises from sockets where their eyes should be. A child's bicycle wheels slowly spin in a circle. No child. When I touch it, the rubber is wet as

though dragged through something thick. Posters peel from walls, revealing new posters underneath, each bearing faces I almost know. Fdeya's outline flickers across them, but her eyes have been replaced with knots of rope or spirals of shell.

I walk, and the city folds itself inward. Corridors spiral, walls bending at angles that make no sense, as if the geometry itself resists definition. The cobblestones pulse underfoot, subtle vibrations tugging at my balance, as though the ground itself is aware of my passage. Windows reflect not me but versions of me, gaunter, eyes more eroded, skin pallid and stretched thin, shadows of the body I used

to inhabit. They mouth things I can't hear, though once I swear one says:

*She's already drowned. You're running in circles.*

The words cling to the air, sticky and cold, grazing the back of my neck, alive and searching. She didn't die. I would've known.

The harbour stretches before me, a jagged mouth of metal and brine, and every step on the wet planks sends a shiver up my legs. The wood quakes underfoot, uneven and splintered, slick with rain or something worse, and I feel each grain and groove as if it belongs to the city itself. It pulses beneath me, the heartbeat of the

docks, resonating up through the soles of my boots. I can smell it in the air: salt, yes, but twisted, acrid, undercut with iron and something organic, something that thrums, a muscle still flexing after death

Cranes loom overhead, skeletal and impossibly high, their arms stretched wide, rust flakes drift down as snow, dusting my shoulders and hair. I reach out, hand trembling, to brush one, and it flexes ever so slightly at my touch, the joints groaning with a voice that is neither metal nor wood. A low vibration runs through the cables, thrumming in sync with the unseen pulse beneath the harbour, and I flinch back.

The water is impossible. Not liquid, not solid, but something in between, a slick, reflective sheet that clings to itself with tension, rippling only when I shift my gaze or step near. My reflection fractures and stretches with each glance, showing me not one body but dozens: hunched, broken, echoing the worn and hollow shapes I saw in the city windows. The surface seems to breathe, undulating in slow waves that echo the pulse of the sea I felt beneath the stones earlier. When I lean closer, shapes stir beneath it, faint silhouettes twisting and coiling into fish, into rope, into the shadows of people I've known. They move against the current, slow and deliberate, watching.

I step onto a gangplank that sways violently, creaking in protest. Each footfall sends tremors up the ropes that tether the ships, carrying through to the cranes above and the gangways beyond. Every movement feels amplified, the world hyperaware of my passage. Rain begins to fall, though I cannot tell if it is rain or condensation rising from the water itself. It sticks to my hair and skin, thick and oily, cooling the heat that clung to me from my walk through the alleys.

The ships themselves are alive in the same way. One leans unnaturally, hull split open to reveal decks that fold into themselves, impossible interior angles. Cargo crates shift as

I pass, groaning under the weight that is not there. Nets hang from the sides, dripping black water, and I see shapes tangled within: limbs? fish? rope? My stomach knots, but I step closer anyway. The ropes writhe when I touch them, coils tightening under my fingers, pulling slightly as if testing me.

A ladder leads to the top of a crane, swaying gently in the wind that tastes of rust and metal. The wind here carries sound differently: the foghorn's moan folds around me, bending and stretching in patterns that tease comprehension. I climb. Each rung is slick, the metal biting into my palms. My boots scrape the ladder, and a high note rings out, pure and

sharp, cutting across the low groan of the harbour. At the top, the wind howls through the skeletal structure, singing a twisted hymn. From here, the water stretches endlessly, flat and bruised, reflecting the city in fragments.

I see the edges of the city from this height. Buildings lean inward, windows twitch, and alleys coiling. The harbour reaches into the city, carrying a black tide that pulses under the planks and through the hulls. Each ship, each crane, each dock seems linked by that same rhythm I felt in the streets, the city breathing in sound and pulse, dragging me with it.

I descend, careful to feel the surface beneath each foot. The gangplank tilts, sending

a shudder through my legs. Water licks at the edges of the dock, thick and viscous, and I feel it cling to my boots when I step off. Shapes coil beneath it, slow, patient. One rises just enough to reveal a face, pale and stretched, eyes hollow, mouth opening in a silent scream. I jump back, heart hammering, and the water pulls it down again, all the swallowing the motion.

The smell grows worse: rotting, layers of decay stacked upon decay, clinging to my lungs and climbing down my throat. I choke back a gag, tasting brine and blood, and press my hands to my mouth. The docks shift under my weight, creaking and groaning, as though the city itself disapproves of hesitation.

I reach for a rope ladder to another platform, and the ropes coil at my touch, tightening and loosening in a rhythm that mirrors my heartbeat. A faint vibration runs through my arms, into my shoulders. I climb slowly, every movement deliberate, aware of the sway and the pulse beneath the wood. Above me, the foghorn moans in counterpoint to the city's pulse, layering the sound into chords that twist through the air.

At the top of the new platform, I can see further into the harbour. The ships stretch, a procession of dead leviathans, their hulls torn and scarred, anchors grinding through shallow metal water. The cranes sway in synchronised

patterns, their arms bending toward the water as if to drag me in. Shadows cling to the edges of the ships and the cables, twisting shapes that move just at the corner of vision.

I step along a narrow beam, slick with oil and rain. The city hums beneath me, groaning with anticipation, whispering in the wind through the cables: come closer, closer, you know you must. Each step feels measured, as if the beam itself knows my weight, my hesitation, my fear. The reflection of the water beneath shimmers, showing fragments of the streets I passed, the alleys, the lamp pulses, everything folded into this impossible mirror.

A rope swings across from one crane to another. I grab it, testing its weight. The fibres groan, black water dripping onto my boots. As I swing, the harbour below seems to stretch, the water elongating, taffy-pulled, shapes twisting just beneath the surface.

A hand, flesh pale and wet, reaches from the water toward me. I recoil, but the rope tightens in my grasp, pulling me forward, guiding me across. I land on the opposite crane, wind tearing at my clothes, the foghorn wailing behind me. I pause to look down. The water glows faintly now, bruised metal light illuminating forms beneath: shapes twisting, faces pressed against the underside, mouths

opening and closing in silent moans. The city's pulse thunders in my chest, each heartbeat resonating with the groan of the harbour.

A ladder leads down into the water itself. My boots touch the surface, and the liquid yields, skin-tight, cold and viscous, clinging to every curve. Shapes coil beneath me, circling, watching. I take a step, then another. The water rises just below my knees, carrying a faint current that pushes gently against me. It smells stronger here: iron and rot, faintly of something sweet and metallic.

Something moves beneath the surface. Slow, deliberate, just a ripple at first. Then a form rises, towering, impossible, a shape of

limbs and shadows, pulling itself upwardThe water clings to it, stretching, elastic and unyielding. It tilts its head toward me. I see the eyes: hollow, vast, reflective, and somehow knowing. The city hums beneath the docks and through the planks, matching the rhythm of my pulse. The foghorn moans. Bells clang. The water rises, higher now, around my thighs.

I want to run, but the planks bend, the gangways shift, the city bending to keep me in place. Every crane above, every hull below, every plank underfoot moves in concert, drawing me closer to the water, closer to the impossible shape that watches. The reflection of the city folds and warps in the surface around

me, fragments of streets, alleys, lamps, the harbour, everything compressed into liquid metal.

I breathe, deep, into the salted rot. Each inhale carries taste and texture, the grit of brine and rust, the press of water around my legs, the vibration of cables in my hands, the sway of the planks. The city, the harbour, the water, the cranes, they are not separate. They are one organism, pulsing, breathing, aware, and I am inside it, caught in its rhythm.

The shape beneath the water rises more, coils stretching toward me. The wind carries the sound of distant voices, whispers I recognise

and cannot place: *Don't leave me. You'll be fine, won't you? Wait—wait—*

A sudden tremor runs through the planks beneath my boots, sharp and deliberate, as if the city itself just inhaled, and the water beneath me surges, dark and viscous, rising faster than it should. Shapes coil and twist in the reflection, faces I almost know pressing to the surface, mouths opening in silent warning. I stumble back, heart hammering, and the wind carries a new sound: a single, low note, neither foghorn nor bell, vibrating through the steel, the wood, and my bones. It hums my name. And then, silence.

The harbour holds its breath. So do I. Poised on the edge of something I cannot yet see.

CHAPTER 19 - IN THE NAME OF ALL THE USELESS DEALS.

# FIOLLETO YAROSLAV

-PRESENT-

-EARTH-

Fuck it, who even cares anyway?

I step forward. My boots skid across slick planks, algae-smeared, groaning with a living strain, each one bowing, cartilage and flex, writhing beneath me. The water pulses, slow and thick, wrapping the pier in blood-filled veins, sharp and metallic, sweet, sour, human, slicing through my throat. Every breath scalds. The pier groans, wounded, dragging out its last

sounds. The wind carries whispers, faint at first, a voice just beyond understanding, then louder, woven from Fdeya's cadence, threaded with screams, cries, and my own younger pleas, rising from the orphanage punishments I had tried to bury. The pier is no longer wood and water. It is a body. Its lungs heave with every wave; its joints creak, bone and pain fused together. I feel each tremor through my knees and palms, as if the harbour itself is alive, feeding on me.

Warehouse husks loom overhead, beams exposed, ribs picked clean. Rust-eaten cranes sway, cables whining, sinew pulled taut, ready to break. Shadows undulate along flickering

across my vision, forming the outlines of children stitched into the walls, screaming silently, their tiny faces melting into planks and ropes. Straps crack somewhere behind my mind. Cells slam shut around me. Isolation walls rise and fall, trapping my chest. I hear the sharp sting of lashes again. The whole harbour reeks of something half-alive, half-decayed, a stew of salt and rust and sweet, cloying rot that coats my tongue.

And there in the middle of all this chaos, Fdeya.

*Fdeya*. Not Echo. *Fdeya*.

My knees buckle. I stumble, collapse beside her. My hands hover, trembling, terrified to touch her but unable not to.

Her body is wrong. Shattered into something obscene. Skin pale and grey, smeared with dirt and crusted blood, torn open where jagged planks gouged her. Ribs jut sharp beneath her shirt, one side lifted higher than the other, as if the cage itself had been pried apart. Her left shoulder droops at an impossible angle, socket ruptured, bone threatening to push clean through the skin. Her wrist, *oh God her wrist*, bends backwards until the knuckles scrape the boards, fingers curled and cracked, nails snapped down to raw beds, clotted with

blackened blood. Both legs lie twisted, mangled, one bent in half the wrong way, shinbone bulging white through split muscle and glistening meat flashes where skin has peeled back, wet and quivering.

She is ruined. Ruined beyond recognition. Except,

Except it's her. My stomach convulses. Acid floods my throat. I gag, but nothing comes.

"No… no, no, no…" The words rasp out, shredded, broken. My fingers twitch, shaking so badly I can't even find her throat, her chest, anywhere that might hold the faintest beat. My hands brush her face instead, hair stiff with

clotted blood scraping my skin. “This is my fault… my fault…”

Her lips part. A faint rasp of breath leaks out, dry, hollow, not even a word. Not even herself. She doesn’t move. Doesn’t flinch. And then it slides in. The voice, oily, viscous, worming through my skull.

“Look at her. All for you. Every fracture, every tear. Your masterpiece. You begged for this. You wanted control. And now she’s nothing but a husk you get to collapse over.”

The air writhes, shadows rip free from the walls, slithering as entrails across the pier, swelling into forms that flicker and crawl, too

many limbs, too many mouths, too much of her. Echo. My head snaps up.

"Fuck you!" My scream rips my throat raw. "Shut the fuck up!" My chest heaves, tearing itself open, ribs collapsing inward, burning. "I didn't… I don't…" Words shred to tatters. All that's left is rage. I hurl myself forward. Fists slamming, not into Fdeya, never her, but into the thing. The thing crouched against her, its silhouette laid over hers. My fists hammer its chest, its ribs, its shoulders. Flesh gives way with a nauseating pop, bones grinding, brittle glass breaking in jagged bursts. My knuckles split, warm blood slicking my

grip. For one second, I believe it. I believe I'm tearing it apart.

But then, my hand plunges through. Straight through its body. Through nothing. Through air and shadow. No resistance.

The Echo convulses, shuddering in a grotesque parody of life. Its ribs balloon outward and collapse with a wet, sucking wheeze, each swell exaggerating the ragged stutter of her failing breath. Its jaw unhinges too far, bone cracking in silence, lips splitting until they peel back. From the black pit of its throat, a tongue spills out, thick, veined, writhing slickly against the air. Fdeya's eyes snap open. And they are not hers. Not the light blue that

always brought me peace, they are empty. Hollow. Vast. A pit staring back at me. No light. No life. Only it.

"Fuck! *FUCK*!" My throat burns until I taste blood. I tear at the pier, the crates, splinters biting deep, my nails shredding to pulp. Blood smears across rotten wood, streaks the air with the copper stink of me. I can't stop. I can't breathe. The whole harbour drowns me in iron and decay.

"Do you even feel anything?" I bellow, spit flying, throat splintering. "*LOOK* at her! *LOOK* at what you've done!"

I seize the Echo's arm where it melts into hers. My nails rip through its shape, shadow peeling back, wet fabric parting under strain. It convulses, spasming in impossible directions, joints splitting backwards, jaw rattling loose as it shrieks soundlessly. My stomach knots. My vision blurs. But I don't let go. I can't. I need to drag it out of her. To rip it free.

It only stares. Calm. Silent. Patient.

Then, it speaks, her voice. Her voice fractured, gutted, stitched wrong. "Are you done with your little act? You will not stop this, Fiolleto. You never will. I will not leave her. Nor you. Not while she's alive. We made a deal, remember?"

The sound carves through. I freeze. Palms raw, slick with blood. My chest seizes, each breath an eruption of fire. Guilt and rage and terror gnash through me, eating everything until I am hollow.

“Shut the fuck up, this was not the deal….” My voice is a thread, torn and frayed. “I swear…I’ll—” My legs buckle. I stagger back, groping blindly. My fingers close on jagged glass from a broken windowpane. The shard bites deep, slicing palm to tendon, but I don’t let go. The sting barely registers. I raise it, trembling so hard it rattles in my grip.

“I’ll end this,” I choke. “I’ll end you.”

The harbour tightens. Shadows coil, writhing snakes around my ankles. The pier groans, splintering under the weight of what isn't there. The water slaps below, thick as blood, stinking of rot and salt and flesh. Echo doesn't move. Doesn't blink. Its hollow eyes lock onto mine. A curl creeps across its mouth, splitting the lips into something not quite a smile, not quite a wound.

"End me?" It titters, the sound sharp and shrill, bubbling up, a child's giggle forced through rusted wire. The laugh fractures, echoing across the harbour in stuttering loops, as if the world itself can't hold it steady.

“Fiolleto… Fiolleto…” It sings my name, a nursery rhyme laced with sweetness and venom. “Do you truly think you could kill *me*? A bug stamping at a storm. A drowning man cursing the ocean.” Its tongue flicks against its lips, wet and swollen, smearing a thin thread of spit down its chin. “You think the shard in your trembling hand means anything? You think revenge feeds the dying?”

It leans closer, ribs clicking open and shut in obscene rhythm with Fdeya’s faltering breaths. The sound is wet, sucking, hungry. “I am the only thing tethering her to this world. The only thread keeping your beloved from rotting faster than she already is.”

It tilts its head, mock tenderness bleeding through the distortion of its voice. “Look at her. Look how close she is. One last rasp, one last twitch, and she is gone. And still, here you are, blinded by that pathetic, human itch for vengeance. Do you want her last breath to be spent choking on your rage?” The Echo giggles again, high, jagged until it splits apart into a shriek that makes the boards rattle.

“What do you want from me then!” My voice tears out of me, raw, breaking, more sob than scream. I stagger closer, the shard of glass rattling in my bloody grip, my other hand clawing uselessly at the air. “We’ve made a deal! You have my soul, my memories, my

*everything*! Just—" My throat seizes, words cracking to dust. "Just let her live…"

I drop to my knees again beside Fdeya, rocking forward, my forehead almost pressing to her ruined chest. Her breath scrapes faintly against my ear, shallow, stuttering, slipping further with each ragged gasp. I can't tell if she's still here, or already gone, or if the Echo is just dragging her lungs open and shut. My palms press against her ribs as if I can hold them together, keep her from splitting apart. My blood mixes with hers, hot and slick, until I can't tell which is mine.

"I'll give you anything," I choke, words tumbling out too fast, too desperate. "Take it,

all of it, again, I don't care, tear me apart, hollow me out, leave me nothing. I'll crawl, I'll beg, I'll slit my own throat if you want it, just don't take her. Please. Please."

The glass shakes in my grip, cutting deeper as I clutch it harder. My whole body spasms with sobs I can't swallow down. "You said you'd let her live," I rasp. "That was the deal. That was the *fucking* deal…!" The Echo only watches, its hollow gaze widening, absorbing my collapse, a starving animal fixed on the last twitch of prey.

"*The deal*…" It purrs, and the sound crawls down my spine. "You cling to that word as if it meant anything. A contract? A promise?

Oh, Fiolleto…” Its grin tears wider, flesh splitting until its cheeks gape. “You think I am bound to your petty bargains?” It leans closer, ribs yawning apart and snapping shut in grotesque rhythm, as though mocking the very breath struggling in Fdeya’s chest. “I took your soul. I devoured your memories. I swallowed every scrap of you worth keeping. And still, here you crawl, believing your words had weight. Believing you could buy her life with your *ruin*.” It laughs then, high, sharp, splintering the air. The sound scatters across the pier like broken glass sliding over stone. “Pathetic. Beautifully pathetic. A man hollowing himself out and calling it love.”

My throat rips raw. “Then why, why hasn’t she stopped breathing yet?!” I shout, spittle flying, shaking Fdeya’s shoulders as if that could wring life back into her. “Why not end her now? Why leave her to…”

The Echo’s smile freezes. Something darker pools beneath the mockery, deeper, steady as the tide. Its voice drops, low, heavy, thrumming inside my ribs. “Because, little bug… I’m not done with you. I’m not done with *her*.”

The shadows twitch, pressing closer, then slacken, as though recoiling from their own edge. “There are threads you haven’t seen yet. Knots you cannot cut. You want her alive?” Its

grin returns, faint, slit wide. “Then crawl further. Bleed further. Burn further. Only then will you both learn why I keep you.” It tilts its head, eyes glittering with the void. “And I *will* keep you.”

For one beat, the air stills, and I swear Fdeya’s chest rises fuller, a ragged inhale deeper than the last. The Echo leans back, laughter bubbling from its throat again, dripping malice with every note. “You beg for her life as if it is yours to give. But her breath…” it lifts one shadowed hand, almost stroking her face, “...that belongs to me. Always mine, my hymn. And when I decide you’ve both broken enough…” Its grin glints.

“You will *live*.” The words stretch out, slow and deliberate, bleeding into the air. Not because I deserve it, not because she deserves it, but because I *am useful*. Useful for her own distorted pleasure.

It tilts its head, eyes glinting with something sharp and patient, like a spider watching a fly struggle at the end of a thread. “Not for mercy. Not for love. Not for your pitiful bargains.” Its laugh spills across the pier, sweet and brittle, breaking on the rotten wood. “For play. For watching. For savoring the exquisite little heartbeats of terror you bring to each other.”

It leans closer to Fdeya, the shadows bending with it, curling around her body. “Every twitch, every gasp, every flicker of fear, it is all mine. And you, crawling over her, shaking, bleeding, begging… *You* will feel every second as if it is your own life being ripped away. And yet…” Its grin widens impossibly, teeth jagged and wet, glinting in the low light. “You will *live*.”

The words hang in the air, heavy, almost tasting of iron and rot. My chest seizes as a part of me realises the cruel inevitability: it’s not letting her go. It’s letting us exist, just enough to watch us fracture, just enough to make us

plead, just enough to draw out the terror. Echo disappears into oblivion.

And still, Fdeya breathes.

# FDEYA DOSTOEVSKY

-PRESENT-

-Earth-

The first thing I know is not breath, not light, not even pain.

It's the sound of water. Slow and heavy, a throat clogged with something thick. A dragging tide, each pull weighted down with rust and salt and sweetness gone sour. It fills the inside of my skull, lapping against bone, drowning thought before it can spark.

I don’t know if I am above or beneath it.

I try to open my eyes, but the lids feel stitched, heavy, congealed. When light leaks in, it is not light; it is red, rippling, viscous, smearing across my vision. The harbour. The pier. I think. Or maybe my lab… my precious lab… The walls blur, folding into each other, wood ribs snapping into steel frames, rust becoming chalkboard scratches.

I breathe, or something breathes for me. My chest rises, jerks, then collapses again. Each expansion is violent, too sharp, as if hands beneath my ribs are prying me open with crowbars. No air fills me. Only weight.

Something pressing, pressing until my heart trembles.

Fiolleto. His voice. It filters through the sludge.

But not clean. Not now. Not him at twenty-two, twenty-two…? Or perhaps twenty-four… I don’t know… It's been so long, crouched above me with his hands raw on my chest. No, I hear the twelve-year-old, the one locked in isolation, pleading for Anninka to stop.

The two voices overlap, twist together, too many mouths in the same throat.

*“Fdeya, please…” “No, no, don’t…” “I can’t…” “I’m sorry…” “Stay with me—”*

Which is his? Which is mine?

I try to move. My fingers twitch, I think. No. They crack instead, stiff, nails peeling from their beds with the faint wet pop of roots pulled from soil. I don’t scream. My lips part, but nothing comes. Or maybe something does, a rasp. But I cannot tell if it is me, or if the Echo has climbed into my lungs and scraped sound out of them.

Because I hear it too. I hear *her* too. Inside. Deeply buried in the gap of my cells.

*“Poor little thing. Strings and splinters, all hollowed out. Don’t fight. Don’t waste it. Let me breathe for you.”*

The voice isn’t foreign. It doesn’t hiss, it drips, slow, thick, coaxing instead of mocking. Almost tender. A lullaby crawling through my marrow. And for one unbearable beat, I want to believe it.

I drift. Or maybe I flicker. Between places, between selves.

One second, I am on the pier, blood soaking into rotten wood, ribs jutting sharp as blades. The next, I am in the lab, chalk breaking between my fingers, scrawling equations across

blackboard after blackboard. White dust clouds, lungs ache. Then it is gone. I am small again, knees drawn tight, stone floor biting skin, the orphanage walls pressing so close I can hear them breathe. The strap whines in the air.

And then I am back at the harbour. I see Fiolleto's face, but warped, smeared sideways by the water in my vision. His mouth moves, but it is both shouting and whispering, both now and years ago. Which one is real? All of them? None of them?

I blink. Or think I do. And suddenly, he is carrying me. Arms locked beneath my ruined frame, dragging me through narrow streets, the city behind us dripping into shadow. His breath

hitches against my ear, sweat stinging my hairline. I feel the weight of him, the tremor of his steps.

But then it slips. I am still on the pier. I never moved. My legs lie twisted, bone laid bare, white and gleaming, ivory amid flesh.

*Dead. Alive. Dead. Alive. Dead. Alive. Dead. Alive. Dead. Alive. Dead. Alive. Both.*

The Echo hums when I break again.

"*Don't pull so hard at the seams. You'll tear yourself worse. I can hold them shut. I can keep you stitched. All you have to do is let me."*

Her words seep into my own. I don't know if the thought that follows is mine or hers: "*What if...*"

The thought vanishes as quick as it came to me.

*I try to breathe*. But again, it comes out wrong. Each inhale is sticky, catching, dragged. My chest does not decide when to rise. Something else pulls it. Something else shoves air into me, then yanks it back out. I feel it, a pressure behind the sternum, a puppet's hand.

*I try to cough*. Nothing. My throat clogs with silence. My tongue sticks, heavy, a dead

eel writhing useless. My body is not mine. It jerks when it wants, it stutters when it wants.

And somewhere, I feel strings. Invisible, slicing through my joints, tugging me open, tugging me shut. Not pain, no, pain would be human, pain would mean nerves still belong to me. This is different. This is *violation*. My flesh is an instrument someone else has begun to play.

I hear his voice again. Fiolleto.

Closer now. A hand against my cheek, sticky, blood-warm. I think it is him. I want it to be him. His words tumble into me, frantic, pleading. But the Echo folds over them, thickening them, stretching them until they

don’t fit anymore.

“*He begs so prettily, doesn’t he? All for you. Every crack in his voice is yours. You made him this soft. This desperate. Isn’t it sweet?”*

I want to scream. But I don’t know how. My lips move. I feel them move. But the sound that scrapes out is not mine. Dry, hollow, not even a word. Just breath dragged wrong. Or perhaps this damn monster spoke through me. I cannot tell.

Time sloshes. I am on the pier. I am in his arms. I am in the lab. I am a child again. I am back in the apartment. The train. The coffee shop. The forest. Limbo.

*Dead. Alive.*

Strings tug in every direction. And through it all, the Echo croons.

“ *Don’t be afraid. You don’t have to carry the weight anymore. I will hold you up. I will breathe you. I will keep you from rotting. You will never die, not while I am here.”*

The worst part is not her voice. It is the silence inside me after, the silence where my own should be. The part of me that wants to lean into that whisper. The part of me that is terrified that I already have.

Something tugs.

Not at my arm, not at my chest, deeper. The tug is inside the joints, where bone meets

bone, where ligaments knot. A jerk, a pull, a foreign hand slipping into the crevices no hand should reach. My elbow bends without me. My jaw creaks open. My spine arches too far, a whipcrack of vertebrae, and then slackens. Not my choice. Not mine. The body remembers how to move. But I am no longer the one remembering.

I am not breathing. I am being breathed. I am not moving. I am being moved.

The thought repeats until it frays into a chant. And the Echo hums, pleased.

"*Yes. See how easy it is? Why claw at control when control is a wound? Rest. Let me*

*lift you, let me string you. You don't have to bleed for every step."*

The voice does not slide into my ear. It grows inside the cavities of my ribs, blooming from marrow. It is not a whisper. It is an organ. My hand rises. Slowly. Smoothly. Fingers splayed, trembling, nails cracked and black. I don't command it. Yet it rises, palm toward my face. The shadow of it ripples across my eye, a grotesque puppet-shadow in the waterlight.

For one sick instant, I wonder if Fiolleto sees. If he looks down at me and thinks *she's reaching for me*. When in truth, it isn't me at all. The Echo laughs softly at the thought, a lover's laugh, amused and cruel.

“*Oh, he will think it. He will believe every touch is yours. He will never know I hold the strings. Isn’t that tender? Isn’t that mercy?”*

The hand strokes my own cheek. Clumsy, jerking. My nails drag small lines across skin, carving red crescents. My own touch feels foreign. I can’t connect flesh to self. I choke on the distance. I try to resist. To twitch my fingers back, to clench, to drop my hand. But it is like wrestling chains nailed into bone. I strain until my skull buzzes, until veins flare behind my eyes. For a heartbeat, my hand trembles off-course. Almost mine again.

But then it snaps back. Hard.

The fingers press into my jaw, forcing it

wider. A gasp shreds out, involuntary. Air, heavy, syrup-slow, rips into me, expanding lungs that feel flayed raw. And the voice slips through the open mouth. Not mine. Not Fiolleto's.

"*Breathe, little one. Breathe with me…".*

I sob without sound. My body jerks again, angles unnatural. Neck twisting too far. Shoulder snapping forward, out of rhythm. The strings yank sharply, then slacken. I dangle, a marionette in seizure.

Somewhere in the blur of street and pier, I glimpse Fiolleto again. His face cuts through the smear, pale and raw, jaw trembling as he

shouts. His eyes lock with mine, desperate. He thinks I am still inside this husk.

But I am not. Not fully.

I want to claw through my own skin just to show him the truth: I'm already hollow. Instead, my lips curve. They curve up. A smile. His breath catches. He thinks it's hope, but it is not me smiling.

The Echo croons, almost proud.

" *Do you see? Even ruined, even unravelled, you can still give him comfort. Through me, so just give in Fdeya. I will make sure he never loses you, even when you are*

*nothing but string and bone. Isn't that what you wanted? To protect him?"*

The words drip into every hollow. I want to spit them out, to scream "*no"*, but my jaw only slackens further. My tongue twitches, but the syllables that form taste sweet and rotted.

*"Yes."*

The voice is mine. The voice is not mine. I don't know which is worse.

Time bends again. The harbour tilts sideways, and I am back in the lab. My own chalkboard towers above me, numbers dripping off it, sliding down in white rivers that stain my hands. I am scribbling, faster, faster, trying to

patch a wound in the world itself. But every time I write, another hand overlays mine, guiding, rewriting. The equations warp, curve into spirals, into eyes. The chalk shrieks against the board, wrong.

Then I am back in Fiolleto's arms. He staggers under me. His breath chokes raggedly. Blood slicks his shirt where my ribs cut against him. But I am not still. I twitch, jerk, thrash against him. Not mine. Echo makes my body writhe, my limbs knotting around him, giving the illusion that I cling to him.

His voice cracks. "I've got you, I've got you…"

No, I want to scream, you don’t, you don’t, I’m not here, it’s not me.

But all that spills out of my lips is a whisper, breathy, sweet. “Don’t let go.”

He sobs at it. He believes. Echo hums with delight.

“ *See? I give him hope. I make him softer. You could never do that alone. You wound too deep. Let me. Let me shape the words he needs. Give in.”*

But I don't, and the strings tighten. My ribs creak. My knees jerk until bone threatens to splinter. I am dragged along, a limp doll, a corpse that will not rot. And for the first time,

the thought sinks through the static, horrifying, unshakable:

What if this is what survival feels like? What if I can no longer tell the difference between being kept alive and being puppeted?

The air bends. Not just light, not just sound. Air itself.

One breath tastes of saltwater, thick with mist. The next scorches with ozone, as clean and sterile as my lab. The next taste of mildew, dormitory blankets from the orphanage. My lungs do not know where they are.

I cough again, but the cough never lands; it fractures, becomes a chalk squeal on the board,

becomes Fiolleto's voice calling me by a name I don't remember having.

*"Fdeya…" "Little one…" "Get up…" "Don't…"*

Each voice overlaps, dissolves. Some are too young. Some are too old. Some not his at all. And threaded through them, she plays.

"*Every memory is yours. Every memory is mine. Every seam has always been open. You never walked alone. You never thought alone. You were never alone. Not from the instant you brought me to life."*

The harbour tilts sideways. Water laps against the pier. But when I blink, it is not

water, it is the black, shimmering fluid of the machine's rupture, the dimensional bleed. The city skyline wavers, mirroring itself, then cracks.

For a moment, Fiolleto carries me not through the pier but through the corridors of my lab, stumbling past overturned desks, past split open machines. My head lolls against his chest, eyes tracking numbers in the air, projections, equations unravelling mid-air.

*I blink again*. We're outside. The sea sprays. His shirt clings, heavy with water and blood.

*I blink again*. We're twelve. He drags me by the wrist down the orphanage hallway, both of us barefoot, fleeing the dark shape of the caretaker. My lungs are small, my hair tangled. I smell the dust of stale bread and floor polish.

Then the smell flips back to salt. I am older again. He is older. I can't tell which body is mine. The small one with scraped knees? The fractured one with ribs clawed open? The phantom one writing equations with a bleeding finger?

Every frame insists it is real. Every frame denies the others. Echo tightens its coil.

"*Do you see how soft the walls are? You always believed in borders, past and present,*

*alive and dead, truth and falsehood. But borders are only paper. And I have always been the flame."*

Something in me wants to believe. Not because it feels right, but because fighting costs too much. Fiolleto's voice slices through again, distorted.

"Stay with me… please stay with me…"

But even that fractures. Half his mouth is his teenage self, cracked voice breaking in the orphanage. Half his mouth is his adult self, jaw set, veins in his neck bursting as he carries me now. Both overlaid. Two Fiollettos, neither stable.

I want to reach for him, but my hand jerks, pulled by invisible strings again.

"*He has always been two. He has always been ten. He has always been none. And so have you. Do not cling to faces, they are only masks shifting through the water.*"

The pier vanishes. I am back inside the machine chamber. The hum rattles my teeth. The light bursts white. I see the instant of rupture again, the black liquid surging out, Echo's first grip threading into my skin.

But then the frame slips again, and I am drowning in the harbour. Water closes over my face. My lungs spasm. But even as I thrash, I

feel strings pulling the breath in anyway, cold and forced.

Then I am sitting at a desk, chalk in my hand, our Polaroid picture on the corner. But when I try to grab it, it bleeds. The image of his face drips black, running across the paper, until the photo is nothing but a mouth that isn't his. I press my fingers into my temples, but I don't know which version of me is pressing.

The orphanage again. I'm younger, much younger. Lying in bed. Sheets smell of mildew. The dark stretches across the ceiling. I hear the door creak open. A figure stands there, unmoving. But when I look closer, the figure has Fiolleto's face.

*And not. And not. And not.  t's too many at once.*

My child-body whispers, "Don't come in."

The figure steps closer anyway. Echo's voice rides the sound of footsteps:

"*You have always belonged to me. Even then. Even then."*

Back to the harbour. I choke, gasp, body writhing, but the breath still pulls itself in. My chest inflates without permission. I cannot stop it. Fiolleto's voice trembles. "You're alive, you're alive…"

I want to scream. "*No. I'm not. Not in the way you think."*

But the only voice that answers, through my mouth, through my blood, is Echo's.

"*She is alive because I am alive. She is alive because I refuse her death. And you should thank me."*

Fiolleto sobs into my hair. He doesn't hear the difference. Or he refuses to. My vision stutters. Frame. Frame. Frame. Lab. Pier. Orphanage. Black ocean. Lab. Pier. Darkness.

Which is true?

Echo murmurs, warm as a lullaby.

" *All of them. None of them. Truth is only a braid, and I am the hand that weaves."*

The voice softens. Not gone. Not silenced. Just… softened.

It threads lower now, beneath my ribs, as if it has learned my frequency. As if it knows the register my bones vibrate at.

"*Little one,"* it murmurs, "*why drown yourself in resistance? Why thrash against arms that carry you? Let me cradle you. Let me be the marrow that never leaves."*

The words ache with sweetness. They coat my wounds, honey poured over rot. I want to recoil. I want to spit blood and bile and scream *Get out*! But I can't. Because the strings yank gentler now, coaxing instead of tearing. My jaw

doesn’t break against them. My lungs don’t rattle as hard. The Echo has changed tactics.

And that terrifies me more.

Fiolleto’s hands tighten under me, desperate, shaking. His heartbeat hammers against my back, frantic, fragile, human. He doesn’t know what it feels in here, the other heartbeat, the second rhythm inside me. The one that isn’t blood but whisper.

Echo fills the gaps where I end. Every fracture in my ribs, every nerve frayed, it threads through. With itself.

“*You were breaking long before I came,”* it croons. “*The machine did not shatter you. You’ve always been fractured. I am the only one who can bind the pieces. You should thank me for making you whole. You should give in and let me take full control.”*

My stomach knots. Is it wrong that part of me wants to believe?

Because the binding does feel real. I don’t collapse entirely. My chest still rises. My fingers twitch, not entirely mine, but not entirely gone either. There is… continuity. A shape. A presence holding me where death should have hollowed.

It feels like comfort, yet contains me as a prison.

Echo presses closer, its voice dripping into my ear as though lips were there.

"*He cannot save you. You know this. He clings to you, but he has no tools, no knowledge, no design. He has only fear. And love. But love is useless against fracture. Love is only the bandage on a corpse. But me…"* The whisper curves, intimate, obscene. " *...I will keep you forever. I will not let you rot. I will not let you slip. I will wear you from inside, and you will never, never die."*

A shiver knifes down my spine. My own blood feels too warm. My throat catches. And

worst of all: the part of me that wants that promise, makes me want to weep. I try to summon memories. To fight with logic. To remember the lab, the machine, the science. Equations. Patterns. Proof. Anything to anchor.

But Echo overlays even that. My own equations unravel into spiral patterns, curling inward, hypnotic. I try to recall constants, but they soften into syllables, the syllables into lullabies.

*"E=you-me, always."*
*"E=you-me, forever."*

It hums it as if it was a lullaby yet numbers bent into cradle-verse. I feel sick. Fiolleto

whispers against my temple. I can hear the tears in his throat. “Stay with me. Please. Please.”

And Echo slips between his voice and mine…

“*Do you hear how weak he sounds? How human? He will leave you, even if he never means to. He will die, even if he doesn’t want to. Everyone leaves. Except me. I will never leave you. Because I am you.”*

Something in me curls around the words. As much as I want to deny them, as much as I want to scream, I don’t have a mouth. The idea seeps into the cracks.

What if it's true? What if Fiolleto can't save me? What if only this parasite can?

I hate myself for thinking it. I hate the quiet relief.

Echo grows tender.

"*You were always afraid, weren't you? Of ending. Of silence. You pretended to chase infinity with your machines, your chalkboards, your formulas, but all along you only wanted one thing: to never vanish. To never be forgotten. I am that. I am your eternity. I am your infinity.*"

My throat closes. A sob tears up but stalls halfway. I want to shout, "*No, that's not true*." But the words never reach my tongue.

Because the shame strikes: what if it *is* true? What if every formula, every risk, every experiment was just me begging the universe not to erase me? And now, here is something that promises just that. Echo hushes me, gentle as a mother, intimate as a lover.

"*Sleep, little one. Rest in me. You've fought enough. Let me wear the burden. Let me breathe for you. Let me think for you. Let me hold you always, until even he cannot pry us apart."*

Its words sink through the marrow. They wrap my nerves then tighten and soothe in the same breath.

I close my eyes. The world blurs, tilts, sways. I want to resist. But resistance feels more exhausting than surrender. And surrender feels so close to warmth.

Fiolleto shakes me. His voice cracks with panic. He thinks I'm slipping. He doesn't know what's holding me up inside. He doesn't know that the thing keeping me from collapsing is the very thing that terrifies me most.

I want to tell him. I want to warn him. I want to scream, "*Don't trust me, don't trust what speaks through me, don't trust this voice*."

But my lips only part.

Echo breathes through me, velvet and certain:

"*I am yours. You are mine. Forever. Give in, Fdeya."*

The world folds in. Not the harbour. Not the lab. Not the orphanage. Not even the black smear between dimensions. All of them fold into one sickly, vibrating seam. I can feel my bones, my lungs that heave, my hands that twitch against my chest.

And then,  words. They come from me. Or me. Or…

I cannot tell.

“Stay…stay…stay…”

The syllables curl from my lips. They carry the taste of sweat and damp rot. But there is softness beneath the grit, a tenderness that does not belong to me. Or perhaps it does, I don’t know anymore.

Fiolleto’s face swims into view. Eyes wide, mouth moving, voice cracking with panic. “Fdeya! Can you hear me? Stay with me, goddammit!”

But the words I speak are not answers to him. Not entirely. *"Yes… yes… I am here… always…"*

I do not intend them. I do not choose them. Echo hums low, threading itself into my jaw, curling its voice along my tongue.

"*Every sound, every breath, every twitch belongs to me as much as you. Do you hear it? I speak, and yet it is yours. You are the vessel, little one. And I am patient."*

I shiver. My ribs press into themselves, strange, uneven angles. Each vertebrae hums with the weight of invisible fingers. I try to tell myself it is pain. But it is not. It is sensation without control, without origin.

The words twist on my lips again.

“Fio… Fio…let go…”

Who says that? My voice? Fiolleto’s? Echo’s? Or a mesh of all three, fused in some grotesque symphony? I cannot tell.

My hands claw at air, trying to anchor something real. The pier shakes beneath me. Splinters pierce my palms, the shadows coil around my torso, press against my chest, cold and viscous, forming letters that melt before I can read them.

*“I am keeping you alive,”* the voice whispers through me, soft as a lullaby, sharp as a knife. “*Not for mercy. Not for kindness. But*

*for play. For seeing. For the exquisite terror you bring him, little bug."*

I gasp, or do I gasp? The motion is mine. The sound is his. The thought is theirs. "Stop…please…stop…"

No one responds. Or everyone responds. I drift.

Somewhere between consciousness and collapse, the images splice together: Fiolleto carrying me across water that shifts into chalkboards that split into orphanage hallways that fracture into black liquid. I am multiple, I am none.

I feel the breath, not my own, rise into my lungs. A hand, not mine, brushes my jaw, brushes my cheek, curls into my hair. A tongue of shadow teases my lips, and I flinch, but the body, not mine, does not flinch.

"*Speak, little one,"* it hums. "*Speak for me. Speak for us. Speak for him."*

My lips move. *"I... I..."* I do not finish. I cannot finish. Or perhaps it finishes itself.

The harbour groans. Shadows fold into the floorboards. The water swirls thick, pulling at my toes. Fiolleto's hands grasp my shoulders. His tears soak through my hair. His lips press near my ear.

“I’ve got you! I’ve got you!”

But the voice that answers him, the one that curls out of my mouth, is not mine. Not his. Not fully.

*“Yes… always… never leave…”*

I try to stop, but the syllables continue, tidal, inevitable. I feel them twisting my jaw open wider than my body should allow. My tongue moves of its own volition. Echo laughs, low and honeyed.

“*You will be my hymn. You will speak through every fracture. And he will believe it, every trembling heartbeat of him.”*

I want to scream. I want to claw at the face, at the pier, at the shadows. But even that is borrowed. Even my fear is borrowed.

I glimpse something, or someone: a flash of child-Fdeya, small and curled, eyes wide, shaking in the orphanage. A flash of lab-Fdeya, chalk smeared across face, hands red with equations. A flash of Fiolleto, standing over me, screaming, collapsing, bleeding. And through it all, one constant: the voice, singing through me. Speaking, shaping, bending me.

*"You will never die. I will keep you. You are mine. You are mine. You are mine."*

I want to refuse. I want to push it out. I want to vanish entirely. But the body does not belong to me. The breath does not belong to me. The words do not belong to me. I feel my lips moving again. The syllables fall without thought.

*"Fio… stay… yes…"*

Fiolleto's hands clutch me tighter. His mouth presses against my ear. "Goddammit, stay with me. Please, Fdeya!"

And Echo sighs, soft, velvet, omnipresent.

"*See? He will never know where you end and where I start. And neither will you. Not yet. Not ever."*

My body shudders. My ribs click. My spine arcs too far. My jaw opens. My lips move. I am here. I am not here. I am speaking. I am not speaking.

And the last thought I can grasp, the only anchor that claws through the endless fold, is a single, terrifying, intimate whisper curling along my marrow.

*“Forever mine.”*

And the world snaps.

CHAPTER 21 - ANCHOR

# FIOLLETO YAROSLAV

-PRESENT-

-EARTH-

I don’t remember standing up. Only the weight of her in my arms, breath masquerading as silence, silence pretending to breathe.

The harbour slid away behind us, muttering into the dark. I don’t remember leaving the boards, neither choosing a street, but suddenly the wood was gone and stone had taken its place, and the lamps flickered awake. I carried her the whole way. Through alleys that

bent too sharply. Past walls that flickered with shadows that weren't mine, weren't hers. Each step belonged to someone else, but the weight in my arms was real. Real enough to make me believe the rest of the world might be false.

I adjust her once, twice, a dozen times. My arms are burning already, but it isn't the kind of pain that tells me to stop. It's the kind that tells me to hold tighter, because if I don't, she'll slip, fall, and vanish into whatever cracks the world has left waiting for her. Her head rolls against my shoulder, hair dampens my collar. I can't tell if it's seawater or sweat. I don't know. I don't want to know.

I count my steps first. Not to measure distance, but to keep me sane. *One, two, three, four, don't drop her, Fioletto. Five, six, seven, eight, don't you dare let her go.* The counting breaks down and I lose track. I start again. I don't care how many times. The numbers don't matter. The rhythm does.

The alleys bend longer than they should. Corners refuse to arrive when I see them. I walk toward a turn, but it keeps slipping back, as though the street is teasing me, or testing me, or both. I press her closer to my chest. "Not tonight," I whisper. I don't know if I'm talking to the street or to her, or to myself.

A door breathes. I swear it. A shutter exhales as I pass, wood inhaling and puffing out a stale draft, as if sighing in relief or disappointment. The glass of a lamp pulses faintly, not with light but with blood, or something that wants to imitate it. I don't stop. I can't. If the city wants to invent tricks, it can do it behind my back. I'll keep walking.

Her breath stutters once. My heart stops. I stagger to a halt, pressing her tighter. Her chest doesn't rise. I wait. Wait again. "Breathe," I beg her. My voice is sand in my throat. Her chest rises, but the sound comes from behind my ear. A soft, wet exhalation, too close, too wrong. I twist, but there's nothing there, only her head

against me. I force myself to believe the breath came from her after all. Otherwise, I'll drop her. Otherwise, I'll go mad.

The memory hits me before I'm ready. The orphanage. The first time she fainted.

She was smaller then, lighter. My arms barely noticed her weight, but my chest did. I remember thinking that if I let go, even for a second, she would break apart. I promised her, silently, because back then I couldn't say it aloud, I promised I'd never let that happen again. The promise presses against me now, heavier than she is. She's heavier than she was then, but lighter than the years between. I adjust

Fdeya again, her arm dangles limply, swinging with each step.

*One, two, three, four, don't drop her. Five, six, seven, eight, don't let her go. The rhythm breaks again. I start over.*

I shift her again, though I don't need to. The weight hasn't changed. My arms just want to believe they're doing something useful, that the pain in my muscles is a choice and not a slow surrender. If I let myself think the other way, I'll drop her. And if I drop her, the promise dies.

Her head slips to the other side of my shoulder. I tighten my hold so fast I hear

something pop in my elbow. Pain flares white up the bone. Doesn't matter. I'm still walking.

The alleys rearrange themselves while I blink. I know because when my eyes shut for that fraction of a second, the walls around me are straight. When they open, they've bent. Just slightly, just enough that the line of bricks runs crooked into the dark, making me feel drunk. I almost laugh and say, "Try harder," as if the street can hear me. But I don't. Talking wastes air, and I need air for her.

I look down at her face once. Just once, because I can't stand it longer. She looks asleep in a cruel way, lips pale, lashes trembling but not opening. Every time her chest moves, I

memorise it, because I know the next time might not come.

A man passes us. Or I think he does. A shape at least. Thin, bent, dragging a sack. I don't hear footsteps, don't hear breath. He walks into a wall and doesn't come out the other side. I want to believe he was never there. My steps sound wrong. Too sharp on the stone, too hollow in the silence. I change pace. Slow, then fast.

"Not now," I whisper again, tighter in my throat. "You don't get to take this from me."

Her breath stutters once more. I stop. Again. Can't help it. My heart claws upward

reaching for an exit through my teeth. No breath. None. I lower my head, press my ear to her mouth. Nothing. My arms shake.

Then, soft, too soft, but there, a sigh. Not from her mouth. From the back of her throat. No air passes her lips. The sound has no place to belong. It doesn't matter. She's alive. She has to be.

A corner finally arrives. I take it too sharply, nearly slamming her head against the stone. I mutter apologies against her hair, over and over, hoping she can hear me, or even forgive me. Another alley. Too long. Shadows drip off the walls, yet I keep my eyes straight and my grip tight.

*One, two, three, four, don't drop her. Five, six, seven, eight, don't let her go. The rhythm breaks again. I start over.*

The station greets me. No ticket booth, no attendants. Just open gates, lit by lamps that don't shine so much as hum. The light vibrates against my teeth. The platform stretches longer than I remember. It bends slightly upward, the train is waiting. Different from before. No gnashing, no shrieks. Just stillness. When I step inside, the air changes. Thicker. But not hostile. Not yet.

I sit with her still in my arms. I don't trust the seats to hold her. *I don't even trust myself.*

The hum of the rails begins, steady, soft, deceitful. I press my forehead to the glass. Outside is not night. Not dark. Not black. It is nothing. A blank. The world erased. Her weight keeps me here. My arms ache, but I welcome it. Pain is proof. Pain is witness. I whisper to her again. “You’re alive. You’re here. I’m carrying you home.”

I try to mark the passing of time, but the train doesn’t respond. Seconds stretch, minutes fold in on themselves. I can’t tell if the light outside is moving or if it’s frozen. I close my eyes for a fraction, open them, and the blankness remain. I press my cheek against her head. Warm, impossibly so, as if she’s still the

child I once held. My fingers trace the line of her jaw, the curve of her ear. I memorise everything, though I know memory will fail me if I blink too long.

The hum of the rails grows louder in my ears. I feel the vibration through my legs, my spine, into the bones in my arms. Her body sways with it. I hold tighter. Every vibration is another reminder that she exists in the world with me, that she is not yet gone.

A shadow passes over the glass. A fleeting, impossible thing. I blink. Nothing. Only my own reflection, distorted by the light. Her breath on my neck. My heartbeat. The silence that is too complete to be natural. I

murmur to her again. “Hold on. Just a little longer. We’re almost home.”

I do not count my steps anymore. I count her breaths. One inhale. One exhale. *Two. Three. Four.*

I press her closer, as if my arms alone can force the world to stay rigid. But the world does not obey. I remember carrying her through a rainstorm years ago. Rain dripping from my hair into her curls. The cold pressing into our skin. I had not understood then that the world itself can lean toward harm, can reach out with invisible hands. Now I do. Now I carry her as if my body is a shield. As if the motion of my arms can suspend time.

I whisper her name. Her lips twitch. She does not open her eyes. I whisper again. The word cracks in my throat. Each repetition frays me, but I keep speaking. Because if I stop, silence might finally claim her. Embrace her. Take her from me.

The train stretches on. I feel the distance under me, a line not measured in kilometres but in breaths, in heartbeats. My own and hers, intertwined. I imagine the rails leading somewhere safe, somewhere I can finally let her rest, the shadows bend back into straight lines, and the walls forget how to breathe.

The train stops.

I don’t remember the platform. I don’t even remember how I got her this far, only the weight of her body in my arms, slack, stubbornly warm, and the reek of my apartment as the door groans open.

The room seems to recoil, walls bending back as if in revulsion, yet the bed yawns wide, patient, hungry. I set her down, fabric slurps beneath her weight, sagging as if it has been waiting to consume her all along.

I whisper words that I should have said years ago, words I tried to choke back: apologies, confessions, fears. I call her my lover. The word tears itself from me raw and

wet, and yet it is true, the only truth left in the world.

Hours bleed facelessly. Light outside staggers, collapses, dawn crushing into dusk, dusk spilling into midnight, midnight folding into nothing. The walls lean in, pressing, hungry. Objects twitch, pulse, hum with her weight. I whisper, “Fdeya… stay. Don’t dare to vanish again. Not now. Not ever.”

My hands clutch the torn fabric of her shirt, fingers digging through threads into her chest. I can feel her heartbeat, barely, and I squeeze harder. “Because you’re the only thing keeping me upright,” I choke out. “Because I need you. Because I… love you. God, how I

love you. Don’t leave me. Please, don’t leave me.”

The words shatter in the air. They taste of smoke and iron and fear. My chest presses against hers. Every breath is a prayer, every pulse a plea. The world presses against us, trying to pull her away, trying to erase her, and I cannot stop it.

And then I break.

The tears come without warning, sharp and hot, burning down my cheeks, soaking into her shoulders, and her ruined shirt. My shoulders heave against her, trembling under the weight I’ve carried for too long, the weight that isn’t

just her, but every fear, every memory, every day I've failed to protect her. I sob into her collarbone, guttural, tearing out pieces of myself with every sound.

"Don't… leave… me…" I choke through gasping breaths. My fingers clutch tighter, nails biting into fabric, into flesh, into whatever part of her is mine to hold. "I can't… I can't lose you… not again… I can't… I can't…"

The sobs wrack my body. My arms feel turn into jelly, my legs threaten to buckle. I am nothing but a vessel of grief, a cracked thing spilling over with love too big to contain, and yet I press on, desperate, clinging, shaking, collapsing in fragments around her. The room

hums, the walls breathe, the shadows twitch, mocking me, or maybe they mourn with me. I can't tell. I don't care. I only know I am here. I only know she is here. My anchor. My lover.

I press my face deeper into her shoulder. I let the sobs come. I let them eat me alive. And still, I hold her. Because if I let go now, even for a second… she's gone. And I cannot survive that. Not again.

CHAPTER 22 - THE ANATOMY OF A QUIET HOUSE

# FIOLLETO YAROSLAV

-PRESENT-

-EARTH-

A week passed through a single, elongated breath I can’t exhale.

I keep thinking the house has gone still with me, but sometimes I hear the walls whisper. Not voices, and certainly not Fdeya. The sound travels through the wet plaster, hollow and rhythmic, mimicking the pulse I can’t find in her wrist.

Fdeya hasn't spoken a single word ever since she reappeared. But at least she’s alive. I tell myself that every morning before opening my eyes, as if thought alone can maintain her shape.

When I finally do look, she’s always in the same position: lying diagonally across the narrow cot near the fogged window. The sheet beneath her never wrinkles. The air around her looks denser somehow, almost refracted. I tried touching that air once, it felt slightly warmer, faintly buzzing.

The walls are swollen from rain. Cracks climb them in branching patterns that glimmer faintly under the light. There’s mold in the

corners again, circular, deliberate, almost symmetrical.

Everything decays in patterns now. The ceiling above her bed is the worst. Water damage spreads outward in spirals, brown and ochre and black at the edges. When I stand below it for too long, I swear I can hear the faintest hum, not dripping, but frequency. The longer I listen, the more I'm convinced it aligns with her breathing.

If I close my eyes, I can almost believe the whole house is breathing through her.

The air here is heavy with dampness and something faintly metallic, as though the rain

outside carries fragments of rust through the air vents. The smell never changes. I've tried masking it with burned coffee, incense, and soap, but the rot wins. It always wins. It seeps back through the floorboards, slow and patient, as though waiting for me to stop pretending. Sometimes, when I sit beside her bed, I can hear it, soft fizzing beneath the wood, the quiet decomposition of whatever world I used to know.

I keep a cup of water near her. Every morning, it's full again. I don't remember refilling it. She doesn't drink it either, yet it never evaporates. When I stare into it, the surface trembles slightly, as if disturbed by a

breath I can’t feel. On the second day, I tried to feed her, a spoon of soup, thin and warm, trembling in my hand. The moment it touched her lips, the air in the room shifted temperature. Not colder, not warmer. Just different. The soup slid back down the spoon, untouched.

I didn’t try again.

When she came back, I thought it meant I’d won.

That the collapse, the deal, the endless noise had meant something.

That I had beaten death, rewritten it into something survivable.

Now I’m not sure I didn’t just bring death home and give it a room.

The mirror by the hallway cracked during the night of her return. I taped over it, but I still catch fragments of our reflection when I walk past, disjointed pieces of myself beside her still shaped in the cot. The two images never line up. Sometimes, my reflection looks directly at her even when I’m not. The lights flicker intermittently. Not the chaotic kind of flicker, no, this one is deliberate. It pulses, steady and slow, always in time with her chest.

On the fourth day, the power died completely. I lit candles and placed them along the hallways. At dawn, when the lights

returned, I found the candles burned halfway and all their wax had dripped away from her, in neat, thin lines. I tried to convince myself it was a draft. But there hasn't been wind here in months. The window near her cot hasn't opened since the collapse, the frame warped shut by humidity, the glass sealed by grime. Outside, I think the city continues, though I no longer hear it. The streets could be flooded, or silent, or gone entirely. It wouldn't change this room.

I talk to her. I talk constantly. It's the only thing that still sounds human.

I tell her about the headlines I imagine, about the survivors who must be rebuilding, about how the world might one day forgive

what I've done. I tell her about the old places we used to walk, how I think the sea must look cleaner now, though the thought feels borrowed. Sometimes I try humor. "You'd hate the silence," I say. "It's too obedient."

She doesn't answer, but her eyelashes tremble once. That's enough. I tell her I missed her. I tell her I dreamed of her. I tell her she's safe now. When I say Echo's name, accidentally, involuntarily, her head moves. Not a natural turn, not gradual, but a sharp alignment, then she's still there again.

The sound of the rain changed three nights ago. It doesn't fall anymore; it ticks, measured and faintly resonant, the walls are dry. The roof

leaks from nowhere. When I close my eyes, the ticking continues, behind the eyelids, inside the skull. It follows me from room to room, syncing with her breathing. I've been writing observations. I think they're scientific. They don't feel that way anymore.

Day One: Pulse weak, uncoordinated. Temperature below norm. No verbal response.

Day Two: No change. Breathing steady, inconsistent rhythm. Minor muscle twitches (hands).

Day Three: Eyes opened for four seconds. No pupil dilation. Skin texture is wrong.

Day Four: Heard whispering when the room was silent. Origin unclear. Possibly pipes.

Day Five: Though I saw condensation move upward on the window. Unconfirmed.

Day Six: The smell in the house altered. Damp plaster mixed with ozone.

I reread these entries every morning and don’t recognize my handwriting. The letters are too clean, the lines too straight. I used to write with more hesitation.

The bed creaks at night, softly, as though something heavier than her has settled into it. I wake to the sound, heart clenching, half expecting her to be gone again, but she’s always

there. Always lying perfectly still. The sheets never wrinkle. I tried lifting her arm once, to reposition it. It stayed wherever I left it. No resistance, no weight shift, no muscle reflex. And yet, when I woke the next morning, her hand was folded neatly over her chest again.

There's a mirror shard I keep in my pocket. A piece from the hallway mirror. I use it sometimes to check if her breath fogs the glass. It doesn't. But if I hold it close long enough, a faint pattern begins to appear, not fog, but something that reassembles frost. The pattern spirals. It resembles the ones in the ceiling rot.

The house resents light. During the day, the windows let in only a faded grayness. At

night, the lamps hum as though trying to warn me. The electricity feels viscous, every object that used to belong to me, books, cups, papers, now seems coated in a thin layer of dust that never existed before.

There are no insects here. Not anymore. Even decay has become disciplined.

Sometimes, I think I hear footsteps. Soft, bare, measured. But they're not hers. Hers were always quick, impatient. These are cautious, rhythmic, stopping exactly when I turn my head. Once, I saw the outline of something moving behind the curtain in the corner, a faint bulge, as though air itself took form for a second. When I pulled the fabric aside, there

was only the wall. The stain there looked fresh. Shaped almost as a handprint, but too elongated.

The nights are worse.

When I close my eyes, I dream of her in the same position she's in now, eyes closed, face still. But in the dream, she's breathing too fast. When I wake, I can still hear it for a few seconds: the sound of breath continuing without her body's movement. Then the silence reclaims it.

I've stopped counting the days, time feels mechanical, and machines are the last thing I wanna see right now.

Sleep happens unnoticed, waking follows without transition.The difference between dreaming and remembering is almost gone. Once, I thought I saw her smile in her sleep. A soft movement at the corner of her mouth. Relief hit me, and my lungs filled again with air. I reached out to touch her cheek, and realized it wasn't moving. The shadow on the wall had twitched, not her face.

Her presence changed the air pressure of the entire house. When she's in the room, everything feels heavier, slower. When I step into the hallway, the air becomes almost thin, as though the walls are inhaling around me. I think I understand now what silence means here.

The silence in this house holds something inside it, and I am beginning to suspect it's *her*.

CHAPTER 23 - RAGEBAIT THERAPY

# FDEYA DOSTOEVSKY

-PRESENT-

-SUBCONSCIOUS-

How did dying suddenly turn into a therapy session?

That's my first coherent thought in… well, whatever passes for time here. A week, maybe. Or a century. It doesn't matter. There are no clocks here. There's only me, this ridiculous red floor, and that thing.

The floor is smooth but not cold, when I move, it ripples faintly, not enough to call it

alive, but just enough to make me wonder if it's breathing with me. The colour changes, too. Sometimes it's crimson, sometimes a deep rose, sometimes the dull rust of drying blood. I don't think it's meant to be symbolic; my brain just ran out of materials to decorate my purgatory. Above me, there's a sky that isn't a sky. It's black, endless, but heavy, nothing moves up there, not a single flicker of light. It's not emptiness; emptiness would be cleaner. This feels dense. Saturated. As if a mind that once was so full of noise it collapsed into silence.

And somewhere within that silence, Echo hums.

It’s not even a melody at this point. Just a sound to remind me she’s here. I used to think silence was comforting. But silence with someone in it? That’s just a countdown waiting to start again. When I first woke up here, if that word even means anything anymore, I thought it was a hallucination. The red, the black, the absence of boundaries. But then she spoke, and I realised: this isn’t a dream. It’s worse.

I’m trapped *in my own head.* Literally. It sounds poetic until you live it. Then it’s just tedious, and rather ridiculous.

The first few days, I screamed, clawed at the red floor until it rippled and healed, tried to conjure a door out of sheer will. None of it

worked. Echo laughed at me the whole time, said she enjoyed watching me play god in a sandbox made of my own neurons. Now I don't even bother. I just sit cross-legged, staring at the horizonless dark, trying to remember how quiet used to feel.

Echo hates that. She hates it when I ignore her.

"You're getting awfully good at pretending I'm not here," she says now, her voice smooth.

"Maybe you're improving," I mutter. "Learning how to blend into the background noise."

“Funny,” she replies. “I thought *you* were the noise.”

Her voice doesn’t come from anywhere in particular. It just exists, vibrating in my skull, brushing the inside of my thoughts.

I sigh. “You realise this isn’t helping either of us, right?”

“Helping?” Echo echoes, because of course she does. “You think I’m here to help?”

The air quivers with her amusement. It’s not laughter, exactly. It’s the idea of laughter, dry, precise, and empty.

I don’t remember exactly when I stopped being afraid of her. Maybe around day three. She spent the first half of the week trying to break me, projecting nightmares, flooding the mindscape with twisted memories, whispering everything I didn’t want to hear. She tried violence once, too. But fear has a limit. Pain has an expiry date. And once you’ve hit the ceiling of both, all that’s left is irritation. Now, she’s just… background radiation. A nuisance with a voice. I’ve taken to narrating the scenery to myself just to drown her out.

“The floor’s red again,” I mutter. “Congratulations, subconscious. You’ve got the aesthetic range of a horror film.”

“It suits you,” she says. “You bleed nicely.”

I glare into the darkness above. “You need new material.”

“Oh, but you make it so easy,” she purrs. “I don’t have to invent anything. I just recycle what’s already broken in you.”

That’s Echo’s favourite trick: turning everything I say back on me.

The air here doesn’t move. There’s no wind, no scent, no sound unless we make it. I tried counting heartbeats to keep time, but my heart doesn’t beat here either. My body’s more conceptual than physical, an approximation my

brain insists on rendering. I'm not even sure if I have skin or if I'm just a sculpted memory wearing an old face. Sometimes I see outlines, my hands, my knees, the faint shimmer of my reflection on the red floor. But it shifts. Occasionally, I look down and see someone else entirely. The younger me. The older me. Versions that never existed but feel painfully real. Echo enjoys pointing those out.

"Look," she says once, "you can't even decide which you're pretending to be."

"Neither can you," I shot back. "You're a glorified glitch with an identity crisis."

She hums. “I’m what’s left when you stop lying to yourself.”

And the worst part is, I think she believes that.

It’s strange how long a week can feel when time doesn’t exist.

Sometimes I try to sleep, but sleep here isn’t rest, it’s just darkness inside darkness. Other times, I try to walk. I’ve walked for what feels to be miles, but the horizon never changes. Just that infinite blend of red below and black above. The closest thing to a change came on day five, when the floor started pulsing faintly beneath me, syncing with Echo’s voice. She

said it was proof that I was “assimilating.” I told her to assimilate herself. She didn’t laugh.

There are moments, brief, treacherous moments, where I almost talk to her as a person. When the silence gets too thick, and my thoughts start looping on themselves, I catch myself answering her questions. About Fiolleto. About the machine. About everything that came before this. She feeds on that. Every word I give her is a thread she pulls tighter.

“You miss him,” she says once, casually.

“No,” I lie.

“Liar.”

Her tone is playful, but there's something sharp beneath it. Something is almost hungry.

"You know what I think?" she continues. "You built that machine to escape yourself. Not to find anything. Not to explore. You just wanted out. And now look, here we are. You got exactly what you wanted."

I clench my fists. "If I wanted you, I'd have asked for an audience."

"You didn't need to ask. I was already inside."

That one stings. Because it's true.

Sometimes, when she's quiet, which isn't often, I wonder if Echo even exists. Maybe she's just me. The part of me that refused to die when the rest of me did. Maybe that's what death is: a conversation you can't end with the worst version of yourself.

I don't know what dying was supposed to feel like. Not this. Not this limbo of sarcasm and static. Not this circular conversation with a shadow that knows too much.

"You're thinking about him again," Echo says.

I don't answer.

“You’re wondering what he’d say if he saw you in this state,” she presses. “Trapped, dishevelled, still trying to rationalise everything. He’d probably pity you.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re overestimating how much I care about your fanfiction.”

“You do care,” she insists softly. “That’s the problem.”

The floor ripples beneath me as if echoing her words. I pretend not to notice.

By the end of what must be day seven, I’ve stopped pretending that ignoring her will make her vanish. She’s much similar to oxygen,

annoying, invisible, necessary. The thought terrifies me more than she ever could. And yet, some part of me still finds this absurdly funny. If this is what the afterlife is, then heaven and hell are just different brands of self-awareness. Maybe that's the point. Maybe the punishment isn't pain. Maybe it's a reflection. Eternal, unfiltered reflection.

"Congratulations," I mutter to the void. "I've officially become my own worst roommate."

"Please," Echo says, smugly. "You wish you were this interesting."

Sometimes I try to provoke her. It's petty, but it gives me something to do.

"Hey, Echo," I say, feigning casual boredom. "If you're me, does that mean I can fire you?"

"You can try," she says sweetly, "but I'm unionised."

I laugh, actually laugh, and it feels wrong, the red beneath me vibrates in response, a low hum of movement.

"You see?" Echo says. "You need me. Without me, this place would eat you alive."

“And with you, it’s just eating slower,” I say. “Fantastic improvement.”

Still, I can’t deny that the dynamic has changed. The fear’s gone, replaced by something almost familiar. I can predict her insults before she says them. I can tell when she’s about to twist a memory or when she’s about to pause, waiting for me to react. It’s similar to living with an old enemy you’ve learned to tune out. But deep down, I know this can’t last forever. Echo isn’t losing her edge. She’s adapting. Waiting. And I can feel her patience thinning.

When I close my eyes, I don't see darkness anymore. I see her, blurred, formless, and I can feel her grin.

"You're still trying to win," she whispers. "That's adorable."

"And you're still talking," I whisper back. "That's tragic."

CHAPTER 24 - PARASITE LOGIC

# FDEYA DOSTOEVSKY

-PRESENT-

-SUBCONSCIOUS-

The thing about being trapped inside your own mind is that you eventually run out of distractions. There's nowhere to walk that you haven't already walked. No corner to hide in. No silence that Echo hasn't already infected. The world doesn't change, but the texture of it does. Every word spoken here leaves a residue. The red floor glistens with faint ripples, and

when Echo speaks, it vibrates, subtly, but enough to make me feel nauseous.

She starts her usual morning routine, not that mornings exist here. It's just that every time I wake from the imitation of sleep, she's already talking. Always mid-sentence, as if she never stopped.

"You dream too loudly," she says.

"I don't dream," I answer automatically.

"Then who was that?" I freeze.

"Don't look at me like that," she says sweetly. "You know exactly who I mean."

“Don’t.”

“Fiolleto,” she hums, drawing out the syllables until they sound indecent. “Such a lovely name to waste on guilt.”

There it is. The day’s first knife.

I should be used to it by now, but Echo always finds a way to make old wounds feel fresh.

She’s stopped trying to scare me with monsters or disfigured versions of myself; that didn’t work. Now she goes for precision. Emotional autopsy. She appears, or rather, suggests herself, in the air before me, a faint distortion of heat. Her form is inconsistent. Sometimes

humanoid, sometimes vapour, sometimes an outline that flickers and fades when I blink. But the voice is constant. Too human.

“You remember, don’t you?” she continues, the words syrupy, false. “The first kiss. You were trembling, though you’d never admit it.”

I grit my teeth. “Find a new hobby.”

“He touched your face as if you were breakable, lovely, huh?”

“Shut up.”

“You wanted him to see you as dangerous, but you melted.”

“Stop it.”

“And then—”

“Echo—”

“—You ruined it, of course. Because that’s what you do.”

The air splits. For a second, I hear his voice. Not Echo’s imitation, his. Or at least something close enough to make me want to believe it.

“Fdeya,” he says softly, memory whispering from behind a locked door.

My throat tightens. “Don’t you dare.”

“You miss him,” Echo says, and now she uses both of our voices at once. “You’ve built an entire dimension out of his absence. How flattering.”

The floor stirs beneath me, faintly warm. My pulse, if I still have one, syncs with the rhythm. It’s not real, I remind myself. *It’s not real.*

“You should thank me,” Echo continues. “At least I kept him alive for you.”

“You kept him wrong,” I hiss. “You twist everything.”

“I perfect everything,” she corrects. “You’re the one who keeps breaking it.”

It’s not the memories that hurt. It’s the distortion. The way she plays them is just a little off-key. The way Fiolleto’s smile doesn’t reach his eyes anymore. The way the world around him feels flatter every time she resurrects it. He becomes more of a concept than a person, something between nostalgia and punishment. She knows exactly what she’s doing.

“Why do you get so defensive?” she teases. “You’re the one who programmed this version of him. I’m only polishing your imagination.”

“Funny,” I say. “You talk a lot for a parasite.”

“A parasite keeps its host alive,” she counters. “I’m something better.”

“At least you admit the parasitic behaviour, huh…”

She pauses, deliberately. She’s testing me. When Echo goes quiet, it’s never mercy. It’s strategy. And right on cue, she breaks the silence with a new voice.

“You always overthink everything, Fdeya.”

I flinch. That tone, light, amused, familiar. She’s borrowed Fiolleto’s voice again, and this time she nails it perfectly. Even the cadence, the faint rasp at the end of his sentences.

“You can’t even let yourself rest,” he says, standing just beyond the haze. “You talk to yourself until you unravel.”

My chest tightens. “You’re not him.”

“You always say that,” he murmurs. “But you’re the one keeping me here.”

“Stop it, no im fucking not.”

“You built this place for us.” she purrs.

“I said stop—”

“And you call *me* obsessive...”

I get up too fast, my knees digging into the red floor. It ripples outward and the reflection beneath me wavers, her face? mine? I can’t tell

anymore. Echo laughs through Fiolleto's voice, soft and cruel.

"You still don't understand, do you? Love isn't about protection. It's about ownership."

"That's your definition," I spit.

"No, that's yours. I just learned it from you."

Her voice begins to overlap, Fiolleto's tone fading into her own, multiplied, layered, until the air vibrates with them.

"To love is to prey," she sings. "You said that once."

“I never said that.”

“You thought it,” she replies. “And that’s enough.”

The worst part is that she’s not wrong.

Somewhere in the static of my mind, I can almost recall the moment, one of those quiet, ugly thoughts you never say aloud. The kind you think once, fleetingly, and forget immediately after. But she remembers everything.

“You wanted to own him,” she whispers. “The way you own equations. The way you own theories. You wanted to dissect his devotion.”

“Because I loved him,” I snap.

“No. Because you couldn’t stand not to understand him.”

CHAPTER 25 - THE SHIP OF THESEUS

# FDEYA DOSTOEVSKY

-PRESENT-

-SUBCONSCIOUS-

Self-awareness, my favourite form of self-harm.

That's how it starts. That's how it always does. A moment of clarity so sharp it cuts its own edges. After Echo's last little experiment, I thought I could clean up the damage. Think my way out. Rationalise the infection. I tried to believe that reasoning was still mine to use, that logic would be a way back to myself. But logic

doesn’t cleanse. It breeds. It grows teeth and starts gnawing on the very thing that created it. And I think I’ve finally reached the part where my thoughts have learned to eat me alive.

The red space is starting to give me migraines. It's too clean, too quiet, too new. Even the silence sounds recently built. When I look down, the floor gleams. I see them.

Fine seams tracing along my wrists and shoulders, glowing faintly when I move. Not scars. Not organic. Joints, as if someone had taken me apart and put me back together, piece by piece, in a rush to meet a deadline.

“Someone’s been replacing things again,” I whisper.

Echo doesn’t answer. She never does when the truth’s too obvious. Her silence stretches, soft and heavy, so I start pacing. Thinking helps. It always did, back when thinking was still a human act, not a form of excavation. My voice sounds too calm, too deliberate. The kind of voice used by someone talking through their own disassembly.

“There’s a paradox I used to love,” I begin, “the Ship of Theseus. Replace one plank, and it’s still the same ship. Replace every plank, and it’s… what, exactly? A perfect copy? A lie that learned how to mimic truth?”

The words echo faintly. The space eats them slowly, as if tasting each syllable.

“I used to say identity isn’t in the parts. It’s in the pattern,  the continuity. As long as the shape holds, the ship is itself.” I pause, looking down at my reflection on the red floor. It doesn’t match me. It blinks half a second too late. “But if that’s true,” I say quietly, “then I’m still myself. Even after every thought’s been rewritten, every feeling reconstructed, every scar recalibrated. I should still be Fdeya Dostoevsky.”

A breath.

“Except I don’t believe that anymore.”

The reflection smiles before I do. I start laughing. Not because it's funny, but because there's nothing else left to do. It's a dry, broken laugh, the kind you get when reason and hysteria collide and shake hands.

"It's ironic, isn't it? I used to mock this paradox. Wrote an entire paper about how meaningless it was. Continuity, semantics, all that nonsense. I said identity was stable as long as you remembered the pattern. And now—" I drag a hand down my face. "Now I can feel the planks coming loose."

"That's the problem with logic," Echo says. Her voice comes from nowhere, soft,

lilting, almost kind. “It doesn’t care who it devours.”

“Neither do parasites,” I murmur. The silence that follows carries her smile.

A tremor in the floor starts out of a sudden. The air flickers. The seams along my arms pulse once, bright red, and I realise the reflection beneath me is no longer mine. It’s hers.

Another me. Then another.

They appear in layers, flickering in and out of existence, one is perfectly still, one is whispering something I can’t hear, one is just smiling.

I reach toward the nearest one, and she mirrors me a half-second too slow. When our fingertips almost meet, her mouth moves. She's mouthing my words, or maybe she's saying them first, and I'm the echo.

"Maybe the Ship of Theseus was never about the ship," I whisper. "Maybe it was a warning. About minds as insane as mine, the ones that keep rebuilding themselves until there's nothing left to save."

"Or maybe," Echo says, her voice multiplying around me, "it was a blueprint."

The world contorts. At first, it's subtle, a pulse beneath the red floor, a tremor running

through the edges of my vision. Then it starts to breathe. The ground expands, contracts, and from that rhythm, the copies begin to rise. Pale silhouettes, bleeding through the surface crawl out of the floor in uneven motions, their gestures echoing mine, their heads tilting in the same wrong rhythm as I sway.

There are hundreds of them, all me, circling, twitching, mouthing things I haven't said yet. Each one is slightly delayed, slightly broken. I lift my hand. They lift theirs.

But half of them hesitate, the other half don't stop. Movements slip out of sync. The floor begins to ripple harder, and the sound it makes, wet, bone-deep, almost human, makes

me laugh. A small, breathless laugh that turns into something hysterical before I can stop it.

The world folds inward. The copies try to merge, but it doesn't work; it never works. They press into each other, their faces half-aligned, half-torn, half-screaming. I can feel them, every version of me breathing through the same lungs, thinking through the same collapsing pattern. My chest feels too full, my mind too wide, everything overlapping and refusing to separate.

I start to hear whispers. Then chanting. Then something else entirely.

“Find your anchor.”

“Find your author.”

“Find your other.”

The voices multiply, distort, and collapse into a grinding rhythm. Each repetition fractures the words further, until they’re no longer instructions but sounds, almost music, a prayer collapsing into noise. I try to say one of them, to cling to meaning, but my mouth won’t decide which language to use. It keeps switching mid-word.

Anchor. Author. Other. *Ha—her—hor—*

The copies start laughing too, and that breaks me. Because it’s my laugh.

Every tone, every pitch, a perfect chorus of

hysteria feeding on itself until I can't tell who started it. The floor shakes beneath the sound. The red horizon bends and my vision fractures, shatters, stitches itself back together wrong. The seams along my arms burst open with light, no blood, just blinding, liquid light, the kind that hums and screams at once. It leaks through me, carving glowing cracks through my body. I should be terrified, but instead I feel giddy. Weightless. Perhaps my past self was a bad idea, and I can finally release it.

Something comes undone, not skin, not bone, but continuity. And for one beautiful, deranged second, I can see every version of myself stacked, infinite and transparent, all

moving slightly differently, trying to agree on which one's real.

Echo's laughter threads through the air, quiet, endless, cruelly familiar. It loops back on itself and I start laughing myself, too loud, too sharp, because it's funny, isn't it? That she might not be my parasite at all, but my original self, watching from the discarded pieces. The red floor opens. The copies fall inward, folding into me, into each other, into everything. Their limbs blur. Their mouths dissolve. I can taste static, metal, ozone, myself.

The world implodes in a single, soundless flash.

And as I go under, my last thought folds into itself like paper burning from the edges inward: If identity is just a pattern, then who's holding the original? Or worse, what if no one is?

CHAPTER 26 - LETTERS TO NO GOD

# FIOLLETO YAROSLAV

-PRESENT-

-EARTH-

The first letter exists because silence has weight, and my knees were starting to give in.

Not metaphorical weight. Not the poetic kind people assign to absence when they want it to feel meaningful. This silence presses. It sits inside the house, swelling the wood, bending the doorframes, tightening the hinges.

Now I find myself sitting at my table, beside the fogged window. The paper curls

slightly the moment I place it down, the damp in the room already claiming it. My hand rests above the page longer than it should.

Not because I believe in what I'm about to do. Because I don't. That needs to be stated clearly.

I don't believe in God.

Not in a creator, not in a watcher, not in a mind that distributes suffering with intention. The collapse alone would have been enough to disprove that. Whatever governs reality, if anything governs it at all, operates with the elegance of a broken drum played by a toddler.

Still, silence requires pressure. Words and the letters on these papers are the only pressure I have left.

So begin to write.

**Letter I**

To the thing that is not there. To the absence. To the silence that refuses shape. I’m not writing because I believe you exist. This is not prayer. Prayer assumes someone is listening. Prayer assumes an ear. This is something else. A test, perhaps. Or the last act of someone who has exhausted every other method. There is a woman in the room behind me. Her name

is Fdeya. She has been lying on the same narrow cot for eight days. Her breathing continues, though it doesn't follow the patterns of sleep or waking. Her skin holds warmth, but it feels displaced somehow, as if the temperature belongs to the air surrounding her instead of her body.

She returned after disappearing somewhere physics stopped behaving. I brought her back, think? Or something wearing her shape came with me. I have been observing. Measuring. Recording. None of it explains why the house breathes with her. None of it explains why the ceiling rot spreads in spirals directly above her

chest. None of it explains why the glass of water beside her bed refills itself every morning. If there is intelligence anywhere in this silence, if absence itself has structure, then this letter is my attempt to apply pressure to it.

If something is there, answer.

-Fiolleto.

By the time I'm able to hold the finished letter between the tips of my fingers, I'm filled with the expectation of a possible answer, yet, the house remains still in the slow, listening way it has adopted since her return. The rain

continues its metallic ticking somewhere beyond the ceiling, precise and hollow.

I fold the paper anyway. Even if no one reads it. Even if it dissolves here with everything else.

The second letter begins less carefully. I don’t watch the paper absorb the dampness or wait for the right sentence to arrive. The pen touches the page almost immediately, as though the silence has already had enough time to answer.

## Letter II

To No God, If you existed, the world would look different. This isn't a moral argument. I'm not interested in justice or punishment or the comfortable belief that suffering has purpose. I'm interested in patterns. Patterns require consistency. Consistency implies intention. Nothing about the last few years has been consistent. Cities collapsed into silence. Entire systems disappeared overnight. The sky lost its color for three days and returned with a shade I don't remember existing before. The woman I love stepped into a machine designed to measure dimensional displacement and vanished into something that behaved more as memory than as space. I made a deal with a phenomenon that called itself Echo. That alone should be enough to dismiss the idea of design. If a mind governs reality, it's either

incompetent or cruel. And I don't believe in cruelty as a universal law. Cruelty requires emotion. Emotion requires presence. You would need to exist first. Which you don't.

Still, something in this house listens. I know the difference between emptiness and attention. The silence here feels… aware. Not benevolent. Not hostile. Just aware. If you existed, you would explain this, but you don't.

-Fiolleto.

So I will keep writing until the silence breaks.

The house creaks softly behind me. Not the settling kind, the slow, measured one. For a moment I think it's the bed again. But when I glance toward the hallway, everything remains still. The lamp flickers twice. The rhythm

matches her breathing. I noticed that immediately. I wish I hadn't.

The third letter begins hours later.

My handwriting looks different now. Messier, sloppy, tired. As if the hand writing it belongs to someone who has already accepted something I haven't.

**Letter III**

To the bitch watching over me, I don't believe in you. That hasn't changed. But belief isn't required for negotiation. If something exists in the silence of this house, if the absence itself has shape, then it understands exchange. Everything does. Energy, matter, memory. Every system I've

ever studied relies on balance. So here is mine.

Take me instead. Not metaphorically. Literally. You can have my memory. You can have my body. You can take my name, the way I recognize my own face in mirrors, the ability to remember what she sounded before the collapse. Take my understanding of the world. Take the part of me that still believes logic can solve this. Take the part of me that thinks I deserve to keep living if she doesn't wake up.Take everything that makes me me. And again, And again, And again, And again, And again, And again, And again, And again, And again, And again, And again, And again, And again, And again, And again.

Just give her back. Not the breathing version. Not the still version. Her. Please. The

one who argued with me about probability curves, the one who laughed too quietly when she was trying not to wake people, the one who walked faster than me and never noticed, the one that kissed me then laughed about it. Give me the version of her that existed before the machine. Before Echo. Before whatever this is. You can erase me completely. I won't resist. I won't even try to remember what I lost. Just let her wake up.

-Fiolleto.

Just when I finish writing, the mood in the room changes. Not colder. Not warmer. Just… different. The pressure shifts slightly, when the atmosphere tightens and every surface seems to hold its breath. The lamp stops flickering. The low electrical hum that has been threading through the walls for days disappears,

swallowed by a silence so complete it almost rings.

The house becomes still. Completely still.

Even the rain outside seems to pause, as though the world beyond the walls has leaned closer to listen. I don't move. Not immediately. The pen remains between my fingers, suspended above the paper, ink gathering slowly at the tip until a dark drop falls and spreads into the page. Time stretches. Or maybe it stops entirely. Then I hear something behind me. A sound so small I almost dismiss it as the wood settling.

The bed creaks. Once. The sound is delicate, but it pulses through my spine. I turn slowly. Not because I'm afraid. Because I'm afraid of moving too quickly and breaking whatever this moment is. My chair shifts

against the floor with a quiet scrape that feels far too loud for the room.

For a whole second, I think nothing has changed. The cot is still near the fogged window. The gray light still drips through the glass in that lifeless way it always has. But then, I see her. She's sitting up. Not halfway. Not in the slow, unconscious way someone waking from sleep might move.

Sitting. Perfectly upright. Her back straight. The sheets beneath her are still smooth. No folds. No disturbance. Her eyes are open. For the first time since she came back, they are hers again. Not empty. Not distant. Not that glassy stillness that reduced her to a reflection instead of a person and most importantly, not Echo. Focused. Clear. Alive in a way that makes my chest tighten so suddenly I forget how to breathe.

On me. She’s looking at me. Not through me. Not past me. At me. I realize then that I’ve stopped breathing entirely. My lungs burn quietly, but I don’t inhale. I’m afraid the sound might undo it. All the letters sit on the table beside me, damp and curling at the edges, the ink bleeding slightly into the paper fibers. They look fragile now, almost pathetic, as if the desperation inside them had been waiting for permission to become real.

For a moment, neither of us moves, yet I can feel my eyes filling up with tears. The silence stretches between us, thin and trembling. Her gaze doesn’t waver. It moves across my face slowly, carefully, the way someone studies a familiar object they thought they’d lost forever. Recognition. And then she speaks. Her voice is quiet, soft, a little rough around the edges.

“Fioleto?”

Maybe God does exist after all.

CHAPTER 27 - CYCLOTRON MOTION

# FDEYA DOSTOEVSKY

-PRESENT-

-EARTH-

I wake up before I understand that I've woken up. Or maybe, I don't. Maybe this is just another version of not being allowed to stop. Maybe I'm hallucinating again. Maybe this all was merely a hallucination. Maybe I'm crazy.

There's no moment of clarity. No clean break between nothing and something. Just sound. A thin, stretched sound that doesn't belong to any place. Laughter. Not loud. Not

close. Not far either. It doesn't travel. It exists. Echo's giggle.

*You wanted to own him.*

The memory surfaces without permission. Not the moment itself, just the accusation. The weight of it. The way it sank instead of landing. My chest tightens before I even understand why. The giggle distorts slightly, she *almost* sounds human.

*Love isn't about protection. It's about ownership. And you know that well, don't you, little hymn?*

The laughter stretches thinner, until it stops. Not fades. Stops. Cut clean in the middle of itself, the silence that follows is hollow. My ears keep ringing as if the sound is still there, as if something forgot to tell my body it ended.

For a moment, I don't move. Not because I'm calm, if anything, I'm terrified. I don't know if I can, or if I should. Every time before, every time I thought I woke up, she was still there. Watching. Waiting for me to react. Waiting for me to prove her right.

There's a hesitation buried deep inside me, something instinctive and quiet: *Don't trust this.* That's how she does it. She builds something that feels real, yet not quite right.

I try to breathe. It doesn't work. Great, fucking awesome. My chest lifts too fast, too shallow, air comes in but doesn't settle. My lungs feel unfamiliar. I pause. Try again. In. Out. In…

My fingers twitch. The movement is delayed, the signal had to travel too far to reach them, as if I forgot how to move. I wait, for the

correction. For the distortion. For her voice to slip back in and tell me what I'm doing wrong. Nothing comes. Nothing resets. Nothing stabilizes.

The ringing continues. Low. Persistent. Too familiar. I open my eyes. Light spills in slowly, as if the world is loading in layers instead of appearing all at once. At first, it's just brightness. Then shapes. Then something resembling depth. It takes too long for something that should be immediate. My vision swims, edges soft, everything slightly out of alignment, I'm seeing from just a fraction off where I'm supposed to be. The thought comes almost immediately yet completely uninvited: *This isn't real.* It settles too easily. That's what scares me.

I blink. Once. Twice. The shapes begin to hold, walls… a ceiling… something familiar.

But I don't trust familiarity anymore. I've seen things pretend too well. Then, movement. I try to sit up, but my body lags behind the intention, slow and resistant, I push through it anyway, forcing myself upright, breath catching halfway through. I turn my head slowly, the movement dragging, deliberate, as if rushing it might break something. My heart stutters. I don't even fully see him, and I'm already crying.

"Fiolleto?" I manage to murmur.

It hits without warning, without build-up. My chest folds inward, breath breaking apart into something uneven and desperate. Tears spill before I can process *why*. But I know. Some part of me knows before the rest catches up.

He doesn't speak. There's no hesitation. No pause to confirm. He just runs. And then,

impact. He crashes into me as if force matters more than consequence. Pain flares, sharp this time, real, immediate, tearing through my ribs, my shoulders, everywhere, but it gets swallowed by something bigger. His arms wrap around me too tightly. Too desperately.

I gasp, not fully from pain, not fully from the force, but because he's *warm*. Solid. Real. I grab onto him instantly. My hands don't feel entirely mine…they seem younger, but I use them anyway. I clutch his shirt, his back, the fabric bunching under my fingers as if I can anchor myself through it. He's shaking, I feel it before I understand it.

His breath breaks against my neck, uneven, sharp, collapsing into itself. He's crying… no, sobbing. Not quietly. Not controlled. It's raw, messy, the kind of crying that doesn't care who hears it, and before I even

realize, my own eyes start to swell. I press my face into him harder, trying to erase the space between us completely.

“Seven years…” he whispered in a broken and shaky manner.

And then, it hits me all at once. Sharp. Immediate. Unforgiving. The number doesn’t build. It doesn’t ease. It slams into me. Seven years. What passed as months for me was seven years for him. The thought crashes through everything else, knocking the air out of my chest before I can even react.

Seven years, and this is the first thing I feel.

Seven years, and he’s still here.

Seven years, and he still cares.

My grip tightens without me meaning it to.

“I…” My voice fractures the moment it tries to exist again “I’m…” Nothing comes out right. Nothing fits. There aren’t words for where I’ve been. There aren’t words for this.

Then suddenly pulls back, too fast for my liking. But a second after his hands come up to my face, not gentle, not careful, urgent. They frame me, hold me in place, as if he’s bracing against something invisible. He seems to expect me to flicker, to glitch, to slip through his fingers unless he anchors me there.

His eyes move over me quickly. Searching. Tracing. Memorizing. Disbelieving. As if he’s trying to relearn my face before it disappears again. And then, he kisses me. There’s no warning, but no hesitation whatsoever. Happens on instinct and catches me completely off guard. It’s not soft. Not careful. Not controlled. It crashes into me with a kind of

urgency that borders on reckless, not harmful, but overwhelming. It's messy. Unsteady. Desperate. There's nothing polished about it, nothing cinematic. It isn't the kind of kiss he used to give me when we were younger. It's not gentle. It's not beautiful. It's *real*.

His hand snakes into my hair, the other still holding my face, needing to keep me exactly where I am. I don't think, I don't even hesitate. I kiss him back just as hard. Because if I stop I might wake up somewhere else again.

Time collapses. Seconds stretch, compress, lose shape entirely, but not as before, not in a bad way. Its too much, yet not enough. Everything all at once. And then… I laugh. It slips out of me mid-kiss. Small. Breathless. Completely out of place. The sound startles even me. For a second, I don't even recognize it as mine. It's been so long since I've truly

laughed. Not forced, not defensive, not something hollow shaped to sound right. This is different. The realization hits just as the sound leaves me, and it startles me as much as it breaks the moment.

He freezes. Pulls back just enough to look at me, his eyes searching, confusion flickering across his expression, he doesn't know how to process it, and then, despite it, something softens. A small, disbelieving smile pulls at his mouth. And for half a second, barely there, he lets out a quiet, breathless laugh too. I blink at him, still too close, still holding onto him.

"My ribs," I murmur, breath uneven, voice barely steady, but the smile still in place. "Fiolleto, I think you broke one of my ribs-" my expression fell grim and dramatically pained.

His expression drops immediately. “What—?” His hands shift, urgency flipping direction. “Where does it—Fdeya—” He’s already looking for damage. Already panicking. The intensity of it… it’s so *him* that something in my chest loosens.

I let out another breathy laugh. “I’m joking.”

It takes a second. You can see the exact moment it lands. Relief. Then irritation. He exhales sharply, eyes narrowing just slightly. “That’s not funny.” He says it through gritted teeth, but there’s no real bite to it, no edge that lands. The tension in his voice doesn’t match the way his hands hover, restless, as they don’t know where to go. He’s not really mad. Just, afraid to let go.

“It was a little funny.”

“Not even a little.”

The familiarity of it settles around us, something warm. Something intact. For a moment, just a moment… nothing feels broken. He shifts then, slower now, more aware, and sits beside me instead of over me. The space between us is small. Intentional. His hand comes back up to my face. Different this time. Not searching. Not frantic. Grounding.

His palm cups my cheek, thumb resting just below my eye. His fingers are slightly cold, or maybe I am… I'm not sure, I can't tell. He doesn’t speak. He just looks at me, really looks. And I see it now.

Beneath the relief. Beneath the disbelief. There’s something else. Something unsettled. Storming. Questions he hasn’t asked yet. Questions he’s afraid to ask. Because the

answers might not be what he wants. Or worse, might not exist at all.

I lean slightly into his hand without thinking. “I know what you’re thinking,” I say softly. My voice still feels distant inside my own head.

“We have a lot to talk about, no?” He exhales through his nose, jaw tightening just slightly.

“…Yeah.”

It’s quiet, careful. I try to gather my thoughts. They don’t come together cleanly, or they don’t come together at all. “I don’t…” I start. Stop. Try again. “I remember pieces.” Even that feels too much of a claim. His thumb moves slightly against my cheek. A small, repetitive motion. “I remember her,” I say.

That part is sharp. It cuts through everything else. Echo. I don't say the name. I don't need to.

"The deals," I continue slowly. "The threats. But not always… words." My stomach tightens. "Sometimes it was just there." I press my lips together briefly. "Like something sitting inside my thoughts that wasn't mine." His hand stills for a fraction of a second. "Disgust," I whisper. "That's the closest feeling..."

The memory isn't visual. It's a feeling. That's what makes it worse. "Fear," I add. "Not of dying." The words sit for a moment before I force the rest out. "If anything… I wanted it. The longer I stayed there, the more I hoped it would just kill me already, just end it." My throat tightens. "I wanted it to leave me in peace." The word sits heavy between us. "I don't remember where I was," I admit. "Not

really. Just that I wasn't allowed to stop existing."

Silence settles, not empty, heavy. Something shifts near my hand. Soft. Warm. I flinch instinctively. My head snaps down. A cat. It brushes against me, claiming the space as its own, weaving around my arm with slow, familiar movements. I blink.

"…Whose cat is this?"

The question comes out before I can think it through. Fiolleto follows my gaze, for a second, he doesn't answer. He just stares at it.

"…It's mine," he says.

Something in his tone makes me look at him again. "You have a cat?"

"I had a cat." There's a difference in the way he says it. Subtle. But there. "It

disappeared a while ago...” he continues, eyes flicking back to the animal.  A cold feeling settles under my skin.

He doesn’t look away from it. “He wasn’t here,” he says. “Not until…” He stops. We both do. The cat lifts its head. Its eyes meet mine, still, unblinking. “…until you woke up.” It presses closer against me, purring softly, the sound is steady. Normal. Too normal. But I guess when you’ve been trapped for that long, whatever’s left of your sanity starts filling in the gaps, making things look right, feel right, even when they aren’t.

I hesitate, then reach down. My fingers brush through its warm fur. It doesn’t look away, not even for a second.cThe ringing in my ears returns. Soft. Familiar. Wrong.cI freeze.

“…Fdeya?” Fiolleto’s voice cuts through, lower now, cautious.

I didn't respond immediately. Because something just shifted. Not around me. Inside me.

“It didn’t leave,” I said quietly. The words come out without permission.

Fiolleto goes still. “…What do you mean?”

“Echo.”

