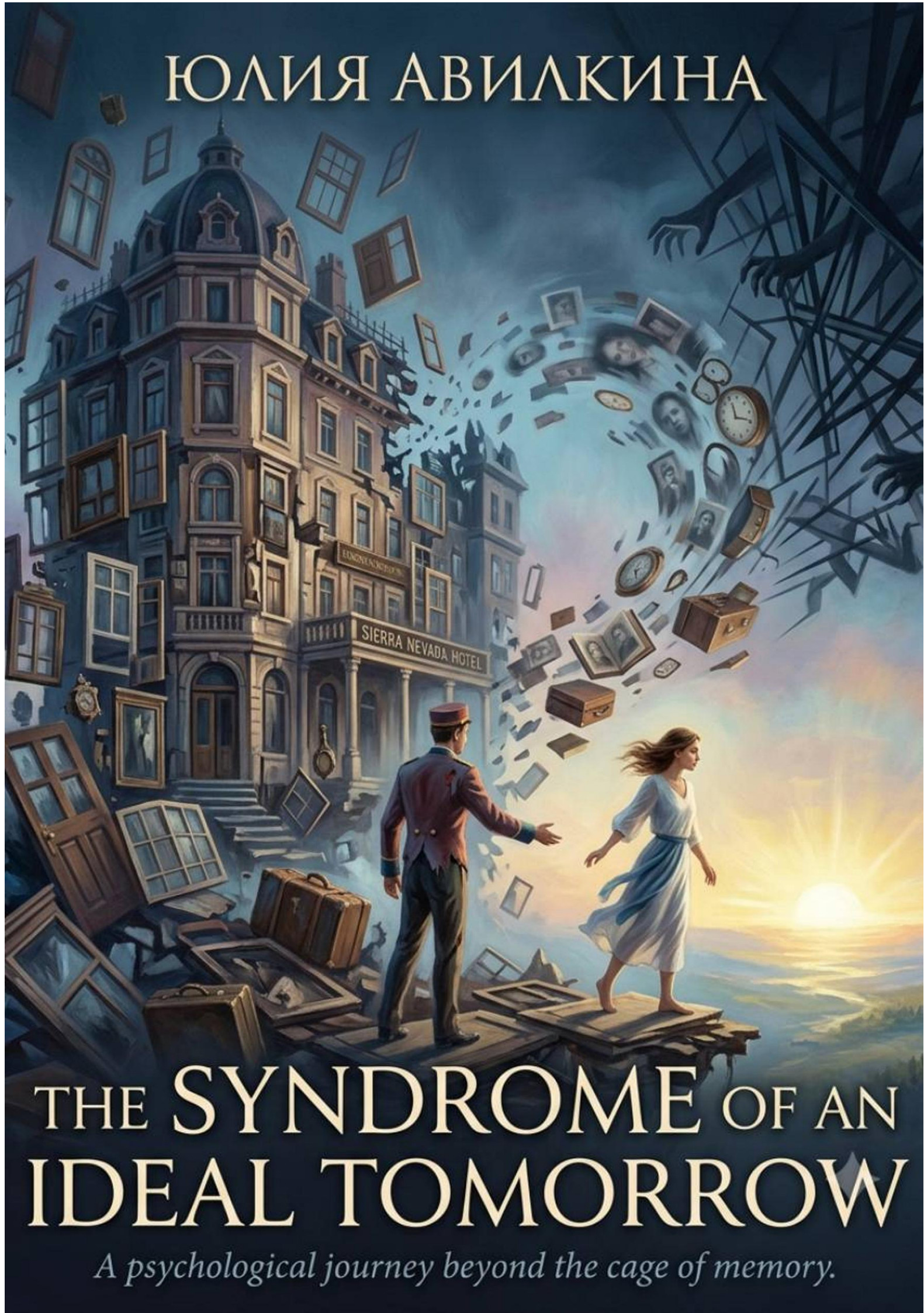


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THE SYNDROME OF AN IDEAL TOMORROW

A psychological journey beyond the cage of memory.

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The Syndrome of an Ideal Tomorrow

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At the Sierra Nevada Hotel, time stands still: guests endlessly relive their "yesterdays," trapped in a cage of memories. Thomas, a young bellhop, acts as the bridge between these fragments until Marta arrives. Unlike others, she carries no baggage of memory and demands a room with a view of "tomorrow". Her presence triggers a shift, as Marta seeks the freedom of the future over the comfort of familiar sorrow. The two embark on a surreal journey beyond the hotel into the void of "Day One," where time is merely a canvas. Pursued by a "System" that feeds on human pain, they must transform from observers into the architects of their own reality. "The Syndrome of an Ideal Tomorrow" is a psychological drama exploring the struggle to escape the snare of trauma. In the silence of solitude, Thomas and Marta realize that the hardest part of the journey isn't building the new—it is finding the courage to finally let go of the past.

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The Syndrome of an Ideal Tomorrow

Prologue

At the Sierra Nevada Hotel, time doesn't flow—it is portioned out by room number, like vintage wine in a cellar.

If you walk down the carpeted hallway of the third floor, your boots will tread, in turn, a May afternoon in 1984, the sweltering twilight of August 2012, and the biting frost of a February dawn that never broke for the guest in 302. The borders between eras smell of iron and old paper. Take a single step, and the temperature swings ten degrees; the silence of the corridor gives way to the rustle of a pine forest felled decades ago, bleeding through the cracks of a nearby door.

The place has its rules.

First: Never knock on a door unless you are prepared to share someone else's "yesterday."

Second: Do not take souvenirs from the rooms—a flower plucked in 1990 crumbles into gray ash the moment it touches the air of the present.

Thomas, the only bellhop whose wrist calendar synced with the real world, was used to this mosaic. He knew to enter 214 wearing sunglasses—inside, the sun beat down on that one day at the beach Mr. Green had refused to let go of for twelve years. Thomas knew that in 405, they were always weeping, while in 112, they laughed so loudly his ears would ring.

But today, a new key lay on the front desk. No room number. No date. It was heavy and cold, like a jagged shard of ice.

The lobby smelled of rain that wasn't falling outside. And for the first time in years, Thomas felt that "today" was the most dangerous place in the building.

Chapter 1: Cold Coffee and the Scent of Wormwood

Thomas's mornings always began with the ritual of "syncing." He stood in the lobby before the massive grandfather clock—the only honest piece of machinery in the building. Its pendulum ticked off a steady, relentless "now," while behind hundreds of hotel doors, time twisted into loops, fell asleep in dusty corners, or thrashed in the hysterics of a single, frozen moment.

Thomas straightened the brass buttons on his livery. He was twenty-five, but in the hotel mirrors, he sometimes saw an old man—the shadows of other people's lived decades had a way of clinging to his clothes like burrs.

"Room 312, breakfast," rasped Marcus, the aging manager, his eyes never leaving a ten-year-old newspaper. "And, Thomas... wear gloves. It's particularly windy in there today."

Thomas sighed. Room 312 belonged to Madame Laurent. Her "yesterday" was stuck in October 1964, on a seaside terrace, five minutes before the mailman brought the letter that shattered her life. She had rented the room to wait for that mailman forever, but never, ever to open the door for him.

He took the tray. The coffee was scalding hot—a product of the kitchen, which still existed in the present. But as soon as Thomas reached the third floor and approached the door, the air around him began to shift.

One step across the threshold, and the hallway linoleum turned into weathered wooden planks. The ceiling vanished, replaced by a leaden sky weeping a thin, icy drizzle. It smelled of salt and bitter wormwood.

"Your 'today,' Madame," Thomas said softly, setting the tray on a table that was technically hotel furniture but looked like wrought-iron garden pieces here.

Madame Laurent, a perpetually young woman in a silk scarf fluttering in the piercing wind, didn't even turn around. She stared at the empty road winding toward the horizon, where a cyclist with a satchel was about to emerge from the fog.

"He's late, Thomas," she whispered. "He usually passes the pine tree at nine-fifteen. It's nine-twenty now."

"Time is temperamental here, Madame," he replied, feeling his own fingers go numb from the cold of 1964.

He stepped back into the corridor, pulling the door shut. The click of the lock—and the sound of the surf was severed. Silence again, carpets, and the scent of floor polish.

Thomas leaned against the wall. His job was to be a bridge between worlds, but today, the bridge was swaying. Returning to the front desk, he saw something that hadn't happened in the hotel for years.

A girl sat in an armchair in the center of the lobby. She wore a bright yellow raincoat, with perfectly ordinary, modern water dripping from it onto the carpet. At her feet stood a suitcase covered in airport stickers for places that didn't even exist in most of the hotel's rooms.

She wasn't looking into the past. She was looking straight at Thomas, and her eyes held a strange, unsettling clarity.

"I booked a room with a view of tomorrow," she said, before he could even ask. "I was told you had one."

Thomas took her suitcase. He expected it to be heavy, weighed down by the baggage of memories like those of most guests, but the luggage was surprisingly light, as if it held nothing more than a change of clothes and a couple of blank notebooks.

They stepped into the elevator—a cramped cab of carved oak and tarnished copper. Inside, it smelled of vintage perfume and a coming storm.

"You realize there are no rooms with a view of 'tomorrow' at the Sierra Nevada, don't you?" Thomas asked quietly, pressing the button for the fourth floor. "Everything is set up differently here. People come to this place to lock the door and never look at a calendar again."

Marta adjusted the hood of her yellow raincoat. On her wrist, Thomas noticed a strange device: not a watch, but rather a tiny sandcastle encased in a glass sphere. The sand inside wasn't falling; instead, it rose slowly toward the spires of the towers, defying every law of gravity.

"That's exactly why I'm here," she replied. Her voice was clear, lacking the rasp people developed after years of inhaling the dust of the past. "There's too much 'yesterday' in the world. It's everywhere—in old grudges, in architecture, in history books. I'm looking for a place where the rough draft hasn't been filled in yet."

The elevator shuddered and stalled between floors—a common occurrence in the hotel when an especially heavy memory drifted past the shaft.

"My name is Marta," she said, extending her hand. "And you, Thomas, look like a man who has spent far too long carrying other people's umbrellas. Doesn't it get cold, having someone else's autumn constantly lingering in your hallways?"

Thomas hesitated before taking her hand. Her skin was warm—startlingly warm compared to Madame Laurent's icy fingers.

"You get used to the cold," he replied cautiously. "But you're right; it's rare to meet someone here who isn't looking backward. The manager gave you the key to 404. It's... a bit of a strange room. It's empty. Not a single frozen date. No one has managed to stay there longer than an hour—the lack of an echo scares people."

"The absence of an echo is what freedom is," Marta said with a smile.

The elevator finally jerked and crawled upward. When the doors opened on the fourth floor, Thomas felt a draft pull at his legs. But it wasn't the musty wind of the past. It was the sharp, fresh scent of ozone—the kind that fills the air a minute before the first spring thunder.

They stopped at a white door with no number. Thomas inserted the key—that "icy" shard of metal—and the lock turned with a short, clean ring, like the sound of breaking glass.

"Coming in?" Marta asked, pausing on the threshold. "They say if two people enter an empty room together, something new might take root."

Thomas shook his head. The hotel's rule was absolute: a bellhop does not enter a room without the manager's orders or an extreme emergency. Moreover, he was frightened by the sudden lightness in his chest. It felt as if his own "today" suddenly weighed less than the empty suitcase in his hand.

"My shift ends in ten minutes," he managed to say, stepping back toward the elevator. "If you need anything... just pick up the receiver. In your room, it should be silent. That's a good sign."

Marta gave him a cryptic smile and closed the door. The click of the lock sounded less like a finale and more like a long rest in a piece of music.

For the rest of the evening, Thomas felt out of place. He passed Room 212, which always smelled of a 1950s Christmas goose, and Room 105, where muffled jazz drifted from a phonograph. These sounds used to comfort him with their predictability, but now they felt like a worn-out record about to be played through to the holes.

Descending the staff stairs, Thomas noticed something glinting on the red carpet. He leaned down and picked up a small metal card, like a pass or a business card.

It looked like nothing else in the hotel.

The material was a smooth, nearly transparent polymer that shifted colors as his fingers touched it—from a soft blue to a vibrant orange. The letters on the card weren't printed; they seemed to float beneath the surface, constantly rearranging themselves.

Thomas squinted.

At first, he saw the words: "One-way ticket." A second later, the letters trembled and settled into a new phrase: "The exit is in the same place as the entrance."

As his thumb pressed against the surface, the swirling colors stilled. A date began to bleed through the polymer, sharp and unforgiving: *March 29, 2026*.

His heart skipped a beat. Tomorrow's date.

The Sierra Nevada never dealt in tomorrows. Even the newspapers in the lobby were always yesterday's news, their headlines yellowing before they were even read. This card was physical proof that the future actually existed—and Marta had carried it here in the pocket of her raincoat.

At that moment, a strange sound drifted from behind the door of Room 404, the very room he had just passed. It wasn't crying, or laughter, or music. It was the sound of an alarm—a sharp, modern digital chime, insistently demanding that someone, finally, wake up.

Thomas descended to the first floor, his fingers tightening around the smooth card in his pocket. It pulsed with a faint, barely perceptible warmth.

A thick, drowsy silence hung over the lobby. Marcus, the manager, sat behind the massive mahogany desk, meticulously sorting guest files. He used a strict six-slot system, organizing the destinies of the residents not by room number, but by the "genres" of their pasts and their residency status. In the first slot lay tragedies heavy as lead, which guests reread day after day; in the third, fading romances set on eternal pause; and into the sixth, he funneled those whose memories had been worn thin, beginning to crumble into dust.

Thomas approached the desk and placed the shimmering rectangle directly on top of a stack of bleak dramas.

"Marta dropped this by the elevator," he said quietly.

Marcus looked up irritably, but the moment he saw the letters shifting beneath the polymer and that tomorrow's date, he froze. His hand, which had reached out to sweep the strange object into the lost-and-found drawer, hovered mid-air. In the dim light of the lobby, Thomas saw the deep wrinkles on the old manager's face twitch—it was as if a decades-old ice of composure had developed a hairline fracture, allowing raw, human fear to leak through.

"Take it back," Marcus rasped, recoiling from the desk as if the card might burn him. "And don't you dare bring anything from 404 into my lobby."

"But it's tomorrow's date, Marcus. The Sierra Nevada doesn't have tomorrows. You told her that room was just empty. What are you hiding?"

The manager removed his glasses and spent a long time polishing them with the edge of his vest, avoiding the bellhop's gaze.

"It's not empty because there's nothing there, Thomas. It's empty because nothing has been written yet," Marcus lowered his voice to a whisper, glancing anxiously toward the dark corridors. "Our hotel is a secure archive. We house finished stories, where all the endings are known and safe. Ho 404... It's a blind spot. A breach in the foundation. People who find their pasts unbearable sometimes ask for that room, hoping for a fresh start. Ho they flee within a couple of hours, screaming, because the absolute emptiness and the weight of responsibility for their own future scares them senseless. They find it more comfortable to return to their cozy tragedies."

He pointed a thin, trembling finger at the iridescent ticket.

"That girl didn't flee. And judging by this piece of plastic, she brought something with her that shouldn't exist here—a sequel. If she starts creating a 'tomorrow' in there, Thomas, our walls, woven from 'yesterdays,' won't be able to withstand the paradox. They'll start to crumble."

At that moment, a strange, low rumble rolled through the lobby, and the hands of the massive grandfather clock—which always showed a perfect, frozen "now"—lurched with a metallic grind and skipped forward one minute.

The metallic grind of the ancient clock echoed through the lobby, and for Thomas, that sound was the breaking point. The years spent as a silent observer of other people's frozen dramas suddenly

felt unbearable. He could feel a strange, almost painful thawing beginning inside him—his habitual indifference was cracking, giving way to a sharp, vivid fear and a searing curiosity.

While Marcus stared in horror at the lurching hand of the clock, Thomas wordlessly snatched the Master Key from the hook behind him. It was a heavy piece of brass, darkened by age, capable of opening any door and shattering any time loop within the Sierra Nevada.

The staircase to the fourth floor felt endless. It was as if the hotel itself were resisting him: the steps felt like quicksand under his boots, and from beneath the doors on the third floor came alternating drafts of the icy cold of others' losses and the cloying warmth of their illusions. But the higher Thomas climbed, the clearer the air became. The scent of old dust was replaced by a freshness like the smell of ozone after a violent thunderstorm.

He stopped before the white door of Room 404. The card in his pocket pulsed in sync with his heart. Thomas slid the Master Key into the keyhole. The lock didn't click—it exhaled, like a person finally relieved of a heavy burden.

Thomas pushed the door open and froze on the threshold.

He had expected to see an empty void, gray concrete, or a blinding white mist. But the room... it was building itself right before his eyes.

There was no patterned wallpaper. The walls resembled clean sheets of heavy paper, across which thin, gold-glowing lines raced here and there, forming the contours of windows that didn't yet exist and landscapes that were yet to be lived. The floor beneath his feet was solid, but every step echoed not with a dull thud, but with a soft resonance, as if Thomas were treading on a taut violin string.

Marta sat in the center of this pulsating space. Her yellow raincoat was draped over the back of a translucent chair. She held the notebook from her suitcase, writing rapidly with a pen that left a faint, silvery trail. With every stroke, more details materialized on the walls.

She looked up, and there was no surprise in her gaze.

"I knew you'd come," she said calmly, setting the pen aside. "People who live in other people's pasts eventually start to suffocate. Did you bring my ticket?"

Thomas pulled out the card but didn't hand it over. He gripped the plastic tightly.

"Who are you?" His voice came out sharper than he expected. "Marcus says you'll destroy the hotel. If you start writing 'tomorrow' here, a foundation built on hundreds of 'yesterdays' won't hold. All those people—Madame Laurent, Mr. Green... they'll lose their sanctuary. Do you want to destroy the only peace they have?"

Marta stood up. The space around her shifted subtly—the golden lines on the walls settled into the silhouette of a wide-open window, through which a real, living wind surged in.

"Peace?" She gave a bitter half-smile. "Thomas, you call a voluntary coma 'peace.' They aren't living. They're just playing the same record over and over until the scratch becomes deeper than the music itself. I'm not here to destroy their sanctuary. I'm here to make time in this building move again."

She stepped toward him, reaching for the ticket.

"This hotel is a massive trap for those who fear the pain of the future. But without a tomorrow, there is no meaning in a single lived tragedy. Give me the ticket, Thomas. Or... use it yourself. There's only a date on it. The passenger's name hasn't been written yet."

Thomas lowered his gaze to the iridescent rectangle in his hand. There, on the shifting polymer surface, just beneath the date "*March 29, 2026*," a blank field was indeed faintly pulsing.

Thomas slowly withdrew his hand. His fingers curled around the cool plastic, gripping it so tightly his knuckles turned white. There was no malice in the gesture—only a sudden, desperate realization that he no longer wanted to be merely a witness. He was tired of being a shadow, carrying other people's umbrellas through other people's rain.

"I'm sorry, Marta," his voice was barely a whisper, yet firmer than it had ever been. "But I've breathed dust for far too long. I want to know what it feels like to wake up and have no idea what the evening will bring."

He looked at the blank line beneath the date *March 28, 2026*. Today would end in just a few hours, and beyond the hotel threshold lay the unknown he had spent years dreaming of.

Marta froze. The golden lines on the walls behind her shuddered, twisting into sharp, jagged angles. She didn't try to snatch the ticket, but a flicker of something like disappointment crossed her eyes—or perhaps, it was an understanding of the price he was about to pay.

"Are you going to write your name, Thomas?" she asked softly. "Do you realize that the moment you do, you'll become a foreign body to this hotel? It won't just let you go. 'Yesterday' never forgives those who choose 'tomorrow'."

Thomas didn't answer. He moved toward the table where Marta's silver pen lay. The second his fingers touched it, a jolt of electricity surged up his arm. Without a moment's hesitation, he pressed the nib to the shimmering polymer of the card.

The letters formed on the plastic effortlessly, as if they had belonged there all along.

T-H-O-M-A-S.

The instant the final letter was formed, the Sierra Nevada shuddered. It wasn't an earthquake—it was the scream of time itself. The walls of Room 404 began to pale rapidly, and the golden lines flared with a blinding light, searing the very outlines of reality.

A violent roar erupted from the hallway.

In Room 312, Madame Laurent screamed: the mailman on her terrace had finally dismounted his bicycle and begun to speak. In 212, the scent of Christmas goose was choked out by the stench of burning—time had been ripped off its hinges, and decades were slamming into one another. Downstairs in the lobby, the hands of the grandfather clock began to spin so fast they blurred into a silver haze.

"Run, Thomas!" Marta cried, her voice sounding as if it were coming from deep underwater. "Run for the exit before your 'today' crumbles into ash with this building!"

Thomas bolted for the door. The hallway was no longer quiet or quaint. The carpets were curling back, exposing a raw void beneath, and doors were slamming open, spilling out the shadows of guests who were suddenly aging decades in a matter of seconds. Mr. Green stumbled out into the hall, shielding his eyes from a light he hadn't seen in twelve years.

Thomas hurtled toward the stairs, clutching his "ticket to tomorrow" in his fist. He could feel entire worlds collapsing behind him—tons of unlived lives trying to drag him back into the vortex of the past.

At the final landing, he saw Marcus. The manager stood in the middle of the crumbling lobby, his face as gray as cinders.

"You've made a mistake, boy!" he rasped, reaching a hand out toward Thomas. "Tomorrow doesn't exist! There is only what we remember!"

But Thomas could already see the light behind the hotel's front doors—the real, biting light of a March morning.

Thomas lunged forward, tearing himself from Marcus's grip. The manager's fingers only brushed the brass buttons of the livery; one popped off with a faint metallic ring and instantly crumbled into dust the second it hit the floor.

"This isn't an exit, Thomas!" the old man screamed after him. "This is the end!"

But Thomas was no longer listening. He saw the massive oak doors ahead, behind which the city should have been—a noisy, gritty, real city with its March slush. He pressed the ticket to his chest, squeezed his eyes shut, and threw his entire weight against the doors.

The doors swung open.

But instead of the roar of traffic and the bite of the wind, he was struck by an absolute, ringing silence. Thomas took a few steps by sheer momentum and froze.

He wasn't standing on a sidewalk. Beneath his feet was neither asphalt nor earth. He was on a boundless, mirror-smooth surface that stretched in every direction to the very horizon. The sky above was neither gray nor blue—it looked like a blank canvas, faintly backlit by a pearlescent glow.

Thomas looked back. The Sierra Nevada was gone. In its place remained only a solitary door frame hanging in the void, through which the wreckage of staircases and swirling memories were still visible. But a moment later, even that dissolved, leaving him alone with this strange world.

He looked at the ticket in his hand. The plastic was no longer shimmering orange; it had turned as clear as pure water. It was then that Thomas noticed something strange: the time on his wristwatch, which he wore for "syncing," had stopped. Yet he didn't feel frozen like the guests at the hotel. On the contrary, he felt a power within him unlike anything he had ever known.

He took a cautious step. Where his sole touched the mirrored expanse, ripples spread across the surface, and from them, contours began to sprout. But these weren't the stagnant shadows of the past.

Thomas thought of warmth—and the air around him instantly grew mild, filling with the scent of blooming almonds. He imagined the sound of the surf—and somewhere in the distance, beyond an invisible boundary, the water began to roar.

This wasn't "yesterday." And it wasn't a "tomorrow" that arrived on its own. This was a space where time obeyed his will. The ticket wasn't a pass into a world; it was the key to creating one.

"You're a quick learner," a voice said behind him.

Thomas turned. Marta stood a few paces away, her yellow raincoat a solitary splash of color in the boundless white. She no longer held her notebook—she seemed to be a part of this new space herself.

"Welcome to Day One, Thomas," she smiled. "The hotel kept what had already happened. But here... here we decide what is meant to be."

She reached out her hand to him.

"See the horizon? It's empty. What will your first 'tomorrow' be?"

Thomas looked at the blank canvas of the sky. For the first time in his life, he didn't feel the weight of other people's stories on his shoulders. He took a deep breath, feeling his lungs fill with air that he had created himself.

Chapter 2: The First Spark and the Gray Stains

The world of "Day One" resembled a blank sheet of expensive watercolor paper—it was ready to receive any color, but it demanded absolute honesty. Thomas quickly realized that he couldn't simply "order" an object into existence. He had to summon the feeling that the object embodied.

He closed his eyes and recalled the sensation of a home's comfort—something he had never truly known in the dusty corridors of the hotel. He imagined the warmth of fired clay, the scent of aged wood, and the quiet crackle of a fire. When he opened his eyes, a small cottage with a tiled roof stood upon the mirrored expanse, looking very much like the ones he had seen on old postcards of Sintra.

"Not bad for a start," Marta remarked. She was sitting on the doorstep, her legs tucked under her. "But remember: everything we create here is nourished by our emotions. If you build something out of fear, it will bite."

Thomas sat down beside her. He felt something soft and warm brush against his leg. He flinched, but looking down, he saw a graceful, jet-black cat with piercing eyes as blue as sapphires. She wasn't a ghost; she was vibrant and real, her flanks rising and falling in steady breaths, a low, vibrating purr resonating in her throat.

"I didn't consciously create her," Thomas whispered, reaching out to touch her cool ears. "She just... appeared."

"Your subconscious works faster than your thoughts," Marta replied. "Cats have always been guides between worlds. Apparently, you needed someone who knows how to see in the dark."

But just as Thomas began to relax, the sky above them clouded over with a murky film. A gray stain appeared on the perfect, pearlescent horizon. It didn't look like a cloud—it was more like an inkblot of indelible ink, slowly bleeding across the clean canvas.

From within this blot, sounds began to emerge that made Thomas's chest feel heavy: the muffled sobs of Madame Laurent and the sharp, rattling bell of that same mailman's bicycle.

"They're leaking through," Marta said, standing up abruptly, her face pale. "The hotel is destroyed, but the stories it housed haven't vanished. They remain 'unfinished.' They have no ending, Thomas. And in this space, anything without an end becomes a parasite."

The gray stain took on a shape. It wasn't Madame Laurent herself, but her Shadow—a grotesque, distorted manifestation of her eternal waiting. The Shadow was immense, woven from fragments of letters and the bitter scent of wormwood. It moved slowly toward their new home, leaving a trail of gray ash that corroded the mirrored surface of the floor.

"She's looking for her 'yesterday'," Thomas said, feeling the cat beside him arch her back and hiss threateningly. "But there is no yesterday here. If she touches our home, it will turn into another cell for her grief."

The Shadow spoke—hundreds of voices at once, rustling like dry leaves:

"He... didn't... come... Where... is... my... letter?..."

Thomas understood: he couldn't simply drive her away. A Shadow was a psychological knot that needed to be untied, not severed.

He took a step toward the gray mass. His heart was pounding, but his mind remained cold and clear. He felt that the Shadow wasn't an enemy, but a tangled thought stripped of its footing.

The black cat he had just created didn't run. She sat directly in front of the encroaching mist, wrapping her tail around her paws. Her sapphire-blue eyes glowed in the gloom like two signal fires.

"Samantha knows you're here," Thomas said quietly, not even understanding how the gray mass was supposed to know he was talking about the cat. "And I know, too."

The Shadow froze. The rustle of a hundred voices turned into a barely audible sigh. From the gray inkblot, the contours of a woman's face began to emerge—thin lips frozen in eternal waiting, and eyes where October 1964 had remained trapped.

"You are no longer in Room 312, Madame Laurent," Thomas spoke calmly, straining to keep his voice from trembling. "That hallway is gone. And that letter you've been waiting for is gone, too. It's buried in the ruins of the hotel, under the wreckage of the time we finally tore off its hinges."

"But... who am I... without my waiting?" the Shadow's voice sounded like the creak of a dry garden gate. *"I built that home out of my pain for so many years. If I let go of the letter, I will simply vanish."*

"You won't vanish," Thomas said, extending his hand, palm open. "You will simply stop being a hostage to a finale that never arrived. In the Sierra Nevada, you wore the mask of the eternal victim so you wouldn't have to feel the cold of the present. But here, there is no need to pretend."

He heard the black cat give a short, sharp meow, the sound slicing through the silence like a blade.

"Look around," Thomas continued. "This world is empty, and it needs color. Your grief was gray because it was allowed to stagnate. But grief can become the deep, profound blue of the ocean. Your love, which turned into bitter wormwood, can become the scent of sage in a garden. We don't need ghosts of the past here, but we do need people who know how to truly feel."

The Shadow trembled. Her edges began to slowly thaw. The gray ash trailing behind her suddenly ignited into a soft, glowing indigo. Madame Laurent—no longer a monstrous inkblot, but a fragile, translucent figure—took a step toward Thomas.

"Who will I be here?" she asked, and for the first time, her voice sounded clear, stripped of the echo of hundreds of others.

"Whoever you want to be," Thomas replied. "You can become the silence before dawn. Or the first drop of rain. You no longer have to wait for the mailman. You can write a letter yourself... to anyone. Even to yourself."

Madame Laurent looked at her hands. They were no longer woven from scraps of paper. They were translucent, yet alive. She nodded slowly, and her figure began to dissolve, turning into a thick, saturated blue mist that didn't frighten, but instead offered a sense of profound peace. This mist enveloped Thomas's cottage, and patterns resembling distant sea waves materialized on its walls.

The gray stain on the horizon vanished. The sky of "Day One" gained depth and color.

Thomas woke because the silence in his new home had shifted. It was no longer the living, breathing silence of Marta's presence. Now, it was the silence of absolute solitude—pure and cold as mountain air.

Madame Laurent's blue mist still softly enveloped the walls, shimmering in deep shades of indigo, but the warmth of human company had vanished. The spot on the threshold where Marta had sat was empty.

On the oak floor, exactly where she had left her yellow raincoat, lay only the silver pen. It pulsed faintly, as if a tiny heartbeat throbbed within. Nearby, glowing upon the surface of the floor, were letters traced in that same spectral handwriting:

"You are the Architect now. Do not let this world stagnate. Remember: time is not something that happens to us; it is something we create. Look for me in 'Tomorrow,' if you can finish writing it."

Thomas picked up the pen. It was weightless, yet the moment his fingers brushed the metal, thousands of images flared in his mind: unwritten cities, meetings that had never occurred, the scents of herbs that had yet to sprout. He realized that Marta hadn't just left—she had passed him the burden of choice. To be the Architect meant more than just building walls; it meant being responsible for every single heartbeat of this new world.

The cat approached him and gave his palm a nudge with her head. Her fur, too, now shimmered with a blue tint in the light of Madame Laurent's walls. She looked toward the door, beyond which stretched the infinite, mirrored expanse of "Day One."

"She left me alone," Thomas whispered. "I've only just stopped being a servant, and she's made me the god of this void."

Samantha gave a low meow and headed for the exit. On the mirrored surface of the floor, where she stepped, ripples didn't just appear—paw prints began to form, and they didn't vanish. She was forging a trail.

Thomas followed her out. The world around him began to shift under the weight of his uncertainty. The sky turned a steel gray, and jagged, lifeless cliffs began to rise on the horizon—a reflection of his fear of responsibility.

"Do not let this world stagnate," he repeated Marta's words.

He gripped the pen and, obeying a sudden impulse, traced a line through the air. The silver trail didn't fade. It hung in space, transforming into a thin, glowing thread. Thomas began to draw—not a house, not a garden, and not mountains. He began to draw a road.

A road that didn't lead back to the ruins of the hotel, yet wasn't a straight line either. It was a winding path, vanishing into the fog where "Tomorrow" had yet to be imagined.

At that moment, somewhere far off, beyond his sight, the first truly living sound of this world rang out—not an echo of the past, but the cry of a newborn baby. Or perhaps, it was the sound of a window opening in a house that did not yet exist.

The silver thread spooling from Thomas's pen settled onto the mirrored surface of "Day One" with a faint chime, like the vibration of a guitar string. The road wasn't material in the traditional sense—it shimmered and shifted, as if woven from moonlight and frozen thoughts.

Thomas walked forward, and with every step, the world gained density. Samantha ran ahead, her tail twitching, her ears finely tuned to sounds Thomas couldn't yet distinguish. She was his living compass in this boundless whiteness.

Suddenly, the road took a sharp turn, and beyond it, Thomas saw something he never expected to encounter in his empty world.

Right in the middle of the silver path stood an ordinary bus stop. It looked hauntingly real: glass walls covered in cracks and a yellowed schedule that had long since gone out of style. A woman sat on the bench. She wore an old coat, soaked by a rain that didn't exist here, and she gripped a worn leather bag tightly in her hands. She smelled of the real world: exhaust fumes, wet asphalt, and cheap instant coffee.

She didn't look like the guests of the Sierra Nevada. Her eyes held no frozen longing for the past. Instead, they held the bewilderment of someone who had simply gotten off at the wrong station.

"Excuse me," she said softly upon seeing Thomas. Her voice sounded surprisingly material in this ringing silence. "I think I missed my turn. My bus was supposed to arrive at 6:15 PM, but the clocks suddenly started running backward, and the driver just vanished along with the road."

Thomas stopped. He could feel the silver pen in his pocket growing warm, pulsing in time with his own confusion.

"There are no buses here," he replied, stepping closer. "And no schedules. How did you get here?"

The woman looked at her hands. They were covered in fine wrinkles and ink stains—she was clearly someone who wrote a great deal or worked with documents.

"I'm just so tired," she sighed. "I was walking home, thinking that tomorrow would be just like yesterday. For ten years, I've walked the exact same route, and at some point... I just wanted the road to end. And it did. Right beneath my feet."

Thomas understood. This wasn't a shadow of the past that needed to be "let go." This was a person from the Present whose reality had worn so thin that she had fallen through the cracks of time, straight into his nascent world.

Samantha approached the woman and, to Thomas's surprise, jumped onto her lap and began to purr loudly. The woman flinched, but her fingers automatically buried themselves in the black fur.

"So soft..." she whispered. "I had one just like her once. Her name was Susan. Or Charlotte... I can't remember anymore. In my world, everything is so fast that names get erased from memory."

"You are one of the Lost," Thomas said, realizing the scale of his new task. "You aren't searching for 'yesterday' like those in the hotel. You're looking for a place where your 'today' finally makes sense."

At that moment, behind the woman—where the wall of the bus stop should have been—space began to warp. From the gray fog, the outlines of other people emerged. They stood motionless, like mannequins, waiting for something. One held a broken umbrella; another, a stack of newspapers that hadn't been printed yet.

"They are coming toward the light of your road, Thomas," the Cat's quiet voice echoed in his head (or perhaps he simply imagined it). "The world out there, beyond the limit, is full of people who have lost their way in their own 'now.' And now, they are all your guests."

Thomas stood before the crowd of people who looked at him with hope, as if he were their last guide. He was no longer just the Architect; he was the Master of the Haven.

The crowd of the Lost, frozen in the gray shimmer by the bus stop, suddenly stirred and parted. A man stepped slowly from the fog, and his presence instantly chilled the air around the silver trail.

He wore a heavy coat of coarse wool that seemed sewn from shadows, topped by a peaked cap pulled low over his eyes. In his hands, he gripped a massive leather satchel and an old, dully glinting ticket punch. His movements were mechanical, calculated, and stripped of all human warmth.

"Fare-free passage is forbidden," he grated. His voice sounded like metal scraping against stone. "Each 'here' costs exactly as much as the weight of 'there'."

He stopped directly in front of Thomas, ignoring the cat, who gave a low, guttural growl, crouching low to the ground. The Conductor raised a heavy gaze to the silver pen in Thomas's hands.

"You are expanding the space without a license, Architect," he spoke coldly. "Every step you take creates a vacuum elsewhere. For the right to build here—and for the safety of these souls—a fee is due."

"I don't owe anyone anything," Thomas said, tightening his grip on the pen. "This world is pure. There are no hotel rules here, and there are none of your laws."

"You're mistaken," the Conductor took a step forward, and beneath his heel, the mirrored surface of "Day One" cracked into a web of fine fractures. "Balance is inevitable. If you create 'Tomorrow,' you steal it from those who never reached 'Today.' Your guests are taking up space in eternity. Pay for their stay."

He extended a skeletal hand clad in a black glove.

"Your pen. Hand it to me. In exchange, I guarantee these people won't crumble into dust within the hour. Without my seal on their 'time,' they are merely noise in the ether. As soon as you finish writing the last inch of the road, they will vanish along with the fog."

The woman on the bench clutched her bag in fear. A small book in a worn binding slipped out—Thomas caught a glimpse of the name "Brontë" on the cover. She looked at him with silent pleading.

"Don't give it to him," Samantha's voice rang in Thomas's head, sharp and clear. "He isn't the master of time. He is its jailer. If you give him the pen, this world will become a new hotel, only with transparent walls."

The Conductor clicked his ticket punch. The sound was as sharp as a gunshot.

"Choose, Thomas. Creative freedom for one—or existence for the many. You like to analyze, don't you? The math is simple: one silver wand against the hundreds of lives you lured here with your 'road'."

Thomas didn't pull his hand away, nor did he clench his fists. Instead, he did what he did best—he froze and began to analyze. His gaze, accustomed to spotting the smallest details in the behavior of the hotel guests, now scanned the very essence of the Conductor.

"You speak of balance," Thomas said, his voice becoming remarkably dry and precise, like the click of a metronome. "You claim that each 'here' costs exactly what 'there' weighs. But allow me to point out a fundamental error in your calculations."

The Conductor froze, his hand with the ticket punch trembling for a split second.

"This world is called 'Day One,'" Thomas continued, stepping to the side and tracing a silver circle directly onto the mirrored surface beneath the Conductor's feet. "There is no accumulated weight from 'there' here. We are at the point of absolute zero. You are attempting to collect a tax on a profit that hasn't been earned yet, charging rent for a space I am creating in real-time."

Thomas knelt and quickly sketched a complex geometric figure inside the circle—a Möbius strip intertwined with an infinity symbol.

"If you are part of a system of weights and measures, then you are subject to logic. In the equation of 'Day One,' you are a variable with no value, because for you, the past does not yet exist here. You demand payment for the existence of these people, but they do not yet 'exist' in the full sense—they are in the process of becoming."

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