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Igor Kochetkov

In the power of ice



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Kochetkov I. N.

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A millennium has divided their hearts, but not their love. Two hearts, awakened in different eras, try to piece together the fragments of time. This is a story of love that has survived the ages, of the agonizing choice between past and present, and of how far one can go to regain the lost half of one's soul, even at the cost of eternity. This is an English-language adaptation of the original Russian work "Во власти льда", written and translated by the author.

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Chapter 1. The Final Peak

The wind did not howl — it sang. A piercing, icy hymn that vibrated in the bones and expelled the very thought of warmth. It seemed to Eva that it wasn't the air cutting her cheeks, but time itself, holding its breath.

— Another hundred meters, Eva! — Artyom's voice reached her through the roar of the elements, wrapped in the woolen fabric of his balaclava. — Do you see the ridge?

She nodded, not wasting strength on words. She saw it. The summit of the "Sleeping Giant" was like a crooked tooth, biting into the pale sky of the pre-dawn hour. Their summit. The last in a string of eight-thousanders they had conquered together over these seven years.

Seven years. The glaciers of Greenland, the cliffs of Patagonia, the thin air of the Himalayas. They were a team. He — strength and calculation, she — intuition and science. Her glaciological sensors and his routes. Their marriage was cemented not so much by rings as by a shared rope and shared breath on the edge of the world.

— The temperature is dropping, — she shouted, looking at the readings of her portable weather station. — Minus forty-two. The wind is picking up.

— The front is moving faster than forecasted, — Artyom replied, his eyes above the balaclava narrowing as he assessed the ridge. — We have an hour, no more. Then we need to descend.

They moved roped together, synchronously, like a single creature with four arms and legs. The ice under their crampons creaked in a peculiar, ominous way — not the dry crunch of solid crust, but a wet, yielding hiss. *Refrozen snow over a crevasse*, Eva's scientific mind noted, but instinct screamed louder.

Artyom was in front. His figure in an orange storm jacket, contrasting with the endless whiteness, seemed like the only reference point in the universe.

— Here! — he turned around, and even through his goggles, Eva saw the gleam in his eyes. Elation. That pure, wild elation for which they had come here, to the edge of life.

He reached out his hand. The final push. Eva drove in her ice axe, felt the steel find solid purchase in the compacted ancient ice, and pulled herself up.

And then the world fell apart.

The sound was quiet, as if something enormous had sighed beneath the earth. The ice under Artyom's feet ceased to be solid. It simply dropped away, revealing the black, bottomless maw of a bergschrund — a hidden crevasse. He didn't cry out. He just opened his eyes wide, filled not with terror, but with a swift, searing understanding. His hand, which had just been her support, grasped at nothing.

"The rope!" flashed through Eva's mind. She instinctively slammed into the slope, the slight tremor in her body replaced by a steely wave of adrenaline. The rope at her hip went taut, biting into her flesh even through her down jacket, turning into a deadly string. She took the impact, her body lurching forward, toward the edge of the abyss. The ice axe was ripped from her hands.

— Hold on! — she screamed, though she knew it was pointless. The wind carried her words into oblivion.

She saw him bouncing off the walls of blue ice below, saw his helmet ricochet and tumble into the darkness. But the rope held. *Safety system. Carabiner. Descender.* She tried to fix the descender, but her fingers in double gloves wouldn't obey, became wooden, alien.

— Artyom! — her voice broke into a whisper, then a rasp. — I'll pull you up! Do you hear me?

A sound came from the crevasse. Not a cry. A tapping. Metal on ice. Once. Twice. Then silence. Then another blow, weaker. He was alive. He was fighting.

Eva lunged toward the edge, forgetting everything. The ice under her knees cracked a warning. She peered down. In the murky blue, at a depth of about ten meters, he hung from the rope, twisted

unnaturally. His face was turned toward her. The buff had slipped. She saw his mouth trying to say something. And his eyes. Eyes that no longer saw the summit. They saw only her.

Their gazes met through the blizzard and the abyss. In that gaze was their entire journey. The first meeting in the base camp on Elbrus. The wedding in a tent during a snowstorm in the Pamirs. Warm nights in the sleeping bag when the wind howled outside, but inside was their own, invincible sun.

He moved his lips. Without a sound. But she read it.

Leave.

Then his eyes closed. His body went limp. The rope at her hip slackened for a fraction of a second before tightening again under dead weight.

— No, — Eva moaned. — No, no, no.

The storm grew stronger, gathering the power promised by the sudden front. Snow lashed her face with prickly needles. The temperature was dropping by the minute. Staying here meant dying. Descending alone with the weight on the rope was an almost impossible task. To unclip him... to unclip him and leave...

She looked at her hand, clenched into a fist. At the simple platinum band of her wedding ring, frozen to her skin. “The strength isn’t in the rings, but in the knot,” he used to joke, tying their double safety line.

Eva detached the descender from her system. With trembling, almost numb fingers, she began to thread the rope, creating a pulley system — a mechanism for hauling a load. Her mind, shutting off emotions, worked with cold, desperate efficiency. *Three pulleys, carabiner, four times the force... Theoretically, I could...*

She pulled. The muscles in her arms and back burned with fire. The rope shuddered, moved a centimeter. Then another. Ice fragments rained down from the crevasse. She pulled, gritting her teeth, snarling with effort, merging with the howl of the storm into a single animal cry of struggle.

And then — a dull, monstrous click. Not from above, but from below. From where he hung. The rope jerked and... went slack. Became empty and terrifyingly light.

Eva froze, not understanding. Then slowly, with icy horror in her veins, she began to haul it in. Meter by meter. The empty, slippery rope emerged from the blackness. And here was the end. A clean, neat cut. As if sliced by a knife or... rubbed through by a sharp ice protrusion inside the crevasse. Death that came not from the fall, but from the relentless physics of steel grinding against stone.

She knelt at the edge of the abyss, holding the severed rope in her hands. The storm consumed her entirely. The cold, which had once been an enemy, was now the only thing she could feel. It crept under her clothes, clung to her skin, whispered soothingly of peace. Of the end of the struggle.

“Leave,” his eyes had said.

She couldn’t leave. Not without him.

Eva crawled back from the edge, found her small platform just below the ridge, sheltered by a rock outcrop. With automatic movements, she set up the emergency cocoon tent, barely managing the guy lines. She crawled inside. Mechanically turned on the heater, the last pair of chemical catalytic cartridges. Pitiful warmth, a drop in an ocean of cold.

Zippering up, she saw on her palm, next to the ring, a tiny star — a crystal of frost, beautiful and deadly. Eva looked at it, and gradually the trembling in her body subsided. She felt... warm. Deceptively, treacherously warm. She knew this was the end. Hypothermia. The final stage.

She took a small field notebook in a waterproof cover from her jacket’s inner pocket. The pen wouldn’t write; the ink had frozen. So she pressed the notebook to her chest and closed her eyes.

Inside, through the advancing oblivion, an image emerged. Not a mountain. Not ice. Their room in the alpine camp after their first climb together. He was sleeping, his arm flung out. Morning

sunlight lay on his eyelashes. And silence. Not the dead silence of a glacier, but a living one, filled with the beating of two hearts.

Eva smiled. The last thing she felt before the darkness engulfed her was not cold.

But his hand on her waist.

Outside, the storm buried the cocoon tent, covering it with a white shroud. The “Sleeping Giant” had taken its tribute. For a thousand years.

Chapter 2. Silence for a Thousand Years

Silence did not come immediately.

First, there was the wind. It howled for three more days, venting all its fury on the mountain slopes, burying the cocoon tent under a meter of snow, compacting it to the consistency of ice. Then the wind tired and left. The grave-like silence of the high mountains descended, broken only by rare sounds: the crack of the glacier moving in its unhurried, eternal rhythm, and the whistle of air in rocky crevices.

Then came the sun. The first rays of spring cautiously touched the snow shroud. They carried crumbs of warmth, but too little to melt the crust. The sun only melted the top layer, turning it into an icy shell — the first seal. At night, the shell would freeze, becoming stronger. Layer upon layer, year after year.

The ice slowly but steadily absorbed the orange cocoon. It took it into itself, like amber taking an ancient insect. It seeped through the micropores of the fabric, displaced the air, enveloped every synthetic fiber, every metal fastener. It penetrated inside, touched the down jacket, the thermal underwear, and finally — the skin.

The process of cryopreservation, which future scientists would perfect in laboratories with liquid nitrogen and complex solutions, happened here naturally, almost mystically. Instant cooling in the thin, moistureless air. Ice that formed not inside the cells, but around them, without rupturing membranes. Her body did not die in the full sense of the word. It *stopped*. The heart did not beat, blood did not flow, but the cellular structures, thanks to the speed of freezing and the dry air, did not undergo irreversible destruction. She became part of the mountain. Its most fragile and most enduring relic.

The world below lived. It seethed, fought, loved, forgot. Decades passed. The resource wars that flared after the climate collapse bypassed this remote ridge. Maps changed, but the mountains remained.

A hundred years passed. The glacier in which Eva rested shifted forty meters down the slope. The movement was slow, but it jostled her capsule, sometimes lifting it, sometimes lowering it, like a splinter in the current of an invisible river. Once, a powerful glacial surge pushed to the surface ice as blue as glass, and with it — some equipment from their backpacks: a dented titanium pot, a fragment of an ancient carbon-fiber pole. No one saw it.

Three hundred years passed. The climate shifted again. A new, harsh planetary winter arrived. The glaciers advanced, closing over the place where the crevasse had once been, swallowing it and all traces of the tragedy. Now above Eva there were not three, but thirty meters of blue, impenetrable ice. The pressure compressed her cocoon but did not crush it. It became more compact, stronger, a true time capsule.

Five hundred years passed. The Great Thaw began. Not a natural one, but man-made. Humanity, squeezed to the limit by catastrophes, found the strength and technology to begin a slow, cautious recovery. New Dome Cities appeared. A new era began — the Era of Gathering.

Expeditions rushed to abandoned regions, to the sites of ancient disasters, to mountain ranges. They searched not for resources, but for knowledge. Artifacts from the pre-collapse era. Genetic materials of lost species. Evidence.

Nine hundred and ninety-eight years passed.

Geological survey scanners, mapping the glacier for Project “Chronos” — the reconstruction of climate history — detected an anomaly. At a depth of twenty-seven meters. Clear, geometric shapes, uncharacteristic of nature. And a strange composition of the surrounding ice — with microbubbles of inert gases, as if something had slowly decomposed for a long time in a sealed capsule before the cold finally stopped the process.

Nine hundred and ninety-nine years passed.

A tracked drilling rig, resembling a giant spiny beetle, bit into the ice. The work went on for weeks. Cores were extracted, layers studied like the pages of a book. And then, finally, the drill scraped against something hard, but not stone. Metal or plastic.

Work stopped. A team of cryo-archaeologists was called to the site.

And on the thousandth year, eleven months, and six days after her last breath, the light of powerful lamps once again fell on the orange fabric. It was dark, almost brown, brittle, but recognizable. Carefully, centimeter by centimeter, the ice around it was dissolved using directed ultrasound pulses.

When the inner chamber of the tent was opened, the air that had stood for a millennium escaped with a barely audible hiss. It had no smell of decay. It smelled of cold and time — absolute, sterile emptiness.

And then they saw her.

She lay curled up, in the fetal position, one hand under her cheek, the other clenched into a fist at her chest. Her face was covered with frost, like a delicate porcelain glaze. Her eyelashes were white, as if dusted with powder. From under the hood pulled down over her forehead, a strand of hair had escaped, turned into an icy stalactite.

She did not look dead. She looked... *delayed*. Asleep from yesterday evening. The most incredible thing — the skin visible on her face and wrist was not blackened or decomposed. It was waxy, pale, almost translucent, but intact.

The head of the expedition, cryologist Igor Menshikov, an experienced scientist who had seen much, removed his glasses and wiped them, not believing his eyes.

— Good God... — whispered one of the technicians behind him. — She’s intact.

— Not intact, — Menshikov corrected, but his voice wavered. — She... has been preserved. Everyone stay where you are. No touching. Initiate Protocol “Phoenix.”

It was a protocol for the incredible. For a miracle.

Carefully, using manipulators, the body frozen into the ice was extracted and transferred to a mobile cryo-complex. Scanners hummed, taking thousands of readings. Core temperature: -32°C. Ice crystals in soft tissues were minimal; major vessels were clear. Brain activity: zero, but the EEG showed not a straight line of death, but a deep, anomalous flat curve that no one had ever seen before.

— It’s impossible, — said the team’s physician, Lika Vorontsova, staring at the monitors. — Such a state... this isn’t a twentieth-century cryocapsule. This is... natural cryptobiosis. There’s a chance.

— What chance? — asked Menshikov.

— One in a billion. Less.

He looked at the woman’s face behind the glass of the slow-warming chamber. At her fist pressed to her chest. What was she holding so tightly, even in death’s embrace?

— Then we are obliged to win that billion, — he said quietly. — For her. And for us. Let’s begin.

And the silence that had lasted a thousand years was broken by the steady, insistent hum of medical devices, counting down the beginning of an impossible return.

Chapter 3. Awakening in an Alien World

Pain came first.

Not sharp, but a dragging, dull ache, spread throughout her entire body, as if she had been pulled out of dense, soundless jelly and each cell was being slowly peeled away from its neighbor.

Then cold. But it was a strange cold — not the piercing mountain frost, but a sterile, technical one. It radiated from everywhere: from the surface she lay on, from the air, from the light beating against her closed eyelids.

Sound came next. A steady, mechanical tapping. A hum. A soft click. Familiar and unfamiliar at once. *Machines*, flashed somewhere on the edge of consciousness.

Smell. There was none. Absolutely none. Neither the scent of snow, nor pine, nor her own sweat and fear. Only emptiness, faintly tinged with ozone and something chemically pure.

Eva tried to move her fingers. They wouldn't obey. Not because of the cold, but because of a monstrous, stone-like heaviness that locked every muscle. She concentrated on her eyelids. It felt like trying to lift leaden curtains. Light seeped through her lashes, blinding and featureless.

And finally, a voice. A woman's. Calm, almost colorless.

— Vital signs are stabilizing. Neural activity is increasing. Electromyography detects micro-contractions. She is returning.

Who? Who is returning?

Eva forced her eyes open.

The world was a blurred patch of dazzling whiteness. Then outlines began to emerge. A ceiling. Smooth, matte, radiating an even light by itself. No lamps, no beams. Just a luminous plane. She slowly, with a soft creak in her neck, turned her head.

A room. Small. Walls of the same matte white material. No windows. Nearby — complex structures of gleaming metal and matte plastic, with flickering screens displaying incomprehensible graphs and numbers. Thin tubes and wires ran from them into her chest, her arms, her head.

Panic, sharp and blind, surged from within. She tried to sit up, but her body didn't respond, only twitching under the sheet.

— Easy, — the same female voice, now closer. A face came into view. A woman in a loose white coat. She had short ash-blond hair and attentive, analytical eyes without a trace of surprise or fear. — You are safe. Don't try to move. Your body needs time.

— Where... — Eva's voice came out as a rasp, tearing from a parched throat. It sounded alien. — Artyom...

The woman-doctor (Eva instinctively identified her as a doctor) tilted her head slightly.

— I am Lika Vorontsova, your rehabilitation physician. You are in the Phoenix Medical Recovery Center. You have received emergency cryomedical assistance.

The words crashed down like stones, failing to form a coherent picture. Cryomedical... "Phoenix"... This was no alpine camp. No hospital in the valley.

— The mountain... — Eva exhaled. — The Giant... He... fell...

Lika Vorontsova exchanged a glance with someone invisible. Eva noticed a faint movement in the corner of the room — a man in a similar white coat stood there, watching the screens.

— Eva Gorenko, — the doctor said, stressing the name, and Eva felt an icy shiver run down her spine. — It will take you time to understand. You were found in a glacier on the slope of a mountain now known as the Ridge of Memory. You were in a state of profound hypothermia. Extreme.

— How long? — Eva whispered, already afraid of the answer. — How long was I unconscious? Days? Weeks?

The doctor paused. Her face remained professional, but something flickered in her eyes — whether regret or awe before the fact.

— Not days, — she said quietly. — You were buried in the ice for one thousand twenty-three years.

The silence in the room became thick, physically oppressive. The hum of the machines turned into a deafening roar. The numbers on the screens danced, warning of a spike in blood pressure, an accelerated heartbeat.

A thousand years.

It was impossible. It was delirium. A concussion. A hallucination from lack of oxygen.

But the cold walls, the unfamiliar technology, the stranger's speech of the doctor — everything screamed the opposite.

— No, — Eva forced out. Her eyes filled with tears that did not flow but seemed to freeze in place. — That's not true. Where is Artyom? My husband! He was with me!

Lika Vorontsova gently but firmly placed a hand on her shoulder, careful not to touch the wires.

— Eva, listen to me. You were found alone. In a tent. No other... remains were found nearby.

The word "remains" sounded like a sentence.

Eva closed her eyes. Before them rose the final image: his eyes in the depths of the crevasse. *Leave.* And the rope... the frayed rope in her hands.

He was dead. She had known it then, on the mountain. But then, death had been instantaneous, theirs together. Now it turned out that her death had been deferred. Postponed for a millennium. That she alone had survived that night. Not survived — slept through. While the world turned, while everything she knew turned to dust.

The loneliness that washed over her was more terrible than any glacier. It was cosmic. She was the last leaf on a tree that no longer existed.

— Everything... everything is gone? — she asked, her voice as quiet as a child's.

— Not everything, — said Lika, and for the first time, a note of something like human sympathy appeared in her tone. — We are here. Humanity is here. It is different. But it survived. And you survived. It's a miracle.

A miracle. Eva looked again at the luminous ceiling. At the machines. At her hands, pale, with prominent blue veins, but whole. Inside, there was no joy. No gratitude. Only a vast, gaping cold. A cold that was now not outside, but inside. The cold of losing everything.

She slowly turned her head to the doctor.

— What now? — she asked, utterly devoid of inflection.

— Now you will live, — Lika Vorontsova answered. — Day by day. We will help you. First your body. Then... everything else.

Eva nodded, a puppet-like, precise motion. Live. In a world without Artyom. Without her home. Without even the stars she had known — surely they too had shifted over a thousand years.

She closed her eyes again, shutting out the white, sterile, alien light. Inside, in the darkness behind her lids, only one clear image remained: a ray of sunlight on his eyelashes on the morning after their first climb. The only warmth in the permafrost of a new world.

The machines hummed softly, counting the first minutes of her second, unasked-for life.

Chapter 4. Shards of Memory

Memory did not return as a flood, but as shards.

Sharp as ice crystals, they pierced her consciousness in the moments between sleep and wakefulness, between the pain of physiotherapy and the indifferent hum of the machines.

First shard: the sound of a campfire. The room was quiet, only the monitor beeping steadily. And suddenly — a crackle, a snap, the hiss of a damp log in the flames. The warm smell of resin and smoke. Artyom's voice, mingled with that crackle: "Look how the flames lick the stars." She squeezed her eyes shut, inhaled through her nose, hoping to catch the smoke. But her nostrils were hit by the same sterile scent of antiseptic.

Second shard: tactile. When a nurse with incredibly soft, warm fingers massaged her to combat atrophy, Eva suddenly remembered. His hands. Rough from ropes and cold, but incredibly gentle when they took off each other's boots after a forced march. How he rubbed her frozen feet, and she moaned from pain and gratitude.

Third shard: taste. They began to administer nutrient solutions intravenously. Her body, which had not known food for a thousand years, rebelled. Her mouth tasted of metal and plastic. And one night she woke with the clearest taste on her tongue — bitter chocolate with chili pepper. Their

signature warming drink in base camp. She even felt it burn her throat. Tears flowed on their own, mingling with saliva that contained not a gram of chocolate.

The psychotherapist at “Phoenix”, a man with a deliberately calm voice, called this “reactivation of neural connections.” He said it was good. That memory was the foundation of personality. Eva remained silent. For her, these flashes were not recovery, but torture. Each shard proved one thing: everything that was truly hers was forever in the past.

One day, she was taken to a special room — the “Adaptive Archaeology Cabinet.” There, under soft light, lay the items found with her. They had been carefully cleaned and preserved.

— This may help contextualize your memories, — said the curator, a young man with eyes burning with enthusiasm.

Eva approached the table. Her backpack. The fabric, once bright blue, had faded to a dirty gray. The buckle was broken. Nearby — a titanium pot. The very one in which they made hot chocolate. On the bottom — an eternal black scorch mark. An ice axe. Its shaft had rotted away, leaving only the steel head and ferrule, covered in rusty orange.

And then her gaze fell on a small, flat object lying separately in a sealed capsule. A scrap of fabric. Orange, like her tent. But it wasn't tent nylon. It was a piece of a buff. *His* buff. On the edge, embroidered in red thread, barely legible, were two letters: A. G. Artyom Gorenko.

She remembered. That last day. In the morning, getting ready, he couldn't find his buff. She handed him a spare — hers, orange. He put it on with a grin, saying: “I'll be like a little sunbeam in this white wasteland.” He never returned it.

Eva didn't remember how that scrap ended up with her. Perhaps she tore it from the unzipped collar of his jacket the moment she was hauling him up. Perhaps it remained in her palm when she pulled in the empty rope.

She reached for the capsule. Her hand trembled.

— May I touch it? — her voice sounded hoarse.

— We don't recommend it... the state of preservation... — the curator began, but Eva had already pressed the capsule's release button. Click. Sterile air mixed with the room's air. She took the scrap. The fabric was brittle as an autumn leaf. She brought it to her face. No smell. Nothing. Only the dust of ages.

And then she did something she hadn't done since awakening. She clutched the scrap in her fist, pressed it to her chest, doubled over, and sobbed. Not quietly, not shyly, but loudly, with wrenching cries more like the roar of a wounded beast. She wept for him. For their life, burned to ash in eternity. For the sun that would never again warm her cheek on his shoulder. For the mornings that would never come.

The center's staff froze in awkwardness. The psychotherapist stepped forward, but Lika Vorontsova, watching from the side, stopped him with a gesture. Her face was sad and understanding.

Let her cry it out. Let her scream it out. This is the first, true pain of return. Before this, there was only shock. Now, grief begins.

Eva cried until her strength gave out. Until the sobs gave way to a quiet, intermittent trembling. She unclenched her fist. The scrap, crumpled and slightly damp from tears, lay in her palm.

The curator carefully held out a new, empty capsule.

— Take it. It's yours.

She nodded, unable to speak, placed the scrap inside, and closed the lid with a soft click. A tiny sarcophagus for the last thread connecting her to her world.

From that day on, the shards of memory became rarer and less painful. Not because she forgot. Because she began to build inside herself a quiet, solid tomb for everything that was “before.” There, in that inner crypt, lay Artyom. Their shared laughter. The smell of the campfire. The taste of chocolate. The light on his eyelashes. She sealed the door tightly and placed a heavy stone upon it.

To live in a new world with an open wound was impossible. So the wound had to be mummified. Turned into a silent, sacred artifact of her very self.

At the next therapy session, the psychotherapist, looking at her calm, detached face, noted in his report: “The patient demonstrates significant progress in emotional stabilization. The adaptation process is proceeding satisfactorily.”

He did not know that stabilization was not healing. It was frostbite of the soul. Eva was not getting healthier. She was simply learning to be an ice floe in the current of a new era: cold, smooth, and invulnerable. At least on the outside.

And in the pocket of her hospital pajamas, next to her slowly strengthening heart, lay the small capsule. In it — her entire world, the size of a palm. And his last breath.

Chapter 5. Life as a Gift

Adaptation was like climbing upside down. You didn’t need to scramble toward the summit — it was already in your past. Now you had to slowly, step by step, descend into the valley of an alien world, renouncing familiar heights, learning to breathe the thick, strange air of ordinariness.

Eva was given housing — a small apartment in the “adaptation sector” of New City-2. The walls were white and smooth, the furniture functional and faceless, like everything here. She looked out the window at a strange landscape: not forests and mountains, but geometrically correct gardens under a dome, flying transport platforms, and people in simple-cut clothing moving at a quiet, purposeful speed. Everything was safe, sterile, and soulless.

She was assigned a “guardian” — a curator for social integration. It turned out to be Mark Vern. Eva later understood this was no accident. The adaptation commission, having studied her psychological tests (that very “stabilization”), decided: she needed not a psychologist, but a quiet harbor. A person who was the antipode of everything that had destroyed her.

Mark was an architect. He didn’t design skyscrapers. He designed sustainable worlds — those very domes and infrastructure that allowed survival. He was thirteen years older than her, calm, solid. He had kind eyes behind thin-framed glasses and hands that had never known rope burns, only the marks of a stylus on a tablet.

His approach was practical and patient. He didn’t ask about the past. He showed the present. He explained how the food synthesizer worked. How to use the public archive, which stored digitized fragments of her era. How to dress so as not to attract attention.

One day, he brought her a potted plant. Not a genetically modified crop from hydroponic farms, but a simple, as old as the world, spider plant.

— This survives in almost any conditions, — he said, placing the pot on the windowsill. — And it cleans the air. Practical.

He spoke “practical,” “rational,” “logical.” His world was built on these principles. And Eva, whose world had collapsed from the elements and emotion, instinctively reached for this predictability. With him, she didn’t feel like a museum exhibit. She felt like... a project. Complex, but interesting — a project for restoration. And Mark was the ideal engineer for such work.

He never touched her without permission. Never spoke unnecessary words. His care was unobtrusive, like the light from that very luminous ceiling. Gradually, he became the only constant in her new, shaky existence. An island of calm in a sea of alien technology and faces.

Love did not come as a flash, but as a quiet, slow germination, like that plant on the windowsill. It was not the passion, like a storm in the mountains. It was gratitude. A deep, bottomless feeling of gratitude to the person who reached out a hand when she was drowning in a thousand years of loneliness. Who built for her a quiet, reliable home where there had only been the icy wind of emptiness.

When he first, with extreme caution, touched her cheek, Eva did not flinch. She closed her eyes and thought: “This must be how thawing earth feels under the first spring sun. Not hot. Not dazzling. But enough to live.”

Their wedding was modest, in the administrative hall of the Sector. No mountains, no tents. Only the two of them, two witnesses from the commission, and a hologram-official reciting standard words. Eva wore a simple cream-colored jumpsuit. Around her neck, under the fabric, on a thin chain, hung that very capsule with the scrap. The past was pressed to her chest, sealed. It no longer screamed. It only pulsed quietly, like a scar.

Mark was happy. Sincerely. He had found not just a wife. He had found living proof of resilience, a miracle he could protect and cherish. He gave her books (or rather, digital scrolls) on history and art. He took her to virtual archives where she could see digitized photos of her own time — streets, faces, landscapes. He tried to give her context, roots in this new soil.

And then Sofia was born.

Childbirth became the second miracle in Eva’s life. The first was awakening from the ice. The second was the emergence of new life from within herself. When she first saw that tiny, wrinkled face, heard the first cry, the icy crypt inside her trembled. Something melted in her. Not the past — that remained untouched. Her own eternal winter melted.

She looked at her daughter — at her gray, attentive eyes, reflecting not the light of mountain peaks, but the soft glow of their home’s lamps — and felt an inexpressible, animal tenderness. This was her flesh, her blood, her continuation here and now. Not in the dead past, but in the living, fragile, warm present.

Sofia became a bridge. A bridge between Eva-the-ghost and Eva-the-woman, the mother. Caring for her, her laugh, her first steps — all this filled the emptiness with the dense, soft fabric of everyday happiness. Mark adored his daughter. He was a wonderful father — caring, attentive, predictable. Their home was filled not with passion, but with deep, warm mutual respect and a shared love for the child.

Sometimes, rocking Sofia, Eva would look out the window at the artificial “sky” of the dome and think of Artyom. But it was no longer a sharp pain. It was a quiet, sad note of a distant, beautiful melody that once played. She kept it in the most hidden corner of her soul, as a precious and fragile relic. Never taking it out, only occasionally touching it in her mind to make sure it was still there.

She had built a life. Strong, stable, good. She learned to smile, to joke with her archive colleagues (she found work — systematizing old, including pre-collapse, digital data). She loved her husband with a quiet, grateful love. She loved her daughter madly, unconditionally.

Sometimes she felt that she had given up. Betrayed that girl with the ice axe and the mad passion in her eyes. But then she would look at sleeping Sofia, at Mark’s profile illuminated by the projector screen, at her spider plant grown into a lush bush, and think:

“This is not surrender. This is a different victory. I didn’t survive to mourn the dead forever. I survived to live. And this — this is my life. A good life.”

And she was right. It was a good life. A quiet, bright, protected space built on the ashes of an ancient catastrophe.

She did not know that beneath this well-groomed, peaceful layer of soil lay an unexploded mine. And that the hours of her quiet happiness were already ticking, counting down the last years, months, days until the moment when the ground would tremble and the past would burst forth, demanding its share.

Chapter 6. Double Awakening

Project “Chronos” worked like a giant, unhurried machine. Mapping one glacier after another, sector by sector. After the sensational discovery of the “Woman from the Ice” (as Eva was called in the reports), funding increased, and the search continued with redoubled zeal. They hoped to

find artifacts, perhaps animal remains. A find of Eva's level was considered unique, an unrepeatable miracle.

The miracle repeated itself nine years later.

Three hundred meters from where Eva was found, but a hundred meters lower down the slope, scanners revealed a second anomaly. Larger, chaotic. Not a geometric capsule, but a cluster of materials: scraps of fabric, metal, organic matter. At first, they thought it was debris from an old base or a crashed pre-collapse aircraft. But chemical analysis of the ice showed the same thing: microbubbles of inert gases from the slow decomposition of organic matter, halted by the cold.

They worked carefully, without haste. They expected fragments. But when the ultrasonic cutter penetrated the thickness, the operator cried out. In the blue light of the spotlights, embedded in the ice like glass, lay a man. Or rather, what remained of him.

It was not a whole body like Eva's. He had no tent to protect him. The glacier had ejected him from that very crevasse and tumbled him in an ice mill. He lay in an unnatural pose, one arm stretched above his head, as if still trying to grab onto something. His jacket was torn, the ribs and bone of his left arm visible through frozen flesh, decayed over a thousand years of movement in the glacier. His face was hidden under a hood and a layer of transparent ice, but it was clear that the skull was fractured on the right side — a blow from the fall onto the rocks.

But there was also a miracle. The lower part of his torso, protected by a massive harness with safety equipment and deeply frozen into a compact block of ice, was relatively intact. And most importantly — the head, despite the trauma, was not shattered. The brain, though damaged, had not turned into ice crystals.

Igor Menshikov, the same cryologist who now headed the department, received the signal and arrived at the site. He looked for a long time at the man in the ice, at his outstretched arm, and his face turned to stone.

— Protocol "Phoenix-2", — he ordered quietly. — Complete isolation from the press. And urgently check all archives related to the first find. Coordinates, equipment list.

They did not extract him on site. Instead, they cut out an entire block of ice weighing several tons, loaded it onto a heavy transport, and delivered it to "Phoenix" in a special cryo-chamber. They worked in the strictest secrecy.

Inside the center, in a sterile operating room, they began to dissolve the ice. The body was in terrible condition. It took weeks to stabilize the remaining organic matter, reinforce the bones with biopolymer, restore the vascular network using nanobots. The chances were a thousand times lower than for Eva. But technology had advanced far in nine years. And there was will.

Her name was Yana Sokolova. A young but brilliant rehabilitation physician, a specialist in extreme trauma. She took "Patient Zero-Two" as the challenge of her entire career. She didn't sleep for days, personally overseeing every stage. For her, this was not just a person. It was a mystery, a great medical and historical riddle that she had to solve.

When the scanners showed the first, ghostly signs of activity in the brainstem, she did not cry out in delight. She quietly exhaled: "Contact." And her brown eyes, usually stern, lit up with the fire of obsession.

Artyom's awakening was not like Eva's. It was heavier, more aggressive, filled with nightmare.

He came to with a hoarse, animal howl. His body, still not obeying him, convulsively jerked on the table. His eyes wildly darted around the white room, not seeing, not understanding.

— Where is she?! — was the first intelligible sound torn from his parched throat. His voice was rough, raw. — Eva! The crevasse! THE ROPE!

He tried to grab something in the air, his fingers clenching on emptiness, as if grasping at that very frayed rope.

Yana was nearby. She didn't try to calm him with words. She firmly, but without cruelty, fixed his shoulders.

— You are safe. Breathe. You are in a Medical Center. Trauma. You suffered severe trauma.

— Trauma... — he blinked, trying to catch her gaze. His own gaze was full of horror and physical pain. — I fell... so long... cold... She stayed up there! On the summit! We have to... go back...

His consciousness jumped through fragmentary pictures of the last seconds: the fall, the impact, darkness, cold. And her face, the last thing he saw on the edge of the world.

— What summit? — asked Yana, her voice a steel anchor in the delirium of his mind. — What is your name?

He froze. As if this simple question was the most difficult riddle.

— Artyom... — he finally exhaled. — Gorenko. My wife and I... on a climb. The “Sleeping Giant.” A storm...

Yana exchanged a glance with Menshikov, watching through the glass. “Sleeping Giant.” The archives contained a mention — an old, local name for a peak in the Ridge of Memory. And the name... Gorenko. It appeared in the preliminary report nine years ago as a possible member of the lost expedition to which the “Woman” find was attributed.

— Artyom, — Yana said, slowing her speech. — Listen to me carefully. Much time has passed. Very much time. Your wife... Eva Gorenko. She was found. Alive.

He stared at her, not believing. Then a wild, mad hope flashed in his eyes.

— Alive? Where is she?

Yana paused. This was the most difficult moment.

— She was found nine years ago. She was thawed. She survived. She... adapted. She lives in the New City.

He closed his eyes. Tears, cloudy from medication and pain, rolled from under his lids and crept down his temples.

— Thank the gods... — he whispered. — Where is she? I need to go to her.

— Not yet, — Yana said firmly. — Your condition is critical. You need months, maybe years of rehabilitation. And... — she paused again, choosing her words. — The world you have returned to, Artyom, has changed greatly. Not several days have passed. A thousand years have passed.

He opened his eyes again. This time there was no hope in them. There was complete, absolute incomprehension. Emptiness.

— A thousand... years? — he repeated, like a poorly learned lesson. — But... she is alive. She is here.

— She is here. But she has her own life now, — Yana added softly but inexorably. — About which you need to learn, before you see her.

He was silent, digesting this new, monstrous blow. His wife was alive, but separated from him not by space, but by a chasm of an entire era. And, as the doctor hinted, perhaps not only by an era.

Yana watched the last spark extinguish in his eyes. As panic gave way to icy, bottomless despair. She knew that in such a state, a patient could break. Not physically — mentally.

And then she did something she had no professional right to do. She placed her hand over his — cold, trembling, disfigured hand.

— I will help you, Artyom. I will be with you at every step. We will walk this path. Together.

He did not answer. He just stared at the ceiling, and it seemed that he was back there, in the darkness of the crevasse, alone for a thousand years.

From that day on, Yana Sokolova became everything for Artyom: doctor, nurse, teacher, protector. She was ruthless in therapy, giving him no respite, forcing every muscle to work. And infinitely patient in explanations. She told him about the new world, showed archival records. She was his only connection to reality.

He clung to her like a drowning man to a lifebuoy. She was solid ground under his feet when his whole world was quicksand. He saw how she burned out by his bedside, how she gritted her teeth

when he was in pain, how she rejoiced at his slightest progress. His gratitude to her gradually grew into something more. It was not that mad, all-consuming passion he had felt for Eva. It was a deep, quiet dependence on the source of his salvation. Love as attachment. Love as an answer to the question: “Why should I live in this alien world?”

And when one day, during a painful procedure, he broke down and sobbed helplessly, and she did not shame him but simply hugged him, pressed his broken head to her shoulder, and whispered: “Everything will be fine, I promise,” — something in him broke and rebuilt itself anew.

He married Yana two years after awakening. It was a quiet, private ceremony. He looked at her serious, radiant face and thought of Eva. But the thought of her now evoked not pain, but a distant, bittersweet sadness, like the memory of a beautiful but irretrievable dream. He decided that she must be happy too, somewhere out there, in her own new world. That he had the right to his own piece of quiet happiness. To his own haven.

And when their children were born — first Snezhana, and two years later Gleb — Artyom felt that roots had finally grown through the ice of a millennium and touched solid ground. He loved them madly, with this new, calm and clear love. He was a father. A husband. He built a new life on the ruins of the old one, carefully walling up the entrance to that cave of memory where he forever fell into darkness, and her face remained above.

He did not search for her. He considered it the best gift he could give her and himself. Not to disturb the past. Not to destroy her present. He was sure this was the right thing to do.

He did not know that in the archives of “Phoenix” lay a classified report on patient Eva Gorenko, now Eva Vern. And that it contained her current address. And that the security systems of the New Cities, linked by a single network, could find a person in seconds.

He preferred not to know. His new life, with Yana, Snezhana, and Gleb, was a fragile, beautiful glass ball. And he was afraid even to breathe on it, lest it crack.

The silence between them — for both of them — lasted another seven years.

Chapter 7. Parallel Worlds

The lives of Artyom and Eva flowed like two deep, powerful rivers in the same mountain range, separated by a ridge of time and ignorance. They flowed parallel, never mingling, each in its own channel, eroding its own banks and carrying its own waters.

Eva’s world was the world of the archive. Quiet halls with holographic projections, where she, sitting at a console, restored fragmented digital fragments of ancient news, private diaries, scientific articles. Her colleagues respected her silence and her strange, almost machine-like erudition on matters of the pre-Collapse era. They did not suspect that she was not studying history — she was remembering it.

The Vern home was an oasis of calm. Mark was building an extension to the dome — a new sector with a park. Sofia grew, transforming from a toddler into a thoughtful girl with her mother’s gray eyes and her father’s analytical mind. In the evenings, they watched archival films (Eva preferred silent nature documentaries) or played complex board strategy games designed by Mark.

Sometimes, putting Sofia to bed, Eva would watch the girl fall asleep and think: “You will never become a climber. And that’s good. Your peaks will be different. More solid.” And she felt calm at that thought.

Her past was neatly packaged. Sometimes she would open an old digital archive with photos of mountains and find a picture: she and Artyom on some rocky outcrop, bathed in sun, laughing. She would look at it for a second, then close the folder. Not because it hurt. Because it was like looking at a portrait of a beloved but long-dead grandfather — with a light, bright sadness that no longer wounded.

Artyom’s world was a world of movement and physical overcoming. His profession as a survival instructor was ideal for him. He did not lead groups into the mountains — mountains were now a restricted zone, a place for ice extraction and research. He taught people to survive *here*: in the technogenic labyrinths of the dome cities, in case of depressurization, system failure. He taught them

to listen to their bodies, just as he once listened to the mountain. His authority was indisputable — he was a living legend, a man who had conquered thousand-year-old ice. But no one except Yana and the top management of “Phoenix” knew the whole truth.

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