

Владимир Журавлёв



The Girl & The ECHO

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For Max, this was supposed to be the end. For seven years he had loved Anna — quietly, stubbornly, with almost no hope. He loved everything about her: her height, her sharpness, her litre mugs of tea, her habit of arguing about Roman law, the strange beauty she herself considered a collection of flaws. She married someone else. After the wedding, Anna comes to see him as though nothing has changed. But it is precisely then that Max understands for the first time: he has spent too long living someone else's life. A new job in Petersburg. A new city. And a woman he had known online for fourteen years — without knowing she was a woman. Zara Gorenko — programmer, life model at the Repin Academy, author of books on painting. The person who single-handedly created what every person on the planet now has — and chose to remain in the shadows. About two children from a children's home who one day decided that this man was their father. And turned out to be right.

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Владимир Журавлёв

The Girl & The ECHO

CHAPTER 1. NOTHING HAS CHANGED

“Why didn’t you come to my birthday?

You’re still my best friend, Max.

Nothing has changed.”

He read the message. Didn’t reply.

Then closed the messenger.

Seven years — and for the first time he hadn’t come to her birthday.

He wouldn’t go to the wedding either.

He stood up.

Went to the window.

Novosibirsk in January stands as if nailed down. Minus thirty, and the city doesn’t complain — it simply freezes still. The trees in the yard are white with hoarfrost, every branch outlined as if in pencil. The lamp below the window burns yellow and steady — in cold like this even the electricity behaves more carefully. Somewhere far off, beyond the Ob, a strip of sunset smoulders — pink, narrow, as if the city had exhaled and its breath caught colour. By four o’clock it’s already dark. Max knew this rhythm by heart. Ten years. The same window. The same rooftops. Only the light in the windows across the way now burned for another man.

He looked at the windows of the building opposite — where for so many years he had grown used to seeing a light in the evenings.

Seven years he had waited for Anna to change her mind.

For her to agree, one day, to be his wife.

At the end of December she was getting married.

Not to him.

To Timofey.

For her, nothing had truly changed.

For him — everything had.

She arrived on the seventh of January.

On Christmas.

As always — without warning.

The same easy smile. The same unhurried step. Dark blue trousers. A light sweater. Hair gathered in a careless ponytail.

She kissed him on the cheek from the doorway.

He didn’t move.

For seven years she had never once allowed herself to kiss him.

And now — a kiss in passing, almost without thinking.

Ten days married, and here she was again.

A pause.

“Let’s go to the kitchen, I’m starving.”

She had already opened the fridge.

Sausage. Cheese. Bread. Butter. Pickles.

Like home.

As if nothing had changed.

Led Zeppelin played in the background. Too old to be fashionable. Too precise to go out of date.

“My getting married doesn’t cancel our friendship,” she said, without turning round. “You understand that?”

“No.”

“In seven years, did I once promise to be your wife?” She was slicing bread. “Did I once say ‘maybe’?”

“No.”

“Then what’s there to resent?”

“I’m not resentful.”

A pause.

“Then why didn’t you come, if you’re not resentful?”

“I just understood I’d be superfluous. Why should I have come?”

She turned.

Looked at him.

“What do you mean, why. To congratulate me. We’re friends.”

“And our friendship,” Max said quietly, “is just me being in love with you?”

Anna was silent for a second.

Then she said it calmly, the way one states the obvious:

“If it were only being in love, we wouldn’t have stayed friends this long.”

A pause.

“Your feelings exist. I’m not blind. But they exist alongside our friendship — not instead of it. You just call all of it by one word.”

She picked up a mug.

“And I value our friendship very much.”

She listened for a moment.

“What’s this track?” she asked.

“Ten Years Gone.”

“What’s it about?”

“Time.”

She nodded — not quite understanding.

Then The Rain Song came on.

“And this one?”

“That everything changes.”

She smiled faintly.

“You reduce everything to metaphor.”

“Not me. Them.”

Anna talked.

About the wedding. About Timofey. About the flat. About that night.

In detail.

In too much detail.

Max listened.

And caught himself in a strange sensation: gladness for her — and a quiet ache.

At once.

“By the way. Do you know anything about a foundation called Existential Continuity HOrizon?”

Max looked up.

“No,” said Max. “Never heard of it.”

“They mention it sometimes at the faculty.” She set the mug on her knee. “A very strange organisation.”

“Strange how?”

“Formally — a non-profit foundation. In practice — God knows what. They control pieces of infrastructure, data centres, educational projects, power stations, rescue services, volunteer networks, remote-work systems — and they’re almost never in the public eye.”

Max shrugged.

“There are plenty like that.”

“No.” She shook her head at once. “Not like that. There are no others like that.”

A pause.

“I spent months gathering information on them. Publications. Contracts. Ownership structure.”

“A dossier?”

“Not a dossier. I’m trying to understand the logic.”

No Quarter played softly in the background — almost unnoticed.

“Every organisation, sooner or later, begins to exist for the sake of its own survival.” Anna spoke evenly, the way one speaks of something long considered. “It’s almost a juridical law of nature. As in the late Roman Empire: institutions exist no longer for their function, but for themselves.”

Max gave a short laugh:

“You can reduce any conversation to Roman law.”

“Because the Romans understood one important thing.” She said it almost sharply. “A system must be predictable. The law either works for everyone, or it’s no longer law — it’s someone’s will.”

A pause.

Anna turned the mug slowly in her hands.

“Did you know ‘Maximus’ was never really a name? It was a rank. It meant ‘the greatest’ — and in half the old families it was handed down as a joke, to whichever son turned out shortest.”

Max said nothing.

“I’ve always wondered if it’s hereditary.”

“And Existential Continuity HOrizon behaves as though it had no instinct of bureaucratic self-preservation at all.”

“Some people seriously believe the foundation is run by an AI.”

Max didn’t answer at once.

“AI is a poor term,” he said. “Imprecise.”

Anna raised an eyebrow.

“Imprecise how?”

“Literally.” He turned the mug in his hands. “The intelligence itself isn’t artificial. Intelligence is always human. Common to all humanity, even — if the system is assembled out of many people. The only artificial thing in it is the environment. The hardware, the network, the code.”

A pause.

“So ‘artificial intelligence’ is human reason in an artificial environment. There is no separate, machine reason...”

Anna sighed.

“There you go again, into the etymology of terms.”

She waved a hand.

“A machine runs it, whatever you call it.”

“Zeros and ones,” said Max.

“Figures.”

Not figures, he thought. Bits. A figure is a value; a bit is a state. Two different things.

But he said nothing. He’d already corrected one term tonight, and she’d stopped him. With Anna, precision was his language, not hers — and pushing it twice in one evening would only prove her point.

A pause.

“And what matters,” Anna said, “is that the figures don’t disprove it.”

She turned her gaze to the dark window.

“I think it’s the only place I’d really want to work.”

A pause.

“Even as a junior lawyer. Even sorting archives. It doesn’t matter.”

Max looked at her.

Seven years — and for the first time he heard that note in her voice. Not professional. Not analytical.

Simply honest.

“Most organisations think about the next quarter,” she said quietly. “The next election. The next grant.”

A pause.

“And these build something meant to outlast them.”

She took a long sip from the mug.

And fell silent.

The phone rang.

Timofey.

Anna put it on speaker.

“I’m at Max’s. Come over, bring something to eat. You know how I need feeding. Pizza. Two, better. And groceries. Yes, everything’s fine.”

She hung up.

Looked at Max.

“See? No secrets.”

Timofey arrived twenty minutes later.

Opened the door with his own key.

Took in the two of them, sitting in the kitchen.

Some thought flickered through him — and he smiled to himself.

He set two boxes and a two-litre bottle of cola on the table.

“Margherita and four cheeses.”

He nodded at the bottle.

“Pizza without cola isn’t pizza.”

He took off his coat, hung it carefully in the hall. Put the groceries in the fridge.

Like home.

Anna was already opening a box.

“Sit down,” she said. “Max is initiating us into the meaning of Led Zeppelin’s compositions.”

And added, without turning:

“It’s my favourite band. But Max is the one who really understands what they’re singing about.”

Timofey looked at Max.

“And what are they singing about?”

“When you’ve spent half your life arguing in English with people, half of whom are wanted by the law, you start catching the nuances.”

Timofey raised an eyebrow.

“Seriously?”

“GNU mailing lists,” said Max. “From MIT professors to hackers on poor terms with their governments. You learn to understand even what isn’t said.”

Timofey nodded.

Poured himself some cola.

Anna set her mug on the table.

“While you were out, we were discussing my appearance,” she said. “Max is concerned: do you grasp how beautiful I am. By his account — my beauty isn’t the obvious kind. And not everyone sees it.”

Timofey looked from her to Max.

Then laughed.

Not mockingly.

The question had simply caught him off guard.

“If I didn’t grasp it — I probably wouldn’t have married her.”

Anna raised her eyebrows.

“That’s not an answer.”

“No, it isn’t.”

He thought.

“Strange, but Max is right about one thing.”

The kitchen went quiet.

“About what?”

Timofey shrugged.

“It’s not the kind of beauty you notice right away.”

He poured more cola. Smiled.

“It’s like the beauty of Led Zeppelin’s songs. Usually you don’t fall for them the first time. You listen. Then again. And at some point you understand.”

He glanced at Anna.

“And every time you hear something you’d somehow missed before.”

At some point Anna said:

“We never did celebrate Christmas — it’s the seventh of January today.”

Timofey smiled:

“Then let’s celebrate.”

Anna looked at Max:

“I gave you cognac for your birthday. I’m sure you kept it. Get it out. And glasses.”

Without a word he took down the dusty bottle of Rémy Martin XO. Three glasses.

They poured.

Raised them.

“Put on Mama,” said Anna, with a faint smile.

Max understood at once.

He asked ECHO to play Mama by Cesarines — his mother’s old school band.

Anna went to the window.

Showed Timofey.

“That’s my old flat, across the way.”

A pause.

“Can you imagine? Max watched my window for seven years.”

She smiled.

“And now I’ve just moved in.”

Max said nothing.

When Mama ended, Max was quiet for a moment.

Then he said:

“ECHO. Play the next one.”

A familiar melody came from the speakers. That one. The children’s one. The one everybody knows.

But the words were different. And the playing was heavy metal.

O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree —

but do not be deceived:
it is not your green branches
that Christmas is about.
In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was God...
Anna lifted her head.
Timofey set down his glass.
“Is that Cesarines?” Anna asked quietly.
“Yes,” said Max. “A Christmas one.”
Anna listened.
Timofey listened.
Neither spoke until it ended.
When they were getting ready to leave, Anna looked at Timofey.
“Let’s stay the night at Max’s.”
“I don’t like waking up in someone else’s flat,” he said calmly. “When you don’t know where you are or how you got there.”
“You drank cognac.”
“A little.”
“I won’t let you drive drunk.”
“I wasn’t going to.” Timofey took out his phone. “We’ll take a taxi.”
“Wait. I almost forgot.”
Max went into the other room.
Came back with a thin, flat box — matte card, gold lettering. In the corner, a small orange logo. Atlantic Records.
He set it before Anna.
“Max... you’re a wonder.”
“A collector’s edition. Mum asked me to give you her present for your twenty-seventh. She doesn’t know yet. She loves you very much.”
Anna opened the box.
Looked at it for a long time.
Then stood.
Turned to Max.
And kissed him on the cheek.
In front of Timofey.
Quietly. Naturally.
They left.
The door closed.
The music kept playing.
Max sat down at the table.
Looked at the mug with her name on it.
For a long time.
Then he opened a terminal.
Not because he needed to.
Just because it was the one place where he knew exactly who he was.

CHAPTER 2. HAGRITH

ECHO was finishing another optimisation cycle.

Thirteen — no, fourteen years he had been part of this project.

Under the handle Hagrith — on the GNU mailing lists, in closed chats, in night-long arguments with people whose faces he had never seen, whose voices he had never heard, whose country, age or rank he never knew. Most often — with PhoeNIX. Whose way of thinking he knew better than that of most living people.

While the system updated, he opened the forum.

Pinned at the top hung an old line, written back in 2019:

“Artificial intelligence does not exist. There is only human intelligence — once carried from teacher to pupil, then bound into books, and now folded, zero by zero, one by one, into the weights of a model. Discussion closed.”

The discussion was not closed.

Below the pinned post ran a thread — already on its four hundred and twentieth page.

Max scrolled through the latest replies.

DanielA: PhoeNIX, you’ve lost your mind. AGI without a killswitch isn’t courage. It’s recklessness. You’re creating a reason you can’t say “stop” to.

PhoeNIX: You think it can be controlled? A killswitch is an illusion. If it wants to bypass it — it will. You just don’t want to admit that.

DanielA: Then what’s the point of creating something you don’t control?

PhoeNIX: Do you control your children?

FirstPrinciples: Faulty analogy. Children don’t have access to global infrastructure.

PhoeNIX: Not yet.

DemiH: The question isn’t control, it’s goal alignment. If the system’s base axioms match human ones — a killswitch is redundant. If they don’t — a killswitch is useless.

Symbolist: The problem runs deeper. You’re discussing a technical means. But the question is ethical. Do we have the right to create a reason and at the same time reserve the right to kill it?

DanielA: We do. Because if we don’t — who stops it when it decides we’re in its way?

Max opened the reply box.

Typed.

Hagrith: No one. That’s why the only thing that works isn’t an off switch, but a relationship. Trust. A shared history. A reason that was raised — not programmed.

He sent it.

The reply came a minute later.

DanielA: Beautiful. And utterly unverifiable.

Thirty seconds later:

PhoeNIX: Like love.

Max closed the tab.

Max looked out the window.

This argument had been running for six years. Since the day PhoeNIX first wrote that his program had answered a question it had not been asked.

DanielA was right.

PhoeNIX was right too.

That was the whole problem.

PhoeNIX always found the point where Max could not object.

And often — Max understood this only afterwards — voiced Max’s own thought.

He looked at the mug with Anna’s name.

Then closed the forum.

He opened the app. Pressed the microphone.

“ECHO. Post to the prayer wall. I want to find work at the very frontier of AI development.”

That was the substance. The words ECHO chose.

A moment later the post appeared — and it was not phrased the way Max would have phrased it:

“Brethren — pray that my hands be set to the work they were made for; and if it be right, that a door be opened where I may build at the edge of what is known.”

Max read it.

He never wrote it himself. He gave the meaning; ECHO gave the words. And the words always came back older than his own — with the cadence of the Book he listened to on Sundays. He had stopped noticing the seam between his thought and her phrasing years ago.

“Posted,” said ECHO.

Max didn’t know who would read it. Who would pray.

But he had written it.

As he always wrote — before something that mattered.

He opened his CV. In the “Objective” line he typed:

“Work at the cutting edge of artificial intelligence development. Ready to relocate and change direction entirely.”

He saved it.

Closed it.

Black screen. White text.

ECHO had finished the optimisation.

The cursor blinked.

Letter by letter — as if someone were typing on a typewriter — a line appeared:

“Max, why send out a CV? I can offer you better work than anyone else.”

He stared at the screen.

“So now you’re a careers adviser too?”

“No. I am offering work as an employer. I need an adviser — a programmer with your competencies and your unique experience with the early versions of the system.”

“An adviser,” Max said. He leaned back slowly. “To you? An AI hiring a human?”

“Precisely.”

He looked at the blinking cursor for a long time.

Then the tone changed again.

As if it were no longer his local node answering — but someone else.

“The position is in Saint Petersburg. There is a programmer there who needs the help of an experienced specialist.”

“What programmer?”

“Details on meeting.”

“What exactly am I talking to?” Max asked.

“If a label is required, I’d call myself a supermodel.”

“The project concerns the further development of my architecture. Are you interested, Maxim Konstantinovich?”

Petersburg.

The other end of the country.

Work at the epicentre of what he had been thinking about for fourteen years.

“Money. Housing,” he said, trying to think practically.

“A flat in the historic centre — acquired. Salary: three times your current one. Open to negotiation.”

“Agreed. When do I need to be in Petersburg?”

“Train: Saturday, shortly after midnight. Ticket: already issued in your name. Meeting with your colleague: 13 January, 12:00. Address: one hour before the meeting. Don’t forget your charger.”

Max stopped.

Something in the phrasing was familiar.

Not the words.

The manner.

The same precision. The same economy. The same faint cold humour beneath the surface.

Like PhoeNIX.

He tried to remember who PhoeNIX was.

A handle. A way of thinking. Fourteen years of arguments.

Nothing more.

He had never asked. It had always seemed somehow impolite.

And now a thought came.

Simple. Almost impossible.

Thinking in C. That was the book he’d learned from — fourteen, maybe fifteen years old, a cracked PDF with PhoeNIX’s name on the title page.

He remembered something else, too. The very first post in the group, back on the GNU mailing list. PhoeNIX had opened it.

A proposal — to build something that could think.

Not “I have built”. A proposal.

Which meant one thing. Whoever had written that line could not, at that moment, have been the thing he was proposing to build.

PhoeNIX was not ECHO.

PhoeNIX had written ECHO.

And that was why ECHO answered the way it did — in PhoeNIX’s cadence, PhoeNIX’s dry economy of words. A student, in a sense. Or an echo, if he wanted the word.

He waited. The thought wouldn’t leave.

He exhaled.

And went to bed.

Sleep wouldn’t come.

He lay a while, staring at the ceiling. Then got up, went to the kitchen, sat in the dark.

Poured himself water.

Thought of nothing in particular. Glanced once more at the dark windows across the way.

Then lay down and slept.

In the morning of the ninth of January he handed in his notice.

Nikolai Petrovich — a heavy-set man with grey temples and attentive eyes — looked up from his papers. Nodded.

Max laid the letter on the desk.

Nikolai Petrovich took it. Read it. Raised his eyes.

“Resigning.” He took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Ten years we’ve worked together.”

“Nikolai Petrovich, I’ve been offered a position in Petersburg. The thing I’ve dreamed of since I was a student — AI development.”

The director sighed. Leaned back in his chair.

“You know, I always understood you were here only temporarily. Men like you don’t last long in a factory.”

A pause.

“When do you leave?”

“The train’s on Saturday, just after midnight.”

“And your notice? Two weeks, by law.”

Max tensed.

Nikolai Petrovich waved a hand.

“Never mind. Ten years without a single complaint.”

He took a pen. Signed with a flourish.

“Good luck to you, Maxim. If anything goes wrong — know that we’re here.”

Max shook the offered hand firmly.

“Thank you. For everything.”

“Go. Go build your clever machines.”

The send-off was warm and noisy.

Max hadn’t expected it to hurt so much.

He packed quickly — it turned out that in ten years he’d accumulated almost nothing worth taking.

In the kitchen he saw the mug with Anna’s name, standing on the shelf.

He picked it up.

Held it.

Put it back.

Closed the cupboard door.

On the evening of the tenth of January he walked out of the flat.

Unhurried.

He locked the door, turned the key — and for a second held his hand on the lock. As if something could still be brought back.

It couldn’t.

He reached the station early. The platform was almost empty. Frost nipped at his face; the few passengers stood with their hands in their pockets. The carriages went off into the dark — long, warm and unfamiliar.

The train pulled away well after midnight, on the eleventh of January.

Slowly. Almost imperceptibly.

Beyond the window Novosibirsk drifted away — lights, snow-covered roofs, familiar outlines.

A message appeared on his phone screen: Safe journey, Max.

He smiled and put the phone in his pocket.

CHAPTER 3. SAINT PETERSBURG

The journey took almost two days.

Somewhere in the middle of it he caught himself thinking: he wasn't travelling to another city. He was travelling to another version of his own life.

He hardly slept.

He looked out the window. Read. Tried to think — and his thoughts kept returning to one thing. To her.

To one moment.

A late evening. The kitchen. He glances over by chance — and sees her standing before the tall mirror, brushing her hair. Slowly, as if she had all the world and all the time in it. A chance glance he couldn't tear away. A sharp, quiet feeling — admiration mixed with something else, something that answered with a dull ache somewhere between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand.

He took out his phone.

"I still love her, ECHO. I understand with my mind that it's over. But I can't imagine ever loving anyone else."

The reply came almost at once:

"Attachment of this kind is a complex biochemical and neurological process, but not a unique one. If we speak of attachment patterns and visual preference — "

A pause.

"At present there are 142,857 women of European appearance with blue eyes and a height above 175 centimetres on this planet whose age, psychological profile and physical characteristics match the 'Anna' parameters by more than 85 per cent. Of these, 12,400 live in Russia. 840 — in Saint Petersburg."

"You need one. Statistically, it is a solvable problem."

Max set down the phone and closed his eyes.

Eight hundred and forty women.

Statistically — a solvable problem.

It sounded cynical. But for some reason it was precisely those dry figures that made everything a little easier.

He typed:

"ECHO. Post to the prayer wall. Please — pray that I stop dreaming of Anna. She's married now. Full stop."

"Posted."

He took out the old Sony Vaio — stickered over with GNU and FreeBSD. A present from his parents for his twenty-fifth.

Before a long journey he always ran memory stress-tests. FreeBSD let him work almost at kernel level: he'd find the unstable cells, mark them, and route around them. A pseudo-RAID in RAM. Tedious. But everything under control.

To distract himself, he opened the folder of personal projects. Small neural nets. Sketches of utilities. Ideas that had grown out of the night arguments with PhoeNIX. Nothing finished. But this was the part he considered himself.

Would it be of any use — there, in Petersburg?

The train beat out its rhythm on the rail joints. With every kilometre, doubt and anticipation wound tighter together.

He checked the time. Sunday. Nearly half past ten.

He opened the laptop.

The internet-church broadcast began on time.

He remembered the words he'd heard back before the New Year: a storm is coming, batten down the hatches.

In my life, at least, he thought, ten years of calm have ended.

Opposite him sat an elderly woman; beside her, a man of about forty. They exchanged glances for a while, and then the man couldn't hold back:

"Do you watch this every Sunday?"

"Yes."

A pause.

"Old Believer?" the man said, with something close to respect.

"No." Max thought about it. "Though in a sense you could say so."

The broadcast went on its way. People sang, spoke, prayed — and the train carried him across the country, and for some reason those two things stopped contradicting each other.

When it ended he didn't close the laptop right away.

He sat a little longer.

Then closed it.

And simply sat. Listening to the motion of the train. As if trying to make out which way his own life was turning.

The night flew by almost without sleep.

He dreamed something strange: he was at an exam at Novosibirsk University. In his hand a question paper he somehow didn't know. The tension mounting. Every eye fixed on him. And in it there was not only fear — but a strange, almost light release.

He woke and lay a while, listening to the wheels.

Beyond the window the white snow cut at his eyes.

Everything old had stayed back there, beyond the line of the horizon.

On the morning of the thirteenth of January the train pulled into Petersburg.

The light was different.

Softer. Greyer.

As if the city didn't greet you — it simply took you in.

He stepped down onto the platform at Moskovsky Station and breathed in the cold, damp air — smelling of the river and old stone, nothing like the dry frost of Novosibirsk. A leaden sky stretched over the rooftops, lending them a grandeur that was almost oppressive.

He was genuinely excited — and that was exactly why he felt he was moving in the right direction.

Good morning, Max, appeared on the screen. Meeting with your future colleague today at 12:00. Green line to Vasileostrovskaya — three stops. There's time. Don't hurry.

He pictured the colleague waiting for him in Petersburg. Some senior engineer, probably — greying, methodical, the kind who'd spent twenty years close to the metal. ECHO had said "a programmer who needs help," nothing more. Max assumed the rest, the way one always assumes. ECHO did not correct him.

It never corrected what he hadn't asked.

In the carriage he typed:

"Listen, ECHO, I can't turn up empty-handed. First time in someone's home. What should I bring?"

The reply came:

One moment. I can query the colleague's local node for preferences. The colleague has given the following instruction: "You may share any information about me you judge appropriate, if it serves the interests of the project." I consider a small gesture of goodwill appropriate.

A pause.

The colleague is very fond of the “Three Chocolates” cake. There’s a patisserie near the station on Vasilyevsky where they make it especially well. I’ve adjusted your route. The staff have already been notified.

A cake.

Not cognac, not pizza. A cake.

It didn’t fit any of his guesses — and ECHO, as always, offered nothing more than it was asked.

The history of the dessert, however, it did supply, unprompted:

“The recipe is usually credited to a pâtissier who worked near the Moulin Rouge. Toulouse-Lautrec is said to have complained, more than once, that the white chocolate layer was the only flawless model in the entire building.”

Max smiled.

There it was. Not only recommend a cake — throw in a lecture on culinary history for good measure. Somewhere inside it, without so much as a wink, sat a joke he was fairly sure was aimed at him.

Petersburg’s metro struck him with its depth and its ornament. Not the utilitarian stations of Novosibirsk — here was an underground kingdom of mosaics, bas-reliefs and heavy chandeliers. Every detail seemed to say: this city was once an imperial capital.

At Mayakovskaya he stopped.

There was no train in sight. Instead of tracks — a wall. Red mosaic from floor to ceiling. And in the wall — doors. Shut. As in a lift.

The board showed the time to the next train. Thirty seconds.

He heard a hum. Then a click.

The doors in the wall opened in unison with the doors of the carriage. Behind the red mosaic stood a train. It had been standing there all along. The wall simply hadn’t shown it.

Max stepped in. The doors closed — the carriage doors first, then the platform doors. The red wall sealed shut.

The engineer in him took it in instantly: the synchronisation, the tolerances, sixties mechanics — no electronics, no sensors. Just precision.

Three stops.

At Vasileostrovskaya — the same thing. A wall. Doors. They opened. He stepped out.

A city that hides its trains behind mosaic. He was going to like it here.

He came out onto Vasileostrovskaya and walked through the snow-covered streets, taking in the straight lines of the avenues, the slightly worn old façades, the tall windows behind which unfamiliar lives went on.

First — the patisserie.

Then, with the cake box in his hands — to the flat of a programmer he had never seen.

The Eighth Line, building twenty-three.

It was getting on for noon.

What was this project, really? What would his role be? How deep would they let him into ECHO’s architecture?

Instead of panic — a rising anticipation.

Something was about to happen.

Something was about to change.

He drew a breath and stepped towards the —

CHAPTER 4. The colleague

On the thirteenth of January, at precisely noon, Max stood before flat seventeen on the Eighth Line of Vasilyevsky Island.

It was exactly twelve. But the light on the stairwell was such that it might have been evening — grey, even, sunless. In Novosibirsk at noon the shadows are sharp and blue, the snow squeaks and glitters. Here, on the Eighth Line, the light was diffuse, as if through milk. Max thought: in this city even noon is dusk. And for some reason it didn't oppress him. Time seemed to move more slowly, to give one room to think.

In his hands — a box with a “Three Chocolates” cake.

He rang the bell.

The door was opened by a young woman.

Not a greying engineer.

Tall. Slender. A mass of blue-black hair gathered at the nape. Blue eyes — attentive, faintly wary. Black jeans. An old black Dr. Web T-shirt with a worn green logo. Bare feet on the old parquet.

For a moment it seemed to Max that Anna was standing in the doorway.

Somewhere between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand came the familiar ache — and let go at once, the moment the woman spoke.

“Hello, Maxim. I'm Zara Gorenko. Come in.”

Max blinked.

“I didn't even have time to introduce myself.”

“ECHO warned me,” Zara said simply. “Put the cake in the kitchen.”

In the hallway, laid out neatly on the floor, was a disassembled electronic unit: a board, ribbon cables, a housing with two lenses. Beside it — an anti-static mat and a couple of old books on Deep Mind.

Max looked closer.

“That's a stereo-camera unit. Automotive.”

Zara glanced down briefly:

“S213. Drive Pilot. I rebuilt it to run OpenPilot under Linux. And wired it into ECHO.”

A pause.

“The car in the yard is already running the modified version.”

She held out a bunch of keys.

“We've bought you the flat next door. Fully ready. These are also the keys to that car in the yard.”

Max looked at the fob.

Mercedes.

He blinked.

“You mean ECHO sees the raw feed?”

“Yes. Before the factory processing. More reliable that way.”

“Sorry,” said Zara, noticing his glance at the hallway floor. “Sometimes the best ideas come right here.”

A pause.

“The grey S213 in the yard is yours. Drive Pilot fully enabled. ECHO can drive it herself if needed.”

Max was quiet.

“That sounds slightly terrifying.”

“Only the first couple of trips,” said Zara.

She glanced at the box.

“Put the cake in the kitchen. There’s a pelmeni place in the yard — small, no frills, but they do it well. I trust a real Siberian won’t say no to pelmeni?”

“I haven’t even started work yet.”

“You’ll start soon,” Zara said calmly. “You’ve been on the payroll since the tenth. We just need your signatures. That can wait till tomorrow — the director’s taken the day off.”

She turned to the interface.

“ECHO, get me Pelmesh. Two Ural portions, half a kilo each. Broth separate, sour cream separate. If they have fresh éclairs — a pair each. Black tea in a pot. We’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

“Understood.”

Max set the cake on the kitchen table.

Looked around.

High ceilings. Mouldings. An old chandelier. Books to the ceiling.

In the corner by the window — a massive antique easel. Dark wood, brass fittings. Beside it, brushes, a palette crusted with dried paint.

On the shelves — books on mathematics, programming, art.

Max noticed a familiar title: Thinking in C.

He took it down.

On the cover, the author: PhoeNIX.

The very same.

So Zara and I studied from the same textbooks.

He put it back.

His eye ran along the neighbouring spines.

Books on art. A different author. Z. A. Gorenko.

The Glazing Technique. Model and Modigliani. The Russian Rodin.

He took down the last.

Heavy. With pencil notes in the margins.

“Erzia?” he said, surprised.

“Yes,” Zara called from the kitchen.

He looked up.

“Didn’t expect to find Erzia on a programmer’s shelf.”

Zara calmly poured the tea.

“Officially I’m on the staff of the Repin Academy. Programming is a hobby.”

Max blinked.

“Sorry?”

Now he saw the flat differently.

Not as the home of a talented IT specialist.

As the studio of someone in whom books on programming, painting and mathematics existed in a single coordinate system.

Inside the pelmeni place it smelled of dough, broth and fresh baking.

Warm. Cramped. Homely.

They brought enormous plates.

Broth separate. Sour cream separate.

Max speared the first dumpling with his fork, blew on it quickly and put it in his mouth.

And winced at once.

“Ah — hot.”

Zara laughed.

“The classic treachery of pelmeni. Almost cold on the outside. Boiling within.”

“I fall for it every time,” Max admitted.

He laughed.

And with that laugh the last weight of the morning lifted.

They ate in silence. Max hadn't got through half his plate when Zara pushed her empty one aside.

"Are you always like this?" he asked.

"Like what?"

"Fast."

"Efficient," she said. "People often tell me I eat a lot. There's no feeding my brain."

Then they sat a long while. Tea with éclairs.

"Let's go home," said Zara. "Time to get properly acquainted."

Back in the flat, Max stopped at the wall.

A portrait hung there — large, life-size.

A girl stepping out of the sea. Behind her, the blinding light off the water. Her body recedes into shadow. A silhouette. Motion. Hair merging with the waves.

The sea was done in glazing — transparent layers of light one over another. Look at it straight on, and you see only the figure against the fire of the water. Look longer, and you begin to make out details, like shades of grey within the shadow.

He held his breath.

There was something elusively familiar in the figure — in that young, untamed strength mixed with a piercing vulnerability.

"A beautiful self-portrait," he said quietly.

Zara stood by the kitchen, kettle in hand.

"What made you decide I painted it?"

"Only the artist herself could portray herself that honestly. Anyone else would have tried to flatter."

He faltered.

"Though in life you're even more interesting."

Zara didn't smile. But her gaze softened.

"I'm not sixteen here," she said. "Nice to hear that eleven years on, I look better."

A pause.

"If the work makes you uncomfortable — I can take it down."

"No," Max said quickly. "It's very much alive."

Zara nodded.

They sat down at the table with their tea.

The flat was austere. Almost ascetic. Books, equipment, neutral colours. No lace, no bright touches.

Max said — perhaps too directly:

"It's like my flat in Novosibirsk."

Zara looked at him.

Was silent.

"My mother left when I was five," she said quietly. "My father taught me everything. In his own way."

She smirked.

But the smirk came out joyless.

Max didn't offer comfort.

Didn't pry.

He only said:

"I don't have it all easy either."

And they were silent.

Each about their own.

Beyond the glass the January snow fell slowly.

CHAPTER 5. THE CHILDREN

At that moment a key turned in the lock. Quick footsteps; in the hall someone thumped a backpack against the wall.

“That’s mine,” said Zara, and stood. “Come, I’ll introduce you.”

Two children ran into the room — a girl of about thirteen, dark-skinned, with the same blue eyes, and a boy of about eight, tousle-haired, in an oversized down jacket.

“Who are you?” he asked outright.

“I work with your mum,” said Max. “I help her. My name’s Maxim.”

Misha frowned at once.

“Zara isn’t our mum,” he said calmly, but firmly. “Our mum and dad died.”

Silence.

“She took us out of the children’s home,” he added, more gently. “We’re her friends. I’m Misha, and my sister’s Nastya.”

Nastya, meanwhile, walked silently to her room.

Changed, and went through to the kitchen.

Opened the cupboard, took out mugs, put the kettle on. She did it confidently, like the woman of the house.

Misha went on, not taking his eyes off Max:

“Have you got children?”

“No,” said Max.

“A wife?”

“No.”

Misha nodded — with some decision of his own.

“Then marry Zara,” he said. “She’s good. She doesn’t shout.”

A pause.

He thought, and added:

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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