

THE ECHOVEIL

A Reverse Memory Device

The Device That Deletes Tomorrow's Pain.

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*To Neha, Sarah, Zarah, and Nairah—
for the memories we carry, the silences we break,
and all the futures we refuse to forget.*

CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[1: Silence Protocol](#)

[2: The Gray City](#)

[3: Echo Transmission](#)

[4: The Smuggler](#)

[5: Memory Leak](#)

[6: The Forbidden Thread](#)

[7: Unmaking](#)

[8: The Veilkeeper](#)

[9: Splinters](#)

[10: The Dissonance Room](#)

[11: Elen's Voice](#)

[12: The Catalyst Memory](#)

[13: Kale's Collapse](#)

[14: Trigger Code](#)

[15: The Quiet Revolution](#)

[16: The Return](#)

[17: The Ashes of Silence](#)

[18: Letters to Elen](#)

[19: The Glitch Archive](#)

[20: Before the World Was Quiet](#)

[About The Author](#)

PROLOGUE

The Memory That Wouldn't Die

“Some things refuse to be forgotten—no matter how many machines we build to silence them.”

It began, as most tragedies do, with a child's scream no one could hear.

In a small apartment stitched into the white grid of the city's southern quadrant, a girl sat bolt upright in bed. Her eyes were wide, but dry. Her fists clenched the blanket. Her mouth hung open around a sound that had already been erased.

The dream was gone.

It had come in flashes—fire, a name she didn't know, a fall that never hit the ground. She didn't remember it. But her body did.

Across the room, her mother stirred. Not from the noise—there was none—but from the subtle ping on her neural display. Emotional spike: child, 3:41 AM.

She padded across the floor, her collar glowing faintly with pale green light, indicating suppression in progress. She knelt beside the bed and brushed the girl's hair back.

“Bad dream?” she asked, voice calm, practiced.

The child blinked. “I think... I was falling.”

“But you're safe now,” her mother said. “It's okay. It's already gone.”

The child looked down at her hands. They were still shaking.

Her mother reached toward the soft wrap at the base of her own neck. The Echoveil pulsed, a silent guardian. She adjusted the child's as well, fingertips gliding over the fibers like they were made of silk and forgetting. "Better," she said.

The girl nodded. She did feel better. Or rather, she didn't feel *anything*.

Years later, she wouldn't recall that moment.

Not the dream.

Not the fear.

Not the silence.

Only a shadow where something should have been.

And a question that would burn its way through her bones:

What did I lose that night, before I knew how to remember?

"No one remembers the first thing they forget."

1: SILENCE PROTOCOL

“They said peace was the absence of pain. But I remember a time when even silence had a sound.”

The city moved like a sleepwalker—precise, unfeeling, caught in a hush so deep it felt like the world was afraid to breathe. Glass-paneled streets shimmered beneath a gray sky, reflecting nothing but the anonymity of movement. People walked in soft synchronization, their Echoveils faintly glowing at the neck—those silk-smooth collars threaded with nano-fibers, whispering commands into nervous systems that no longer rebelled.

Lyra Venn stood at the edge of Observation Square, clipboard in hand—though the clipboard was only for show, a relic from a time when records were touched. Her real work was internal, streamed silently through retinal prompts and minor muscle twitches.

“Confirm timestamp: 09:01,” she said, under her breath.

A soft click in her temple confirmed the memory log. A child fell nearby—no cry, no gasp, just a light thud and the delayed, mechanical crouch of a parent who’d forgotten instinct. The child blinked. The Veil pulsed. No pain, no fear. Logged and neutralized.

Lyra blinked the memory into storage.

“Observation complete,” she whispered.

A flicker of something—off-kilter, unfiled—quivered in her chest, but it vanished before she could name it.

She returned to her unit in Central Block 48, a clean prism of pale light and soundless temperature control. The walls were matte white, with nothing to look at and nowhere to hide. There was no art, no personal objects, no noise

except for the faint thrum of atmospheric stabilization. Her breath sometimes startled her.

She lay down. The Veil hummed softly against her neck, syncing with her pulse, slow and dulled. Her eyes closed, and that's when it began.

The dream didn't ask permission.

It started with fire.

A rush of sound—violently wrong in this world. Metal screamed against metal. A hovertrain twisted off its line, a chorus of voices crescendoed into something too real, too jagged. People ran, reaching for someone. A woman's face—smoke around her, mouth open. Screaming Lyra's name. Then black.

She woke with a noise caught in her throat.

A sob.

Real. Raw. From her.

The room was not built for this.

Her hands went to her neck. The Echoveil had not interrupted. No vibration. No chemical flood. Nothing had dampened the horror that now trembled in her bones.

"Emotion spike detected," the room intoned calmly, a feminine voice devoid of empathy.

Lyra stared at the ceiling. She was already flagged.

She spent the morning in diagnostics. No one looked her in the eye. No one ever did.

"The Veil sync was delayed," said the technician, a man with hands too clean and eyes too tired.

"I had a dream," Lyra said.

"Dreams are not sanctioned. Was it a replayed memory?"

"No. It never happened."

He paused, fingers twitching across the console.

“Pre-memory? Echo-burn? Or emotional fabrication?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you feel... pain?”

She hesitated. “I think so.”

He blinked. She could almost see the thought dying in his mind.

“You’ll be monitored. For your safety.”

She nodded, the appropriate response. Inside, her ribs still trembled like something had tried to escape.

Later that day, she walked past the Memorial Atrium—the most ironic name in the city. A vast chamber where people went to remember what they weren’t allowed to feel. Names etched in white light across the walls, blurred into meaninglessness.

She stood for a moment, letting her heart thud uselessly against the silence.

A woman passed her, eyes blank, lips set. She laughed. Just once. A slip.

Lyra heard it.

It rang out—short, absurd, utterly human.

And then it was gone.

The woman touched her Veil. Her expression calmed. Lyra turned away before the Sentience Enforcers noticed her lingering.

That night, she returned home and sat without movement, as if being still might protect her from herself. But the question echoed through her like static:

Why did I feel it?

She asked the question to herself again in the mirror. Not aloud—never aloud. Her reflection was pale, sharp-eyed, a woman who wore quiet like armor. The Echoveil blinked at her collarbone, obedient. Functional.

“Did you forget to stop me?” she whispered to the Veil.

Of course, it didn’t answer. It didn’t need to. It was the answer.

The dream returned before sleep.

This time, it was colder.

No fire. Just absence.

She was standing in a city where everything had collapsed. Not exploded—just... folded inward. People walking with their eyes closed. Bodies still standing, but no one home. And that voice again, somewhere far away:

“You promised me. You *made* this.”

She woke to tears. Not hers—someone else’s. But the room was empty.

Her Veil didn’t alert. It didn’t try to stop her.

She stared at the wall, knowing something was deeply wrong.

She reported herself.

Because that’s what good citizens did.

She walked into the Sentience Center and placed her hand on the panel.

“Emotional disruption. Voluntary evaluation.”

A woman greeted her. Mira.

Mira, who used to laugh with her. Mira, who once played music in forbidden corners and quoted fragments of poems.

Now Mira’s smile was professional, bland.

“Lyra Venn. It’s been years.”

“Is that... real?” Lyra asked, suddenly unsure if memory was memory or illusion.

“It’s recorded,” Mira said. “That’s enough.”

They sat in a white room that smelled of static.

“You’ve had unauthorized dreams,” Mira said. No judgment in her voice. Only protocol.

Lyra nodded.

“You know this could be a result of emotional artifacting. Sometimes, early trauma anchors a pattern.”

“I’ve never had trauma,” Lyra said.

Mira tilted her head. “That you remember.”

A long silence followed.

Mira leaned forward, gently. “Lyra... why did you come?”

“I don’t know what’s real anymore.”

“And you want to?”

Lyra didn’t answer. Not directly.

Instead, she asked, “What happens if the Veil stops working?”

Mira didn’t flinch.

“Then we return to the dark. To wars. To heartbreak. To chaos. The Veil is peace.”

“Is it?” Lyra whispered. “Or is it anesthesia?”

Mira looked at her, for a long time.

“I’ll schedule a deeper sync. The system may have glitches. It happens. Especially to those... who used to feel too much.”

Lyra stood.

“Mira... did we used to be friends?”

Mira smiled, soft and distant. “I don’t remember. That means it doesn’t hurt.”

Lyra walked home through rain that made no sound.

Every footstep vanished behind her, erased in droplets that evaporated on contact.

Above her, a billboard shimmered: *Peace Through Stillness*.

And beneath it, for just one second, the screen flickered. Words scrambled.

“You forgot what she meant.”

Lyra froze.

No one else looked up.

She touched the Veil at her throat.

It was warm. Comforting. Lethal.

That night, she didn't sleep.

She stared at the ceiling.

And at 03:12, she opened her private log, an unsanctioned one. Created in a shadowed corner of the CityNet, buried so deep even the Authority might miss it.

She typed one sentence:

“I think I loved someone.”

She didn't send it. She couldn't. But the act of writing it was louder than a scream.

She closed her eyes, whispering into the sterile dark:

“If you're still in there, whoever you were... I'm listening now.”

And for the first time in years, she felt something flicker back.

Not a memory.

Not a thought.

Just a pulse.

The beginning of a sound.

“Before the forgetting, I knew how to cry. I think I'm learning again.”

2: THE GRAY CITY

“When the world forgets how to feel, even a laugh sounds like rebellion.”

Daylight in the city had no warmth. It was a pale filter stretched across a palette of white, chrome, and soft gray. Everything gleamed with engineered indifference. The air was always the same: 19 degrees Celsius, humidity controlled, no scents, no wind. The sky overhead was not a sky at all, but a thick sheet of atmosphere glass that kept the outside from ever getting in.

Lyra walked the main concourse of District Delta, her boots soundless on the cushioned walkway. Every step was softened, like the world didn't want to disturb itself. The corridor was lined with digital banners pulsing softly in lavender hues, advertising tranquility like it was a product:

“Peace Through Stillness.”

“The Echoveil: Tomorrow's Emotion, Gone Today.”

“Feel Less. Live More.”

She didn't look at them anymore. No one did. They were part of the architecture, like the sterile curves of the buildings or the pale uniforms everyone wore. Seamless, expressionless, clean. The city had no rough edges. Even the people looked sculpted by the same 3D printer.

Everyone wore the Veil.

It looked almost beautiful—soft gray fabric woven with faint light, a collar that sat against the throat like a gesture of protection. It purred quietly, attuned to the pulse beneath, mapping cortisol, adrenaline, tremors. When emotions began to rise, the Veil acted. A cocktail of signals and micro-doses, calm deployed in real time. The wearer rarely noticed.

It had worked. The world was quiet now.

Too quiet.

Lyra moved with purpose, but without urgency. She had no appointments, no one to see. Just her weekly walk through the observation grid—a habit that used to be a job. She still called it “recording,” though the city barely needed archivists anymore. The Veil did most of the work. Memory logs synced across networks. Emotional anomalies were filtered, flagged, erased.

Her own Veil was quiet today. The technician from the diagnostic center had assured her everything was operational again. No more dreams. No more emotional “echoes.” Whatever that meant.

But Lyra felt the silence differently now. As if she could hear its seams.

She passed a man sitting on a bench, his eyes locked on nothing. His posture was perfect. Not relaxed—engineered. The Veil at his throat glowed faint blue, indicating a recent suppression.

He had probably thought something.

Maybe he remembered too much.

Or not enough.

It was mid-loop in Sector 12 when it happened.

A girl, maybe eight years old, darted from a corridor. Her shoes flashed light with each step—an outdated, illegal model. Lyra blinked the detail into her internal log. She wasn’t alone. A woman followed a few seconds behind—mother, possibly. The girl stopped in the center of the square and spun in a circle, arms wide.

Then she *laughed*.

Not a chuckle. Not a smile.

A full, bursting sound from somewhere deep inside her. It echoed off the smooth walls. It startled Lyra’s heart like a gunshot.

People turned. Not with horror—but confusion. Discomfort. As if the sound had disrupted their programming.

The mother reached her and immediately pressed a hand to the back of the girl's neck. The Veil blinked red. Lyra saw the moment the laughter stopped—not because the child ran out of joy, but because the Veil stole it mid-breath.

The mother whispered something and held her close. The child's eyes dulled, and she nodded. She walked calmly after that. They vanished into the crowd.

No Enforcers arrived.

No alarms went off.

Because the system had done its job.

Lyra stood frozen.

She wanted to run after them, to say—what? That she had heard it too? That it had meant something?

Instead, she just stood there, hands twitching, and felt her Veil whisper a soft warning. Her pulse had quickened.

She closed her eyes.

“Stabilize,” she said, and the collar hummed, releasing a dose calibrated for minor unrest.

She hated how easily it worked.

Back at her unit, she couldn't settle.

She paced. She read system logs. She checked her own biometric report. Everything in the data said she was fine. But something clung to her—the echo of that laugh.

She pulled up her recording archive and ran a playback of the square. The system had blurred the child's face, as protocol demanded. The laugh itself was not present. Erased. Logged as “Unauthorized Vocalization: Joy Response.” Emotion level: 3.25/5. Resolved.

Lyra frowned.

She opened her private log again and typed:

“Is joy illegal now? Or just... inefficient?”

She stared at the line. Deleted it.

She tried to focus on her sleep schedule. Nutrient ratios. Daily rhythm. But the image returned.

The girl's face—so alive. The laugh, impossibly human.

And the mother, not angry. Not panicked. Just... sad.

She'd seen that look before. A lifetime ago.

In someone else's eyes.

That night, she walked further than she was supposed to.

Past the city's memory archive towers, into the old market districts that hadn't yet been fully repurposed. Some buildings were boarded. Others stood in perfect shape but were empty, forgotten.

She found herself near the Reflection Fountain. It no longer ran. Water was too unpredictable—too prone to spark memory.

But the basin remained, dry and cracked.

She sat on its edge.

Above her, the banners still glowed faintly:

“The Echoveil: Trust the Silence.”

She looked at her reflection in the dark marble. Her face looked back, unchanged. But her eyes...

She didn't remember them being this tired.

A voice startled her.

“You're not supposed to be here.”

She turned.

An old man—gray-bearded, wearing a maintenance badge. His Veil blinked gold—older model.

“I'm just walking,” Lyra said.

“No one *just walks* anymore.”

She didn't argue.

“Used to be, people came here to make wishes,” he said, gesturing to the empty basin. “They’d throw coins. Tell secrets. Cry a little.”

“I don’t think we cry anymore.”

He nodded. “Progress.”

She waited for sarcasm, but it never came.

He just shuffled off, humming something tuneless.

For a moment, she imagined she’d seen him before.

Or maybe she’d just imagined him entirely.

The next morning, Lyra walked the main concourse again.

The Veil was silent. The city was clean.

She passed a woman wearing a bright scarf—scarlet. An illegal color, technically. Too emotionally provocative.

The woman caught her glance and quickly adjusted it, hiding the red.

No one was immune. Not even the rebels.

Even their resistance had rules.

Later that day, she spoke with Mira again. Scheduled, emotion-monitoring liaison.

Mira smiled that same soft nothing-smile.

“You’re stabilizing.”

“Am I.”

“Yes. Emotion index below .7 for three days. No flagged dreams.”

Lyra nodded.

Mira leaned forward slightly.

“You look... tired.”

“Is that a problem?”

“No. Just human.”

Lyra studied her.

“Mira. Did you ever miss it?”

“Miss what?”

“Feeling. All of it. Even the bad.”

Mira paused.

Then: “I remember crying once. A long time ago. At my mother’s funeral. Before the Veil became full protocol. It... hurt.”

“And?”

“I never want to feel like that again.”

“But the laughter,” Lyra said, suddenly. “Don’t you miss that too?”

Mira’s smile faltered.

“We can’t choose one without the other.”

“Maybe we should.”

Mira sighed. “That’s the problem, Lyra. We *did*.”

That night, Lyra lay awake, fingers tracing the edge of the Veil around her throat.

It was light. Soft. Meant to comfort.

But it felt heavier than ever.

Not like a scarf.

Like a hand.

She had another dream.

She was running this time—through the square where the girl had laughed.

Only now the buildings were on fire. Sirens blared. People screamed.

Someone grabbed her hand—small, warm. The girl.

“You forgot,” the girl whispered. “You promised to remember.”

And then she was gone.

Lyra woke gasping.

The Veil had not stopped the dream.

Or maybe it had tried.

And failed.

She didn't cry.

But she didn't blink the dream away, either.

"Silence can protect you from the storm. But it cannot teach you how to dance in the rain."