

# DEDICATION PAGE

To the quiet souls who feel everything deeply and  
still choose to love.

To the ones who carry storms within but walk  
gently through the world.

This story is a home for you.

Thank you for believing in magic, even on the days  
it felt far away.

With love,

~Siddharth

# Chapter One: The Door

## Beneath Rue de Seine

It didn't begin with thunder. Stories love their drama—booming skies, flashes of lightning, the heavens breaking open like a cracked drum—but no, this was quieter. So quiet, in fact, that it would have gone unnoticed if not for the strange way silence has of drawing attention to the smallest of things.

There was a ticking : faint, delicate. Barely there. The kind of sound that doesn't call out for you but waits, patient, like it knows you'll hear it eventually. It reminded me of the soft thrum that pulses behind your ears when you're alone in a room that's gone too still—the kind of stillness that turns the act of breathing into something loud, even awkward.

You don't hear it so much as much as you feel it. The ticking didn't ask to be noticed, but it stayed

with me, like something left unsaid at the end of a conversation.

I had come back to Paris after fifteen years--fifteen long years. A sentence that sounds short until you try living it. It's a strange measure of time, one that stretched out endlessly only to collapse into a blur the moment my feet touched the pavement of Rue de Seine again.

Fifteen years is long enough to forget the finer details, but not long enough to forget the feeling.

And there it was. Rue de Seine, exactly where I had left it, yet changed in a way only memory can alter a place. It seemed both smaller and deeper now, like a recollection that had grown roots in my absence. That narrow streets, with its uneven cobblestones and dusky charm, always carried a faint dampness, even after the rain had stopped. It still breathed somehow. This Street had Lungs.

And a heart too. The rhythm of the place hadn't changed; it still beat in time with the soft footsteps of passersby and the distant clatter of crockery from café terraces. The cafés hadn't moved either. Or if they had, they'd come back, like birds who knew where home was.

There was a familiar perfume in the air. Not just coffee—though of course the coffee was there, rich and dark, seeping from open doorways and mingling with laughter and murmured debates. But something else clung to the wind. Smoke.

That particular brand of defiance wrapped in a blue curl of Gauloises. The same scent that had stained every scarf and coat I owned back then, the same smoke that had once seemed like a symbol—of rebellion, of youth, of being thoroughly and unapologetically Parisian. And now it rose again, coiling into the pale April sky like a thought

escaping before it could form words. Not a ghost, exactly. But a trace. A reminder.

Paris had changed. Of course it had. Cities breathe differently over the years. They inhale new fashions, new people, new languages whispered over bread and wine. There were electric scooters now, parked carelessly like drunken insects against the curb. There were new signs in the windows, QR codes taped to menus, plastic shields at registers.

The city was adapting, as all cities do. And yet Rue de Seine—this sliver of time stitched into stone—felt untouched in a way that made my chest tighten. Not untouched in appearance, no. The cracks were deeper. The paint on the shutters was more peeled. The iron balconies sagged a little, tired but still proud.

But it was something else—the spirit of the place—that had stayed. Like a friend who’s aged but greets you the same way, with the same warmth, the same glint of mischief in their eye.

I walked slowly, almost reverently. Not because I was tired, but because there was something sacred in recognizing the unchanged. Each step felt like returning to a sentence I had written long ago but never quite finished.

The walls remembered things here. They had heard whispers and arguments, poetry and promises. They had seen lovers part, then meet again, then part once more. And they held those moments—not with pride, but with that quiet dignity Parisians are so good at. As if to say, yes, this happened here. And yes, we remember.

So, no, it didn't begin with thunder. It began with a ticking sound you could miss if you weren't really listening. It began with Rue de Seine exhaling, and me inhaling in return. A quiet exchange. A heartbeat skipped, then caught again. Paris doesn't always greet you with grandeur. Sometimes, it just waits for you to notice that it's still here—and that you are too.

But nostalgia—ah, nostalgia is a quiet liar. Not a cruel one, no. Not overt or venomous. It's far gentler than that, and perhaps that's what makes it so dangerous. Like time itself, it deceives with a smile. It hands you back the picture, lovingly framed, edges softened with memory, and tells you this is how it was. But it never gives you the full film. It hides the movement, the flickers of truth that live in the in-between. It muffles the sound—the awkward silences, the slammed doors, the things that were said and then regretted, or worse,

never said at all. Nostalgia edits. It curates. And in doing so, it comforts. But it doesn't tell the truth.

I hadn't returned for the sake of sentiment. There was no poetic yearning, no rekindled longing that had drawn me back to Paris. The truth was plainer, and perhaps lonelier. I had come back because I had nowhere else to go.

I was thirty-nine. That strange age where you no longer belong to youth, yet haven't quite committed to middle age either. Something in-between. A threshold, maybe. And I had crossed my own, years ago. Not in the way most people do—with marriage, or divorce, or some reshuffling of their career—but in a way that didn't leave room for polite society to nod and say :

“Well, that's life.”



Once, and not even that long ago in the great scheme of things, I had been a lecturer in philosophy at Oxford. My days were filled with ideas. I sat in stone rooms filled with the scratch of pens, the flutter of old pages, and the bright-eyed questions of students who still believed that meaning could be found in logic, in discourse.

They asked questions I used to ask myself—What is truth? What is self? What does it mean to be conscious?

I taught them the classics, the canonical texts, the rules of thought. And I played the role well.

But I stopped being able to answer those questions the day I began seeing it. Not a vision. Not a hallucination. Something... else. It was as though the scaffolding of the future had begun to collapse in front of me.

Not metaphorically. Literally. A crumbling, folding, implosion of time—not unlike a dying star. A singularity of some kind. I didn’t just imagine it. I felt it. Like a presence brushing against the edges of my mind. Something impossible, vast, and unkind.

And then—it spoke. Or perhaps it didn’t speak in any traditional sense, but I heard it, felt it, understood it in the way you understand a scream in a dream: immediately and without words.

What it said is harder to articulate. Not because I’ve forgotten, but because human language isn’t built to carry that kind of weight. But I tried. I tried to tell them.

My colleagues. My students. I thought I was warning them. Instead, I broke the rules.

Academia has its rules, you know. Most of them remain unspoken – yet they are ironclad. You may question God, certainly.

You can even question truth, if you do it politely. But what you cannot do—must never do—is let madness walk into the lecture hall with you. They didn't say I was insane. That would have required engagement, confrontation. No, they called it a lapse. A delicate word, clinical and clean.

A lapse in judgment. A lapse in clarity. A lapse in the expected performance of being sane. I saw it in their eyes: that soft, pained sympathy reserved for a colleague who has just walked into the room with his clothes a bit askew, smelling of the wrong kind of truth. It was a kindness, I suppose. A slow, polite exile dressed up as concern.

And so I left. Or perhaps I was nudged out. It hardly matters. What matters is that I ended up in Paris, once again. Back to Rue de Seine, that old artery of memory. And now, I lived above a bookstore so perfectly named it might've been written into a novel just for me.

“Librairie du Temps Oublié”

--The Bookshop of Forgotten Time

The name alone felt like a provocation. It whispered with irony. A touch too poetic to be coincidence. It was the kind of name meant for postcards, for Instagram photos, for tourist blogs titled :

“Hidden Gems in Paris You Simply Must Visit.”

The sign, hand-painted in faded gold on a cracked wooden board, hung slightly crooked over a chipped green door. If you weren't looking for it, you'd walk right past. And most people did.

The locals barely glanced at it. Perhaps they'd grown tired of its quaintness. Or perhaps they, like me, had come to understand that some places are only visible when you need them to be. I passed through its door almost without thinking, as though my body remembered something my mind had not yet caught up with.

The scent of old pages hit me first. Dry, a little dusty, but not unpleasant. Like parchment aging gracefully. There was something calming in it. Something ancestral, almost. The smell of things left unsaid.

The man who owned the shop—Jacques, a retired professor who rarely looked up from his crossword—barely acknowledged my presence beyond a slight nod the day I moved into the flat above.

“Keys are under the third stairboard,” he had said. “Don’t tell the landlord. He likes to pretend there’s security.” And that was the extent of our conversation for weeks.

But I didn’t mind. The apartment itself was modest, no more than two small rooms stacked above a spiral staircase that creaked like an old spine. The windows were crooked and narrow, and the radiator only worked when it felt like it.

But it had a view—a slanted, imperfect view of the street below, where people came and went, where light changed the buildings from ash-grey to something almost gold at dusk. And at night, the ticking returned.

That same faint ticking from before. Not the clock, though there was one, somewhere in the shop downstairs. No, this ticking was different. It seemed to come from within the walls, or perhaps from within me. I didn't fear it. It didn't feel threatening. If anything, it felt... familiar. Like the trailing echo of something I'd forgotten to remember.

I often sat by the window at night, watching the lamplight smear itself across the wet cobblestones, listening to the city exhale. And I wondered if maybe time didn't forget us at all—but simply waited until we were quiet enough to notice it again.

The landlady, Madame Charbonneau, was old—not just in years, but in that particular way Parisians manage to carry age like a worn silk scarf: elegant, frayed, and full of secrets. Time had softened her, worn away the edges perhaps, but never quite

erased the woman she had been. Her spine curved like a question mark, and her fingers shook ever so slightly, as though carrying the weight of things she had never spoken aloud. But her eyes—those were still sharp, dark as soot, and just as difficult to wash away once they'd settled on you.

“You hear things sometimes,” she said that first night, her voice low and steady, almost rehearsed, as she pressed the brass key into my palm. It was heavy and cold, shaped like something out of a fable. “Downstairs. Don’t mind them. The building remembers.”

I offered her the sort of smile you give to the elderly when they speak in poetry. Respectful, but dismissive. I thought it was just age talking—some quiet eccentricity wrapped in metaphor. A poetic warning, nothing more. But now, after everything



that followed, I think perhaps she was being perfectly literal.

The apartment itself was tucked beneath the eaves like a forgotten thought. Dusty and dim, yes, but not unloved. It felt lived-in, like a coat that had hung too long on a hook and still held the shape of its last owner. The walls, lined with sagging shelves and yellowing maps, seemed to lean in slightly, as though listening. Here and there, stacks of brittle books slouched against one another like old men in a church pew, murmuring among themselves.

And there, in the far corner, half-swallowed by shadow, stood the grandfather clock.

It was magnificent in its own quiet way—tall and grave, its wood darkened by time, its face blank beneath a veil of dust. Madame Charbonneau had mentioned, almost in passing, that it hadn't ticked

since the Eiffel Tower had turned one hundred.  
That would've made it silent for decades.

And yet, that night—my first night—I awoke.

No wind, no movement. Just a sound. Subtle. I  
thought at first it was a dream.

But it wasn't.

Tick

Tick.

Tick.

A sound like memory. Deliberate. Patient. Alive.

I sat up in the dark, heart knocking hard against my  
ribs, beating in time with something that wasn't  
mine. The air had shifted. The quiet had changed. It  
was no longer still—it was listening.

Across the room, the grandfather clock loomed, more present than it had been when I'd fallen asleep. My eyes went to its face, almost against my will.

The hands had moved.

They now pointed, unshakably, to 3:17 AM.

I stared at them for a long while, trying to make sense of it. I could have sworn—I was certain—that when I'd arrived, the hands were frozen at 9:40 PM, unmoving, unmoved, untouched by time for decades. That was part of its story, part of its silence.

But now it marked the hour again.

I rose slowly, as though not to disturb whatever was present, and made my way across the cold wooden floor. The clock's wooden case was worn smooth,

the color of dried blood and tobacco. I opened it gently, expecting gears, a pendulum, some quiet engine of time to explain what I had just seen.

Inside—nothing.

No machinery. No ticking heart. Just a hollow interior, a wooden shell. It felt like opening a mouth that had just spoken and finding no tongue.

But there, behind a panel slightly ajar, something waited.

An envelope.

Yellowed with age. On it, a name in dark, looping ink:

Émile Valençon.

No address. Only a single line, faint but clear:

“Under the tiles where the time forgets.”

I did not sleep again.

# Chapter 2: The Philosopher Who Forgot

Oxford, 2010. Before Paris. Before the unraveling.  
Or the revelation, depending on how one chooses to  
name the moment when the world stops making  
sense—or perhaps begins to.

Back then, I still wore the mask of the academic,  
still lectured in orderly halls where the past was  
kept neatly indexed in footnotes and timelines. I  
was giving a lecture on Nietzsche that day, speaking  
to an auditorium half-filled with drowsy students  
scribbling notes or watching the clock. The air  
buzzed with the low hum of disengagement, the  
kind you learn to ignore after years in the  
profession. But that morning, as I paced in front of  
the blackboard, chalk in hand, I felt something  
shift—not in the room, but inside me.

The lecture had followed its usual trajectory. I was discussing Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence, a thought experiment that demanded its listener to imagine living the same life over and over again. A loop. A repetition. A challenge to how we understand meaning. I quoted, as one does, the familiar passage: "What if a demon crept after you one night in your loneliest loneliness and said to you: 'This life, as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more'?"

Students dutifully jotted it down. Some frowned. One or two blinked slowly, clearly far more interested in the end of the hour than the nature of eternity. But as I turned back to the board to draw the illustrative loop—an ouroboros-like circle meant to visualize the eternal return—I hesitated.

Something had lodged in my chest. A thought.

Uninvited, Electric...

What if time isn't what we think it is? What if its straight lines and solid hours are merely the illusion of a mind desperate for order? What if time folds? Spirals? Collapses in on itself like a lung out of breath?

I paused, mid-sentence. My hand, still holding the chalk, hovered over the board. The auditorium, usually so indifferent, suddenly felt like a held breath.

Then I spoke :

"If you could walk backward through time, would you still be yourself? Or does identity depend entirely on sequence—on one moment following another, like beads on a thread?"



A few students blinked. One laughed softly, nervously. Another yawned.

And then, a hand rose.

“Sophie Lin”

She always sat in the third row from the front, always came in early, always had a question—usually a good one. She had the sharp, mathematical clarity of someone who sees the world through structures, but never forgets that structures crack. A philosophy student with a minor in mathematics, Sophie had the kind of mind that could untangle paradoxes for breakfast and still have time to question your assumptions by lunch.

She tilted her head, a habit I'd come to associate with the moment right before she challenged everything.

"What happens," she asked, "if you meet yourself coming the other way?"

I stared at her. The question wasn't in the reading. It wasn't part of the lecture.

It wasn't rhetorical.

The room fell quieter, as though something outside the world of sound had dropped away.

I opened my mouth to answer—and found I didn't have one.

Because the question stuck. It didn't just linger; it grew.

What happens if the self is unmoored from time? If the past and future bleed into the present—not metaphorically, but literally? What happens to memory, to logic, to morality?

Later that night, I couldn't sleep. I sat in my office, lights off, staring at the darkened pane of the window that looked out over the quad. Sophie's question wouldn't leave me.

What happens if you meet yourself coming the other way?

I began to sketch, first aimlessly, then with increasing urgency. Circles. Spirals. Möbius strips. Time not as a line but as a loop, a knot, a mirror.

I pulled books from shelves. Heidegger. Augustine. Bergson. Even Poincaré. But none of them offered what I was looking for. They orbited the question, but never pierced it.

And then, around three in the morning—  
coincidentally, the very hour the clock in Paris  
would later wake me—I drew something I couldn't  
explain.

A series of nested loops, like the chambers of a  
nautilus shell. Each loop held a point—each point a  
version of the self. But at the center, they all  
converged. A core self. Or perhaps not a self at all.

A presence.

Something looking back.

I felt dizzy. I stood up too quickly, knocking over a stack of books. I looked at my hands. They trembled.

I should have gone home. Should have called it a night, told myself it was just exhaustion. But instead, I stayed. I wrote until dawn, notes that would later be dismissed as speculative fiction or metaphysical indulgence by my peers.

But Sophie... Sophie didn't dismiss it.

When I shared my sketches with her, she didn't laugh. She studied them, brow furrowed, as though they were blueprints for something half-remembered.

“It’s not impossible,” she said quietly. “There’s a kind of symmetry to it. Like quantum entanglement, but across time instead of space.”

“Then what happens,” I asked her, “when the symmetry breaks?”

She didn’t answer.

She just looked at me.

And then she said something I will never forget:

“Maybe the reason we don’t remember meeting ourselves... is because we were the ones who turned away.”

Oxford, 2010. That was the moment. The point of fracture. The first glimpse behind the curtain.

The rest would come later.

“Paris. The envelope. The ticking clock”

But this... this was the first echo.

“The first shadow”

And I didn’t know it yet—but I had already begun walking backward.

I smiled—not because I had an answer, but precisely because I didn’t. There was a peculiar comfort in that uncertainty.

“Ah,” I said, adopting the classic tone of a philosopher musing aloud, “then perhaps you'd have to decide which one of you is real.”

The room lightened for a moment with a soft laugh. It was the kind of moment that breaks the tension, a gentle pause in the relentless march of academic routine.

Yet, despite the laughter, Sophie's question stayed with me. It clung to my thoughts like an echo that refused to fade, a haunting refrain in the quiet moments between lectures and late nights. It was as if her curiosity had pried open a door I hadn't realized was there.

The weeks that followed were strange in ways I couldn't have predicted. My sleep fractured—though not with nightmares, but with something altogether more unsettling. I began waking abruptly, my breath shallow and heart pounding,



the remnants of dreams slipping from my lips like mysterious incantations. Dates, always dates: June 6th, 1944. August 5th, 1858. December 3rd, 2031. These were not dates I had studied or taught; they were foreign fragments that settled in my mind without explanation.

Each morning, the dates haunted me like cryptic clues to a puzzle I wasn't sure I wanted to solve. I started jotting them down in a small notebook I kept beside my bed—a collection of moments disjointed from my reality. Sometimes, alongside the dates, I sketched the fleeting images that accompanied them—a frozen canal with a solitary woman in mourning, a boy watching airships drift silently across a copper sky, a city engulfed in flames where smoke and shadows danced on cracked walls. These glimpses felt less like memories and more like whispers from a world that had slipped through the cracks of time.

And then came the incident—an event so sudden and inexplicable that it fractured the rhythm of my life.

To this day, I remember little about what happened in those early hours, only the fragments pieced together from what others later recounted. I was found alone in the bowels of the Bodleian Library, deep in the basement archives—a place few ventured to after hours. It was well past midnight, closer to dawn than anything else. They said I was murmuring in a language no one could identify—not Latin, nor any ancient tongue they recognized—something unfamiliar and alien.

Around me, strewn across the cold stone floor, lay a circle of broken timepieces: wristwatches cracked and silent, pocket watches with shattered faces, gears and springs scattered like debris from some invisible explosion. Each timepiece had stopped at a

different hour, each frozen in its own private disaster. It was as if time itself had splintered around me, fragmented and silent.

In my hands, the authorities discovered a torn page from an ancient diary, its paper yellowed and brittle with age. The ink was faded to a bruised sepia, but the words remained hauntingly clear:

“He came again. The man with no shadow.”

The diary was later identified as belonging to a 17th-century clockmaker whose final years were marked by madness and obsession. The line itself was cryptic—a riddle without a key.

Afterward, I was whisked away to a quiet room in a hospital, subjected to tests and examinations. The official report spoke of exhaustion, dissociation, a

possible psychotic break. They called it a breakdown—a soft phrase designed to cushion the sharp truth. The university arranged for a leave of absence, a polite way to usher me away without open dismissal. There were hushed conversations, concerned voices behind closed doors, and forms that needed my signature—formalities I went through with mechanical detachment.

But beneath the surface, something profound had shifted within me. It was not madness, as they claimed, but awakening. Something ancient stirred in the depths of my mind, a memory that reached beyond the bounds of reason. It was like a dormant gear clicking into motion inside my chest, turning steadily to a rhythm I had never known.

Life at Oxford, with its orderly lectures and neatly indexed footnotes, no longer felt real. The walls of academia seemed to close in like a cage, suffocating

the fragment of truth I now glimpsed. I saw the fragility of the linear time I had so long accepted, the illusion of sequence and cause and effect I had once taught with such certainty.

Sophie's question lingered: What happens if you meet yourself coming the other way? At first, it sounded absurd, a philosophical parlor trick. But it grew in my mind, gaining weight and urgency, refusing to be dismissed. What if identity wasn't a simple thread, but a complex tapestry of intertwined timelines? What if each moment birthed new possibilities, new versions of ourselves, and some part of us remembered all of them?

There was only one thing I could do. I packed my books, closed the door on my Oxford life, and left behind everything I had known. I took a train to the coast, crossed the Channel, and headed to the city that felt older than time itself—Paris.

Paris is a place where time folds and bends gently with the light, where centuries hide between the curves of wrought-iron balconies and the delicate clink of coffee spoons in ancient cafés. It is a city that whispers secrets, where clocks seem to tick softly, as if wary of disturbing the mysteries the hours themselves have chosen to forget.

I arrived in the spring, when the air was still cool, but the promise of warmth hung on the breeze. The streets of Rue de Seine welcomed me like an old friend with lines in her face and stories in her breath. The narrow lanes were alive with the scent of roasted coffee mingling with the curling smoke of Gauloises, the familiar haze drifting upward into the soft grey skies.

Above an old bookstore called Librairie du Temps Oublié—the Bookshop of Forgotten Time—I found a

modest apartment. It was dusty and dim, filled with relics of stories past: yellowed maps, cracked spines of forgotten books, and a silent grandfather clock standing watch in a corner like a sentinel guarding secrets. The clock hadn't ticked in decades, or so I was told. Yet, somehow, that night, I awoke to its steady, patient pulse—a ticking that seemed to mark more than just the passing of minutes.

Paris was no mere refuge. It was a place where time itself felt uncertain, fluid. Here, I could explore the fractures that had begun to appear in my own life's timeline, seek answers hidden beneath layers of memory and myth. It was a city that matched the strange rhythm I now felt inside—a rhythm not bound to clocks or calendars, but something deeper, older, and infinitely more mysterious.

And so, I stayed.

## Chapter 3 – Emile Valencon

By the end of my first week living on Rue de Seine, the envelope I had discovered within the hollow clock had taken on a life of its own in my mind. It was no longer just a piece of paper folded neatly in aged parchment; it had become a presence—almost a silent companion in the quiet hours. I found myself stealing glances at it throughout the day, as if expecting it to shift or whisper some forgotten secret, or to reveal a clue I had somehow missed. The name inscribed on it had begun to resonate with a peculiar weight, lodged somewhere between half-remembered and half-imagined.



“Émile Valençon.”

The name felt fragile yet heavy—like a delicate thread that, if pulled, might unravel not only a story but an entire world concealed beneath layers of dust and silence. There was something haunting about it, something that beckoned me to dig deeper.

One morning, unable to resist the pull any longer, I took the envelope downstairs and approached Madame Charbonneau. She was busy dusting a glass cabinet filled with yellowed books, postcards frozen in time, and little trinkets that hadn’t been touched for decades. At the sound of the name, she froze for a moment; the gentle rhythm of her movements halted, as though an unseen weight settled on her shoulders.

Her lips pressed tightly together, forming a thin, bloodless line. Slowly, almost reluctantly, she spoke.

“Dead. Long ago.”

I waited, sensing there was more.

“She was the watchmaker below the bookshop,” she continued, her voice distant and tinged with the faintest echo of something lost. It was as if she was reaching into a memory stored far away, gathering dust and shadows.

“Below?” I repeated, surprise creeping into my voice. I had assumed the bookstore had always existed in its current form.

“Before the bookstore,” she explained with a faint sigh, barely audible, “this place was a horologist’s workshop. That’s what Librairie du Temps Oublié was, once. His shop. Then... he vanished.”

“When?” I pressed, the mystery deepening.

“1944,” she said softly, eyes narrowing as though she were measuring how much of the story I could bear. “Nazi-occupied Paris. Some say he was taken away. Others...” She hesitated, her gaze sharpening. “Others say he simply walked into a room and never came back.”

Her voice carried the kind of sharpness that comes from witnessing too many tales slip through the cracks of history—truths worn down by time until all that remains is the uncanny.

That night, beneath a low-hanging moon, Rue de Seine folded into its usual hush. The world outside was quiet, the kind of silence that presses gently against windowpanes and lingers in the empty streets. I made my way back to the bookshop, which had long since closed for the day. Its windows were dark, shelves inside reduced to ghostly silhouettes.

But I knew what I was looking for now.

Behind a tapestry faded and softened by dust and the passing years—a worn reproduction of Da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man, limbs outstretched in cosmic geometry—there was something unusual. I had noticed it before but never paid it much mind. Tonight, it called to me.

Carefully, I moved the tapestry aside. There, concealed from casual view, was a door. Heavy iron, veined with rust and etched with a strange

emblem—a fractured hourglass, split down the center by a jagged crack.

I reached out hesitantly and grasped the handle. To my surprise, it opened with no resistance, no creak, no protest—soundless as if inviting me in.

Beyond the door, the narrow spiral staircase descended into a darkness that seemed to absorb all sound and light. I switched on my phone's flashlight, the beam piercing the gloom like a sharp blade cutting through thick fabric. Each step I took echoed strangely—an odd rhythm that made it feel as if someone else were following, mirroring my movements just a fraction behind, like a shadow that didn't quite keep pace.

When I reached the bottom, the staircase opened into a chamber unlike anything I had expected. It was circular, enclosed by cold stone walls that bore

the scars of time. The air hung heavy, metallic and dense, carrying with it the scents of oil, rust, and something more elusive—memory itself, thick and palpable.

Against one wall, a long wooden workbench stretched out, cluttered with the remnants of broken time. Swiss, French, American clocks and watches lay dismantled, their intricate innards spread across the surface like the mechanical hearts of some forgotten creatures, frozen mid-surgery. Springs coiled loosely beside tiny gears, faces without hands stared blankly into space, and cogs rested in careful disarray. Here was time, torn apart and exposed—each piece telling a silent story of moments lost, suspended in delicate limbo.

But amid all this, my eyes were drawn to something altogether unexpected, something that seemed out of place in this shrine to time and mechanics.

A mirror stood in the center of the room—tall, seven feet high, framed in tarnished bronze that bore the patina of age and neglect. It was upright and still, solemn as a sentinel waiting silently for some unseen signal.

Yet, when I looked into the glass, I saw nothing.

No reflection. Not even a shadow or faint silhouette. The surface was a perfect void—an emptiness so complete it swallowed everything behind me. It was as if the glass were not glass at all, but a window into the absence of being.

I stepped forward cautiously, my heart syncing with some ancient, forgotten rhythm. My breath fogged the mirror for a brief moment—only to vanish as if

the air itself refused to let the surface hold even the faintest trace of me.

Curiosity mixed with unease, I lowered my gaze toward the bottom of the mirror, where a narrow strip of bronze framed the edge. Etched delicately into the metal, the inscription caught the faint glow of my flashlight, letters shimmering only at the right angle:

“The present is the ghost of futures not chosen.”

I whispered the phrase aloud, the words hanging in the thick silence like a spell cast into the stillness.

For a moment, the room seemed to lean in closer, listening.



The mirror's void pulsed faintly, as though breathing softly beneath its glassless surface. I felt an almost electric charge in the air, like the fragile tension before a storm breaks, or the whispered pause before a secret is revealed.

I moved around the mirror slowly, tracing the edge with my fingertips. The bronze was cool, textured with age, and inscribed with tiny symbols that suggested more than just craftsmanship—they hinted at a language older than words.

What did it mean, I wondered? The present as a ghost? A shadow of futures that never came to be? The idea twisted inside me like a Möbius strip—endless and impossible to untangle.

I thought of the dates I had spoken in restless sleep, of Émile Valençon's disappearance, of the shattered timepieces scattered beneath the Bodleian Library.

Was this mirror a gateway? A trap? A reflection not of what was, but what might have been?

The room itself seemed alive with stories. The scattered clocks, the tools, the dust motes dancing in the flashlight beam—all were pieces of a puzzle woven through time, waiting for someone to assemble the fragments.

I crouched to examine the workbench more closely. Each watch and clock was a miniature universe, its tiny mechanisms a testament to human obsession with measuring, controlling, and understanding the relentless flow of time.

I picked up a pocket watch, its face cracked but still beautiful. The hands were frozen at 11:11—a time often whispered about in superstition, a moment caught between minutes, between realities.

My fingers traced the delicate engravings on its back, worn smooth by decades of handling. Inside, the gears were perfectly intact, though the watch had long ceased to tick.

It struck me then—these timepieces were not just broken machines. They were relics of lives, of moments held fast in the relentless march of existence. Time, I realized, was less a river and more a shattered mirror—each shard reflecting a different reality, a different choice, a different path.

I stood, turning back to the mirror. There was a pull toward it, as if it called not just my gaze but my very soul. I wanted to reach out, to touch the void, to see if I could pierce through and glimpse the futures that had never come to pass.

But I hesitated.

What if the mirror did not simply show absence,  
but swallowed those who dared to look too closely?  
What if it was a warning as much as a riddle?

The inscription whispered its truth again in my  
mind: “The present is the ghost of futures not  
chosen.”

The weight of those words settled over me. Every  
moment I lived was haunted by the millions of  
possible lives I might have led, the paths I had  
rejected or missed, the choices that rippled outward  
like stones cast into an endless sea.

I turned away from the mirror, feeling a shiver run  
down my spine. This room beneath the bookstore  
was a repository of lost time, yes—but it was also a

threshold. Somewhere between what had been and what might have been, between past and future, a secret waited to be uncovered.

And I had been drawn here for a reason.

A whisper of hope flickered in my chest—the hope that beneath the shattered clocks and silent mirrors, I might find a way to make sense of the time I had lost.

The chamber's silence closed around me once more as I climbed back up the spiral staircase, the echoes of my footsteps mingling with the faint ticking that seemed to pulse just beyond hearing.

Outside, the night air was cool and still. Rue de Seine lay quiet beneath a sky smeared with stars.

The world above had not changed, but something within me had.

The mirror's void remained etched in my mind—a silent challenge to uncover what lies hidden beyond the surface of time itself.

# Chapter Four: The Mirror

## With No Memory

I returned to the chamber three times that week, each time pulled by a force I couldn't explain. It was no longer curiosity. It had become something deeper, something almost like a need. I told myself I was simply studying it, observing, collecting facts like the academic I used to be.

But beneath that careful, logical front, I knew the truth: I was waiting. Waiting for something I didn't understand. A change. A sign. A moment when the mirror might finally acknowledge me.

Each visit, the mirror stood exactly where I had left it—still, silent, and, most unsettling of all, completely unreflective.

The bronze frame had dulled more with the dampness of the underground air, but the glass itself remained impossibly smooth, holding no trace of me or anything else. It was like staring into an empty void. It was a space that stared back.

There's something deeply unsettling about looking into a mirror and seeing nothing. It breaks you. It doesn't just erase your reflection—it wipes away the quiet certainty that you are yourself. Your identity feels fragile, unmoored. I tried to reason with it, to make sense of it with philosophy. I thought of Plato's cave and shadows, Descartes' doubt, and Lacan's idea of the mirror stage—where identity is formed through reflection. But all those ideas, all those theories, felt empty in the face of this mirror. This was no symbol or metaphor. It wasn't madness.

It was something else.



A mechanism.

A passage.

On my fourth visit, I decided to bring something with me. If the mirror refused to show anything on its own, maybe I could coax it, give it a context. Upstairs, on a forgotten shelf in the bookstore, I had found an old, rare book.

The cover was cracked, and its margins were full of scribbled notes written in hurried, faded ink. It was called *The Mechanics of Time*, printed in 1897. I hadn't been looking for it. Somehow, it had just appeared, like it was waiting for me.

Between two brittle pages, I found a folded sketch. When I opened it, my breath caught in my throat.

There, drawn with careful detail and reverence, was the mirror—the same one in the chamber below. It was labeled:

“ La Porte Miroitée “

— The Mirrored Door.

Beneath the sketch, a line was written in faded Latin. It seemed to pulse with meaning, as if alive:

“Tempus non est linea, sed abyss”

--Time is not a line, but an abyss.

I traced the letters with trembling fingers. I read them aloud in the quiet chamber, my voice barely more than a whisper, as if speaking too loudly might wake something that should remain asleep.

Then, heart pounding, I pressed my palm flat against the glass.

The mirror's surface was icy cold—sharper than the chill in the air around me. It bit into my skin like frost that never melts. For a long moment, nothing happened.

Then, I felt it.

Not a movement in the glass, no shifting shadows or light. But something behind it—something buried deep in my mind. A flicker of sensation, like a memory trying to come to the surface. A sound, faint and unfinished. The curl of a syllable.

And then, a voice.

“Émile...”

The name echoed, but not in the chamber. It echoed inside me, vibrating against the walls of my skull. It was a whisper, soft but unmistakable.

No one had spoken my name here. Not in this room. Not in this time.

But I knew that voice.

“Sophie Lin.”

The memory hit me like a wave. Sophie—the brilliant, stubborn, curious philosophy student from Oxford. The girl with the question that had pulled the thread unraveling my life.

She had been missing for six years.

>Officially: a disappearance abroad.

>Unofficially: a name erased from polite conversation, a whisper lost in the passage of time.

But now, here she was. Or at least, her voice was.

I stepped back, heart hammering in my chest. Every nerve in my body was alert, every sense sharpened by fear and awe. The room was different—not in any visible way, but in the way it felt. There was a low hum in the air, just beneath the edge of hearing, a steady vibration that made my teeth ache. The stone walls seemed to pulse ever so slightly, and the metal objects scattered around—the clocks, the tools, the bronze frame of the mirror itself—responded as if they were part of some enormous instrument, a tuning fork struck far away.

It was as if the chamber had begun to remember itself.

Or perhaps it was remembering what it had been waiting for.

The voice, the echo of Sophie's name, stayed with me long after I left the chamber. I couldn't shake the feeling that this room, this mirror, was somehow connected to her disappearance. To her question at Oxford—the question that had set me on this path in the first place.

Who was Sophie really? Had she found this place before me? Was she trapped somewhere beyond that mirror, or lost in the depths of time's abyss?

I returned to my small apartment on Rue de Seine, but sleep was no longer an escape. My mind was restless, spinning with images and sounds. I heard

Sophie's voice again, soft and distant, calling my name through layers of time.

The next day, I sought out Madame Charbonneau again. I needed to know more about Émile Valençon, the watchmaker who had vanished during the Nazi occupation of Paris. If he was connected to the mirror, perhaps his story held the key.

She was reluctant to speak at first. But after a long silence, she said something that chilled me.

“They say Émile wasn't taken by force. They say he disappeared because he wanted to escape something. Something terrible.”

“What?” I asked, leaning closer.

She shook her head. “No one knows for sure. But there are rumors—stories passed down quietly among the old families who remember.”

I pressed her to tell me more, but she only whispered a single phrase.

“The man with no shadow.”

The same words I had read on that torn page in the Bodleian Library.

My thoughts returned to the mirror. Was this “man with no shadow” connected to the mirror’s void? To the idea that time was an abyss?



In the days that followed, I poured over *The Mechanics of Time*, trying to unlock the secrets of La Porte Miroitée. The book spoke of time not as a linear path but as a vast, tangled web—an abyss where every choice created a new thread, a new reality. It described doors like this mirror, capable of bridging those threads, letting one cross between moments and possibilities.

But the cost, it warned, was high. To step through was to risk losing oneself, to become untethered from the flow of time and identity.

I thought of Sophie again, lost for six years. Was she caught between these threads, wandering in a limbo of abandoned futures?

My nights became haunted by a singular vision: Sophie standing before the mirror, her hand reaching out, the faint glow of hope and fear in her eyes.

I was drawn deeper into the mystery with every passing day. The mirror was no longer just an object. It was a question. A challenge. A call.

And I knew I couldn't turn away—not now, not ever.

Somewhere beyond the glass, in the abyss of time, Sophie was waiting.

And so was the truth.

The next morning, just after the sun had slipped its way through the pale Parisian haze, I was stirred from the edge of sleep by a sound unlike the usual gentle ticking of the grandfather clock that stood tall in the corner of my apartment. This was something quieter, softer—a whisper barely brushing against the wood near the door.

I blinked away the last traces of sleep and sat up, listening.

Again, the whisper came. Faint, fleeting, like a secret carried by the breeze. I moved toward the door with slow steps, the wooden floor cold beneath my bare feet.

When I opened it, there was no one in the hallway.

Only an envelope resting on the floor, placed with exactness—as if an invisible hand had delivered it, then vanished before I could catch its shadow.

The envelope was unlike any I had ever seen. There was no postage stamp, no return address, no writing on the outside at all. The paper was thick

and cream-colored, aged in a way that no modern stationery could imitate. It felt heavy in my hands, like a relic from a different century.

I knelt down and picked it up carefully, almost afraid to touch it.

Inside, folded with perfect precision, was a letter.

The parchment smelled faintly of lavender and smoke—a scent that reminded me of old drawers left unopened for decades, or pockets of coats hung too long beside a dying fire. It was a scent of time itself.

The words were written in dark fountain pen ink, each letter so meticulous it seemed less written than engraved into the page.

I unfolded the letter slowly and began to read :

>To the man who listens to forgotten clocks—

>If you are reading this, then time has begun to crack open for you. You are not alone. You never were.

>On the evening of December 3rd, 1858, I stepped through the mirrored door. I arrived in a future where machines dream and men forget themselves in blinking screens.

>The mirror is not a tool. It is a test.

>You will begin to lose chronology. Do not trust memory.

>Do not enter alone again.

—É.V.

The words sank into me like a slow, deliberate tide.

I read them once. Then again. The meaning settled into my bones like dust gathering on old wood.

The final initials caught in my throat.

Émile Valençon.

The same name that was written on the envelope I had found tucked behind the broken clock months ago.

The same name I had heard spoken like a memory through the mirror, in Sophie Lin's voice.

But this letter—this was something altogether different.

How could a man write a letter addressed to someone more than a century and a half into the future?

How did parchment touched by a hand in 1858  
arrive at my door, in 2025, untouched, unsmudged,  
unspoiled?

I held the letter up close and studied it again,  
searching for a sign of forgery or a trick of the eye.

No, the ink was authentic. The paper genuine.

The impossible truth pressed against the edges of  
my mind.

Unless...

No. I couldn't allow myself to accept it yet. There  
had to be a rational explanation. A coincidence, a  
mistake, or perhaps a performance meant to  
unsettle me.

But even as my mind reached for reason, my body  
betrayed me. My hands trembled. My skin prickled  
as if the letter carried a charge, an electric pulse of  
something unseen.

I turned slowly toward the grandfather clock.

It had stood silent in the corner for years.

Forgotten.

But now, it was ticking.

Not just ticking quietly, as clocks do when marking ordinary seconds.

No. This tick was loud. Too loud.

Like a mechanical heartbeat out of step with the world.

I stepped forward and watched as the hands trembled with each tick. It was not measuring seconds. It was marking something else entirely.

Not time.



Warnings.

I folded the letter back carefully, almost reverently,  
and placed it beside the other envelope from days  
before.

The air in the apartment felt thinner, charged—  
almost as though the rooms themselves were  
waking, beginning to remember things I had yet to  
live.

That night, I did not need to descend the staircase.

The mirror called again.

I don't mean that in some poetic or metaphorical  
way.

I heard it.

My name, spoken softly from somewhere inside the glass.

As if the mirror had become a mouth, and the chamber beneath it a throat leading into places I could not see or understand.

My hand moved toward the doorknob without command.

The walls around me pulsed in time with the clock's loud tick.

Every part of me knew the choice was coming.

Inevitable.

Patient.

Because time—whatever it was—was beginning to bend.

And it had noticed me.

The hours that followed passed in a blur.

The whispering of the mirror lingered in my ears,  
and sleep became impossible.

I sat by the window, watching the pale light of dawn  
stretch over the rooftops of Paris.

Below, the city moved on as if nothing was wrong.

But everything was shifting beneath the surface.

I felt as though I stood on the edge of a great  
precipice, the wind at my back pushing me toward a  
fall I could neither stop nor escape.

I wondered how many others had come before me,  
standing where I now stood—held in the breathless  
moment before crossing into the unknown.

Had Sophie stood here? Had Émile?

The mirror's warning echoed in my mind: Do not enter alone again.

Who else had walked these steps?

Who might still be waiting?

The next morning, I awoke to the sound of the grandfather clock's steady, loud ticking.

It filled the apartment like a pulse, a heartbeat marking the passage of something not quite time.

I rose and moved toward the door of the chamber.

My fingers hovered over the knob.

I hesitated, then took a deep breath.

And stepped inside.

The spiral staircase wound downward like a ribbon, each step an invitation deeper into the dark.

The air grew cooler, damper.

My phone's light sliced through the black.

Each footfall echoed strangely—twice—once in front of me, and just behind, a soft shadow following a beat too late.

At the bottom, the chamber awaited.

The mirror stood tall and silent.

I approached it slowly, breath misting the glass.

Still no reflection.

But now, I could feel a difference.

The glass was almost humming with unseen energy.

A thin pulse, a vibration beneath my fingertips.

I pressed my palm once more against the cold surface.

This time, the sensation was stronger.

A low murmur rose in the air.

Not words.

Not yet.

But the sound of something waking.

The chamber itself seemed alive.

Over the days that followed, I returned again and again.

Each visit pulled me further in.

The mirror was no longer just an object.

It was a presence.

A threshold between what was, what is, and what might be.

Sometimes I felt Sophie's voice again, carried on the vibration of the glass.

Sometimes, I heard other whispers.

Fragments of conversations from another time.

Another life.

The boundaries between past and present, between memory and reality, began to blur.

I found myself questioning everything.

Was time really a line?

Or was it an abyss, as the Latin phrase in the sketch had said?

Was the mirror a door?

A test?

A trap?

One evening, as rain fell softly over the city, I brought the letter from Émile with me into the chamber.

I sat before the mirror and read it aloud again.

You will begin to lose chronology. Do not trust  
memory.

I let the words hang in the damp air.

I closed my eyes.

And when I opened them, the mirror was no longer  
empty.

Faint shapes moved beneath the surface—like  
ripples on dark water.

Faces. Places. Moments caught between seconds.

A parade of time itself.

And in that moment, I understood.

The mirror was not just a surface.

It was a memory.



A warning.

A gate.

And somewhere beyond it, Sophie waited.

# Chapter Six: Time Is Not A River

It was her face—Sophie’s face—that drew me back down into the chamber beneath Rue de Seine.

Not a memory, not a photograph from some lost file or a faded corner of my mind. No, this was something else. She had begun to appear in the spaces between things—in the hush between footfalls, in the silence after I turned a page, in the stillness that clings to early morning. She was there. Waiting.

It began with whispers.

First in dreams, then in those fragile seconds  
between waking and sleep, where thought has not  
yet hardened into certainty. Her voice came before  
her image, soft and haunting, always just beyond  
reach. She spoke not like a ghost, but like a woman  
deeply alive somewhere beyond the veil—  
somewhere I couldn't yet reach.

Her words came dressed in riddles, shaped by  
philosophy, laced with poetry.

She quoted Heraclitus in the way a child might hum  
a lullaby: gently, instinctively. No man ever steps  
into the same river twice, she whispered once.

But then she twisted it, as though the thought were  
hers now.

“Time is not a river,” she murmured inside the soft vault of my mind.

“But a hall of locked doors. And memory is the thief with too many keys.”

The way she said it—calm, mournful, steady—sounded like someone who had opened too many of those doors and forgotten what she had gone looking for.

I could no longer resist.

That night, I returned.

The chamber beneath the street seemed darker than before, though I hadn’t changed the lighting. The mirror still stood in the center, proud and still, but the air around it felt thicker, like a room

holding its breath. It no longer seemed like an object, but a witness.

The bronze frame shimmered faintly, not with light but with sound—a sound I could not quite hear, yet still felt. A low, deep resonance, like a cello string vibrating in an invisible tone. It wasn't music, but it moved through me all the same. I felt it in my chest, in my teeth, in the quiet place behind my eyes where dreams take shape before they are born.

This time, I came prepared.

I brought a notebook—blank pages waiting to be filled with meaning, or madness. A compass, though I doubted north would mean much in a place where time folded and turned like a sheet of paper in unseen hands. And a keepsake: an old brass pocket watch my father had given me when I was ten. It had never worked. Its hands had frozen

in some forgotten afternoon of childhood, and  
despite the years, I had kept it. Through school.  
Through heartbreak. Through the quiet fall of my  
career.

It had always been broken.

But now, as I stepped toward the mirror, I heard it.

Tick.

A single sound, soft as a breath.

I looked down.

The hands of the pocket watch were moving.

Slowly. Deliberately.

Backward.

They turned counterclockwise, steady as a heartbeat, each tick echoing with something ancient.

That should have stopped me.

It didn't.

I raised a hand and placed my fingers against the glass.

It was colder than any natural thing. Not the chill of winter or stone, but something deeper. A cold that belonged to places where light forgets to reach.

And then—I stepped forward.

There was no flash. No vortex of swirling color. No cinematic spectacle.

It was subtle. Intimate.

It felt like standing at the edge of your own breath—where the air you exhale no longer belongs to you, and the one you draw in is not entirely your own. It was like falling asleep, not in bed, but inside a moment. Like stepping into the quiet seam between thoughts, the breath between sentences, the hinge between seconds.

And then—

Stillness.

Not silence. Not emptiness. But stillness.

The kind of stillness that hums, quietly alive, vibrating with something just on the edge of happening.



When I opened my eyes, I was no longer in the chamber.

I was standing in a space I couldn't describe, though it felt achingly familiar.

It was not darkness, and yet there were no walls, no floor, no sky.

Everything shimmered slightly, as though the air were made of memory.

There was a sense of vastness, but also of closeness—as if the space was both infinite and folded tightly around me. A paradox wearing the skin of a room.

Light came from nowhere and everywhere, soft and silver-blue, casting no shadows. I felt unmoored, like a page torn from a book drifting in a place that had no wind, no weight, no time.

But I wasn't afraid.

I felt... known.

As if this place had been expecting me.

And then, somewhere just ahead, I saw her.

Sophie.

She stood with her back to me, hair gathered loosely at the nape, wearing the same navy coat I remembered from Oxford winters. Her posture was calm, still.

She didn't turn.

But she spoke.

"You came," she said.

Her voice was exactly as I remembered—warm,  
curious, threaded with wonder.

I tried to respond, but my voice caught in my  
throat.

She turned to face me, slowly.

Her eyes met mine.

And in them, I saw everything.

Joy. Sadness. Years lost and something deeper—  
knowledge heavy as stone, soft as dust.

We stood there in the not-space, not-time, looking  
at each other.

No words.

Not yet.

But in that gaze was a lifetime.

And behind her, countless doors floated in the air—  
each with a keyhole, each humming quietly like the  
strings of a forgotten instrument.

A hall of locked doors.

And I had just become the next thief.

# Chapter Seven: The Room That Breathed

There was no warning -

No lurch, no pull, no burst of light. No cinematic swirl or sudden fall. Just a quiet shift—so small I could've missed it if not for the strange heaviness that followed. It was like stepping into a thought you didn't know you were having. A gentle pressure filled the air, not on my body, but on something deeper. My heart? My memory? I couldn't say. But I felt it—an invisible weight, as if the place I had entered knew something about me that even I hadn't learned yet.

And then—without movement, without fanfare—I was there.

I stood in a chamber that looked, at first glance, nearly identical to the one I had just left beneath Rue de Seine. But this place felt... cleaned. Tended to. The stone walls were no longer cracked and damp but whitewashed and smooth, almost glowing. It was the kind of light you can't name—neither sunlight nor electricity—but it gave the room a soft, patient warmth, as if the stones themselves remembered years gone by and had grown kind because of it.

The shape of the chamber was familiar, but its contents were not. All around me, lining the walls in perfect rows, were clocks. Dozens. Hundreds. Maybe more. Each one carefully placed on wooden shelves that curved gently with the walls.

The clocks came in all forms—wristwatches, pocket watches, ornate mantel clocks, even hourglasses. But what caught my breath was that none of them were still.

Every single one ticked. Not together, not in some orderly pattern, but each in its own rhythm, like tiny hearts beating their own stories. Some ticked so fast they seemed frantic, desperate. Others were slow, patient, as if savoring each second. One small brass watch had no hands at all—but it pulsed gently, like a quiet breath or a thought trying to form.

There was no dust. No spiderwebs. No signs of time passing in the usual way. The room felt ancient and new at the same time. It wasn't abandoned, but it wasn't exactly lived in either. It was more like... remembered. As though this place had once been

forgotten, then quietly restored by hands that still respected its silence.

The air had a strange texture, like it carried echoes. I didn't hear words, but I felt them—whispers that had lived in this room long before me. The walls felt like they were listening.

And then I saw him.

He stood at the center of the chamber, his back to me, tall and still as a statue. He wore a gray three-piece suit that looked like it belonged to another century, the kind of clothing you only see in faded photographs. A silver pocket chain looped across his vest. His posture was perfect—not stiff, just... composed. Like someone who had stood in the same spot for so long that the world moved around him instead of the other way around.



He turned slowly, and I saw his face.

He didn't look old in the usual sense—not fragile or bent with age. But his face carried a kind of wear that went beyond years. His eyes were tired, not from sleep, but from seeing too much. His expression was thoughtful, calm. Like a man who had stopped chasing answers because he had started to understand the shape of questions.

“Welcome,” he said, his voice textured like gravel smoothed by time. “You came sooner than I expected.”

I stood still, unsure what to say.

“Who are you?” I finally asked.

He nodded slightly. “I was once Émile Valençon. But time does not allow names to stay fixed. They wear down, like stones in a river. Call me what you will. For now, I am the Keeper.”

He gestured toward the walls lined with ticking timepieces.

“These,” he said, “are the souls of those who crossed the mirror. Each one left something behind. Each one walked through time and tried to return.”

I stepped closer to one of the shelves. My fingers hovered just above the polished wood. Beneath each clock, I saw a small nameplate. Names carefully etched in elegant script. I read a few aloud in my mind, each one a life wrapped in a single line of text.

And then I saw it.

Sophie Lin — 2030.

Her name, right there, carved into brass. My breath caught. My hands went cold. It was real. She had come through. She had walked through the mirror, just like me. Maybe not recently—but not long from now, either. And then, next to hers, I saw another name.

Elian V. Arlen — ???

My name. But with no date. Just a question mark.

I turned toward him, voice low, uncertain. “She’s here?” I asked.

The Keeper nodded. “Somewhere,” he said. “The mirror doesn’t choose places—it chooses moments.

It sends each traveler to a fulcrum. A point in time where something must be decided. A moment that defines them.”

I stared back at the ticking clocks, each one steady in its own strange rhythm. Each one alive in its own way.

“If she’s here... why haven’t I found her?” I asked.

The Keeper looked at me with something like sorrow. “Because time isn’t kind. And it is never simple. You’ll meet her, if your memory survives.”

“Survives what?”

He looked away then, toward the shelves, his voice growing softer. “This place tests you. It takes from

you the things you rely on most—direction, chronology, certainty. Memory is the first to fade. Then reason. Then purpose. Only those who carry something stronger than fear make it through.”

He paused.

“Be warned,” he said finally, “Time has no mercy for those who wander without purpose.”

# Chapter Eight:

## Introduction For The

### Lost

He no longer called himself Émile.

The name was something he had left behind, like a coat that no longer fit. But I could still see traces of the man he used to be—hidden in the way he spoke, in the careful weight of each word, as if he measured their value before letting them go. There was a quiet dignity in his posture, a presence shaped by time itself. Whatever he chose to call himself now, to me, he would always be Émile Valençon—the name etched on the envelope left at

my door, the whisper that had reached through the mirror like a breath in the dark.

But here, in this place where time folded in on itself, names didn't matter. He was the Keeper now, and the role fit him like a second skin.

Without speaking, he turned and gestured for me to follow.

We moved through a narrow passage I hadn't noticed before. The stone walls curved inward like the ribs of a great animal, their surface smooth and warm to the touch, almost breathing. The corridor was silent but not still; it held a kind of anticipation, like it knew we were there. Each step felt both guided and inevitable, as though the path had been waiting for us all along.

The passage opened into a smaller chamber. At first, I wasn't sure what made it feel so different. There were no torches, no bulbs, no clear source of light—but the room glowed. Not brightly, but softly. The light felt alive, humming gently in the air like the low notes of a cello held just long enough to tremble.

In the center of the room stood a table.

It was made of walnut, polished smooth and deep as riverbed stone. The kind of wood that seems to carry stories in its grain, worn down not by age alone but by memory—by the weight of fingers tracing the same patterns again and again over years we can't count. It didn't shine, but it gleamed with a quiet patience. Like it knew its purpose and had never questioned it.

And there, resting on the table, was a map.



At least, that's what I thought it was—until I looked closer.

It didn't show countries or continents. No rivers winding across valleys, no borders drawn by war or history. No mountains or cities. Nothing you could hold a compass to.

It was something else entirely.

A map of time.

Moments were scattered across its surface like stars—some bright, others dim, all pulsing faintly, like heartbeats in deep space. The years didn't move in straight lines, but in curves and spirals, twisting back on themselves in delicate arcs. They met and parted, looped and collided, forming shapes that

didn't belong to any world I knew. Time here wasn't marching forward. It breathed. It bent. It sang.

I leaned closer. Some of the constellations of time looked familiar—years I recognized, events I remembered. Others were foreign, mysterious, too distant to understand. I could see threads connecting one moment to another—decisions, regrets, echoes. Each point was like a doorway, and each path seemed to wait for someone to choose it.

“It's not a map in the usual sense,” the Keeper said softly, standing beside me now. “It doesn't lead you across land. It leads you into choices. Into turning points.”

His voice was gentle but anchored. The kind of voice that doesn't ask for attention, but receives it anyway.

“This map doesn’t show where you are,” he continued. “It shows when you are. Or more precisely, when you could be. Each point is a moment where something changed—or could have.”

I stared at the patterns. My eyes kept landing on a small knot of time just off-center. It glowed faintly, like a candle seen through fog. I didn’t know why, but I felt drawn to it.

“What happens if you follow the wrong path?” I asked.

“There is no wrong path,” he said after a moment. “Only the one you carry. The map doesn’t decide—it only shows. It’s not about fate. It’s about remembering what matters when the world forgets you.”

He touched a point on the map—just lightly, with the tip of one finger—and the entire thing shimmered, as if alive.

I didn't speak. I just stood there, letting the silence wrap around me, letting the idea of it all unfold in my mind. A map not of where, but of when. A guide made of memory and choice. Of loss and return. A geography of the heart.

I thought of Sophie. Of her name on that brass plate. Of her voice in the mirror. And I wondered what moments she had walked through, what parts of herself she had lost and found again.

And then, almost without thinking, I reached out my hand.

Because somehow, I knew: I was already on the map. I had just never known how to read it.

I stared in awe, barely breathing.

Before me, the names of centuries glowed in soft gold along the surface of the map. They shimmered not with the mechanical clarity of printed ink, but like memories surfacing in a dream—familiar and strange in equal measure. Some dates I recognized instantly: turning points in history, personal anniversaries, collective reckonings. Others floated just beyond my understanding, stamped with years that hadn't yet arrived. Futures unspoken. Maybe futures that had already come and gone, elsewhere.

As I traced the curling loops of time with my eyes, the Keeper stepped forward again.

He reached down toward the map's edge and lifted a small object—delicate, circular, no larger than a pocket watch—and placed it gently into my open palm.

It fit perfectly. Weightless, yet somehow solid. Like holding breath.

The device looked like an antique compass at first glance, but it bore no markings. No numbers, no cardinal directions, no dial to follow. Its face was made of glass—cool to the touch, with a swirling vapor trapped inside. The cloud inside moved of its own accord, spiraling as if alive, like a storm pressed into crystal. Every few seconds, it pulsed faintly, as though it recognized the heat of my skin or the rhythm of my heartbeat.

The Keeper's voice broke the quiet.

“This,” he said, “will guide you to your next memory.”

I looked up, uncertain. “Not my next location?”

He gave a slow shake of the head. “There are no locations here,” he said. “Only times. Not fixed... layered. Overlapping. Tangled, like pages from a book dropped in a storm.”

His words made my stomach twist—not from fear, exactly, but from the weight of not knowing what I had stepped into. He let the silence sit a moment, as if allowing it to sink in.

“You must walk with care,” he said at last.

I turned the device over in my hand, hoping for some clue. Something hidden in its design. But it remained a mystery. Subtle movements stirred the vapor inside, responding, perhaps, to thought or feeling—or some deeper tether I hadn't yet understood.

I met his eyes. "What happens," I asked, slow and careful, "if I lose my way?"

His expression changed. Not sharply, but deeply. Something in his features tightened, not in anger, but in sorrow worn long enough to become part of him.

"Then you begin to forget who you were," he said.



The words were simple. But they carried a chill I hadn't felt before. A cold that didn't touch the skin, only the soul.

"Piece by piece," he went on. "Name. Memory. Shape. You start shedding the things that tether you to yourself. And once that goes—once the center cannot hold—what you were becomes irrelevant."

I swallowed hard, the device clutched a little tighter in my hand.

Instinctively, I tucked it into the inside pocket of my coat. It settled there as though it belonged, and for a brief moment, I felt its warmth pulse against me. A quiet heartbeat, small but present. As if it knew the shape of my breath, or recognized some secret of me I hadn't yet uncovered.

“Why me?” I asked quietly. “Why any of us? Why this path at all?”

The Keeper didn’t answer right away.

He tilted his head, thinking. The shadows around his face shifted, like the room was bending to him as much as he bent to it.

Then, at last, he said simply, “Because not everyone hears the clocks.”

He let the words rest in the air like dust settling in a still room. I waited, unsure if he would say more, and just when the silence began to stretch, he spoke again.

“It starts small,” he said, eyes not on me but on something I couldn’t see. “A feeling. A memory that doesn’t belong to your life. A street you recognize in a city you’ve never visited. Dreams of moments you couldn’t possibly have lived through—and yet...”

He trailed off, like the end of that sentence belonged to someone else.

His gaze sharpened, and for the first time, it felt like he was looking into me—not at me, but through the layers I carried.

“Only those whose souls resonate with temporal echoes are called,” he said.

“It begins as nostalgia. Then déjà vu. Then dreams,” he continued, “of places you’ve never been, yet remember in aching detail. Places that wait for you

in silence. People you've never met who already know your name."

I opened my mouth to reply, to ask what it meant, but he leaned in just slightly. When he spoke again, his voice was lower now, quieter. A truth spoken in the hush of confession.

"You have always belonged to time," he said. "But now... time belongs to you."

Then, gently, he placed one hand on my shoulder.

It was steady and warm, like the weight of someone anchoring you to yourself, just as the world begins to tilt. The moment his hand touched me, everything began to change.

The room around us—the clocks, the shelves, even the map—began to dissolve. Not violently, not like something breaking. But with a kind of mercy. Like frost retreating from glass. Like light fading beneath water.

And then—silence.

The kind of silence that only exists at the edge of something infinite.

# Chapter Nine : The Memory Of Smoke and Rain

I woke with a start, my breath catching in the cool morning air, but it was not the familiar chill of Paris.

There was a stillness to it—a different kind of quiet, more reserved. Heavier. I sat up slowly, blinking into the misty gray that had settled over the street like an exhale held too long. The ground beneath me was cobblestone, worn smooth by time and weather, slick with the sheen of a recent rain. A low fog crawled across it, curling around my boots as if it had been waiting for me.

For a moment, I didn't move. I simply breathed.

The scent was unmistakable—wet stone, coal smoke, something faintly floral hanging just beneath. Lavender? It clung to the morning like an old memory resurfacing, familiar but disjointed. It was not a fragrance I could place in the present, but something more elusive, like the way a dream sometimes leaves behind only the scent of a place you've never truly been.

I pushed myself to my feet, my limbs stiff, as if I'd been lying there longer than I realized. My coat felt heavier, and when I looked down, I saw that it wasn't mine—not the one I remembered from the chamber. This one was thick wool, cut in the fashion of another time, its edges lined with ornate brass buttons that gleamed in the gray light. My gloves, too, were different—soft leather, frayed

slightly at the seams, as though they'd seen years of use on hands that were not entirely mine.

I turned slowly, taking in the world around me.

The sign above my head read Baker Street Station, the letters gold and meticulous, almost too pure for the age of the soot-covered bricks they adorned. I could hear it now—the distant grind of wheels, the rhythmic hiss of steam, the clatter of iron on iron far beneath the street. A train. But not the kind I knew.

And then the people.

Men in tall hats and dark coats strode past, boots clicking against the stones, faces stern or preoccupied. Women moved with practiced grace, their skirts lifted ever so slightly above puddles,



eyes hidden beneath the brims of elaborate hats. They did not seem to see me—not truly—but neither did they seem surprised by my presence. As if I belonged here, even if I didn't.

My breath clouded before me. I was fully clothed, entirely intact, and yet... everything about me felt borrowed.

It was as if I'd slipped into the skin of another man, one who belonged to this hour, this era, this London. A version of myself that lived not in memory or dream, but in this strange and layered truth of time. I could feel the weight of his coat, the ache in his joints, the stories woven into his gloves. My reflection, should I find one, might have shown a stranger's face wearing my eyes.

The sensation was not fear, exactly. It was deeper than that. A kind of dislocation of soul. As if my

thoughts had stepped too far ahead of my body, and now the rest of me had to catch up.

I closed my eyes and inhaled, trying to center myself, to anchor my thoughts.

The scent of coal was stronger now. The street echoed with the life of a city not quite awake, but not entirely asleep. Horse hooves clattered somewhere in the mist. A child's voice called out and was lost in the damp.

It was real.

All of it.

And yet it wasn't.

The timepiece. That thought rose suddenly, and my hand moved instinctively to my pocket. My fingers brushed against the cool, smooth edge of the device the Keeper had given me. I hadn't remembered taking it with me, but of course I had. It was part of me now, as essential as breath. I pulled it free and cupped it in my palm.

There it was.

Still pulsing. Still alive.

Inside the glass orb, the vapor swirled gently, like breath caught inside crystal. It moved with purpose, as though it knew exactly where it was and where I was meant to go. The pulse was steady now, not frantic—like a heartbeat guiding me forward, like a whisper reminding me that I had come here for something.

For someone.

I didn't know where I was headed, not yet. But I understood this much:

This wasn't an accident. This moment, this place, this borrowed identity—it was part of the thread I had chosen to follow when I stepped through the mirror. Part of a memory too big to hold all at once.

Somewhere ahead, something waited.

And then I felt it again: the faint pulse from my pocket.

The memory compass—the strange device the Keeper had given me—had begun to vibrate again, a soft hum, as though urging me onward.

It was subtle at first, like the faint buzzing of a distant bell, but it grew steadier as I reached into my coat. My fingers wrapped around the cool brass casing, familiar now, as though it had always been mine. I pulled it free and watched as the orb at its center stirred to life. The vapor within it swirled, not chaotically, but with intention—slow, precise, as though it knew exactly where it needed to go.

The smoky tendrils inside began to stretch and curl, pointing in the direction of the street ahead, as though the device were a compass not of direction, but of memory. Not of north or south, but of when.

I followed it.

My boots clicked softly over the slick cobblestones as the morning light deepened to a gentle gold. The

fog clung to the city like a second skin, muffling sound, swallowing time. London unfolded before me in fragments—lamp-lit streets with wrought-iron posts, horse-drawn carriages rumbling distantly, buildings that bore the elegance of age and the weight of untold stories.

The deeper I walked, the more unreal it became—not because it wasn't real, but because it felt like I was walking inside a story someone had forgotten to write down. A version of London both remembered and invented.

I turned corners led not by memory, but by instinct, by the soft tug of the compass in my hand. Down narrow alleys where ivy crawled up soot-stained brick. Past shopfronts with windows too dusty to reflect my face. There was a strange kind of stillness here, not lifeless but suspended. As if everything I saw was holding its breath.

And then I stopped.

There, at the end of the lane, stood a modest townhouse—plain, proper, unmistakably English. The number above the door gleamed softly in the diffused morning light.

221B Baker Street.

I stared at it for a long time. A ridiculous coincidence, I thought. The stuff of fiction. A detail too neat, too deliberate, to be real. I laughed quietly to myself, the sound awkward in the thick morning air.

But the laughter died before it could leave my lips.

Because in the window of that most famous fictional address, framed in the fog like a portrait long hidden, stood Sophie Lin.

At first, I couldn't breathe.

She was older now—her features more defined, her posture more assured—but I would have known her in any time. In any world. Her hair was pulled back in a way that drew attention to her eyes, the same eyes that had once watched the Thames ripple from the footbridge at Oxford. Eyes that had once held so much curiosity, so much wonder, now shadowed by something quieter. Something deeper.

She was real. Here. Not a ghost, not a memory, but undeniably her.



She didn't speak, not right away. She just watched me, like she'd been waiting. Her silhouette against the glass shimmered faintly in the light, and then she turned—slowly, deliberately—her gaze meeting mine as if no time had passed at all.

Recognition flickered in her eyes. A moment. A spark.

And then she nodded.

That simple gesture carried a weight I couldn't begin to unpack. It broke the paralysis that had gripped me. It pulled breath back into my lungs.

As if time, cruel as it could be, had granted us this brief moment of grace.

"I hoped you would come," she said, her voice barely more than a murmur, yet it reached me like a song I had half-forgotten. Low, steady, with that same melancholic undertone I remembered from Oxford—when she spoke about time like it was a person, not a concept. "But I feared you'd forgotten the way."

Her words twisted something in me. Not pain, not joy. Something older. I didn't know what to say at first. I could only stare at her—older, yes, changed—but still her.

"How are you here?" I asked. The question left my lips before I could weigh it. It sounded too small for what I felt, but it was all I had.

She held my gaze, her expression softening—not with pity, but with understanding.

“Because this is where I lost myself,” Sophie said, and the words hung between us like a thread drawn tight. “And now, it’s where you’ll begin to lose yourself too.”

She turned and stepped away from the window. The door opened without a creak, as if it had been waiting for me, too. I hesitated only a moment before crossing the threshold.

Inside, the air was still and warm. The flat was not what I expected.

There was no clutter. No pipes strewn about, no violin perched on a chair. No trace of Holmes or Watson or the elaborate fiction that had made this address legendary.

Instead, the walls were covered in maps.

Dozens. No—hundreds. Taped, pinned, spread across every surface, curling at the edges, yellowed with age. But these weren't ordinary maps. They didn't chart cities or rivers or mountain ranges. They charted time.

Each one bore lines that bent and folded in impossible ways. There were dates scrawled in the corners—some centuries past, others that hadn't happened yet. Arrows connected events like constellations. Notes in different hands filled the margins. Some in ink. Others in what looked like graphite. One even burned into the paper itself.

Each map was a theory. A memory. A warning.

I stepped closer to one that depicted Paris in 1897. Another marked an unrecognizable year—4182—crossed out in red.

My heart pounded.

Because these weren't just timelines. They were footprints.

The stories of those who had walked time before me. And, perhaps, those who had never returned.

The flat was nothing like the stories. There was no clutter, no pipes, no violin playing in the background. Instead, the walls were lined with maps—hundreds of them. They were pinned and taped to every available surface, each map a patchwork of dates, places, and histories that no one had ever lived.

The maps were not ordinary.

They curled slightly at the edges, some yellowed and delicate, others crisp with fresh ink. Each one carried a story that didn't quite sit right in the known history books. Cities were named, yes—Paris, 1821; Cairo, 2049; New York, 1929—but their coordinates didn't just belong to space. They were fixed in moments. In events. In something deeper.

One map had its top-right corner folded over, revealing a small red circle inked around a pair of words that sent a chill through me.

Black Tuesday.

The ink had bled slightly through the paper, like the moment itself had tried to escape its confinement. I stared at it, tracing the circle with my eyes, trying to

remember what I knew—stock markets, collapse, panic. But here, the way it was marked...it looked different. Like it wasn't just an economic catastrophe. Like it was something else entirely.

Sophie stood beside me now, her presence quiet, composed.

"I've been cataloguing the fractures," she said. Her voice had a tired edge, like she'd been saying this to herself for years before finally speaking it aloud.

"Points in history where reality split. Not visibly, not in a way you'd notice in the newspapers. But... you feel it. In your chest. In your bones."

She gestured toward the wall, where dozens of other maps bore similar red circles. Each one carried a name—The Tunguska Light, The Silent Hour, The Alexandria Rift—none of them things I remembered

learning, yet all of them felt oddly familiar, like I had once read them in a dream.

“Echoes,” Sophie added. “Moments where something changed, though no one remembers it happening. Not clearly, anyway. It’s like waking up from a dream and knowing you were someone else for a while—but the details vanish before you can grasp them.”

“We’re caught in those fractures now,” she finished, almost as a whisper.

I didn’t know how to respond. My fingers twitched slightly at my side, reaching for the compass in my pocket without really thinking. I wanted to hold it, to feel something stable. But even it, with its pulsing core and strange warmth, didn’t feel solid anymore.



I swallowed the knot forming in my throat and asked the question that had been waiting at the edge of my mind since I'd first arrived.

“And the mirror?” I said. “The one I’ve been searching for?”

Sophie didn’t answer right away. Her eyes moved across the maps like she was scanning for something—maybe a memory, maybe an explanation.

“There are many mirrors,” she said at last. Her voice was slower now, as if she were no longer entirely in the room. “But only one origin.”

I frowned. “Origin?”

She turned toward me, the look in her eyes darker now, heavier. “And it’s in the year 0.”

It didn’t register at first. The phrase didn’t quite make sense. Year 0 wasn’t even a real thing, was it? Calendars didn’t count that way. There was 1 BCE, and then 1 CE. But I saw in her expression that this wasn’t about calendars. This was about something else entirely.

Something before.

I couldn’t breathe for a moment. The weight of her words pressed down on me, steady and unrelenting. The origin of everything. The place where time hadn’t yet found its shape. Where it had no spine, no rhythm. Just a breath in the dark. A ripple that would grow into centuries.

And I understood then, in a way that didn't require logic or clarity.

We weren't chasing a moment.

We were chasing the first tear in the fabric of reality. The one that began it all.

And maybe—just maybe—we were chasing ourselves through it.

I looked back at the maps, at the scrawled notes, at the impossible patterns that danced across paper like veins under skin. I felt it then—not fear exactly, but a deep, steady unraveling. Like a sweater tugged from the hem.

Because this wasn't about finding answers.

This was about surrendering to something that  
couldn't be mapped or measured.

I wasn't just walking through history. I was losing  
myself in it.

# Chapter Ten: The Silence Between Seconds

The maps whispered.

Not in any literal sense, of course. No audible voices spoke from the parchment. But the silence was not empty. It pulsed—steady and deep—with a presence. The kind of hush you only find in places weighed down by memory. Like the quiet you feel, not hear, when you walk into an old chapel. Or when you open a letter from someone long gone. It filled the space around us, thick and patient, wrapping itself around each map like a breath that hadn't yet been let go.

They didn't speak with words, but they murmured just the same. Through their creases, through their age, through the way they seemed to inhale the room's light and breathe it back out again in shadow. You could feel it—the years sitting beneath your skin, the hum of history in your bones. If you closed your eyes and listened, really listened, you might start to think someone else was in the room with you. Not physically. But their presence lingering, quiet and constant. Like you'd walked in on something that had been waiting.

Each map had its own tone, its own kind of silence. Some were brittle and smelled of smoke. Others were softer, linen-like, almost cloth, and carried the scent of old cedar or something faintly herbal, like dried thyme. But none of them were just maps. Not really. They were more like keys. Doors folded flat. Waiting.

Sophie stood at the center of it all, half in shadow. Her hand hovered over a map of Berlin, dated 1921. The parchment had yellowed unevenly, and the ink bled slightly into the grain. She moved her fingers slowly across it, not touching yet, as though asking permission.

Then, gently, she let her index finger rest on a hand-drawn circle.

The ink was rust-red, like dried blood or old wine, and it had been traced not once, but several times, as if the cartographer hadn't trusted themselves to get it right the first time. Inside the ring, faded lettering read:

“The Fracture”

Her finger stayed there for a long moment. I could almost hear her breathing slow, as if she, too, had become part of the silence.

All around her, the room was an ocean of maps, each layered over the next in an impossible geometry. The walls, the tables, even the slant of the ceiling had given themselves over to the sprawl. Red, white, and silver thread connected the maps in lines that shimmered when the light hit just right. It reminded me of a nervous system—fragile, intricate, alive.

Pinned to the junctions were notes in dozens of languages, their edges curling, their ink faded like they'd been handled by too many hands. Beside them, etched into corners or drawn across margins, were symbols I couldn't name. Some sharp, like runes. Others soft and winding, like a melody turned into shape.



Some geometric, some so abstract they felt like music rendered in ink.

I stood frozen at the threshold, my eyes wide, struggling to absorb it all. The room was spinning, not physically, but in the way your mind spins when it's trying to make sense of something that logic alone can't carry. I couldn't move. Not because I was afraid, but because something sacred had settled over everything—like the pause in the air before a storm breaks or the breath you hold when reading a final sentence that somehow changes everything.

This wasn't just a room filled with maps. That much was clear now. This was something else entirely—something deeper and older. It was a chamber of memory. A space stitched together by all the pieces of time that had slipped through cracks too narrow

for ordinary minds to follow. It wasn't a library. It wasn't an archive. It was a reckoning. A cartography of everything time had tried to bury. A living testament to fractures in history that were never meant to be stitched back together.

Sophie didn't look at me. She was still touching the Berlin map, lost in some quiet remembering of her own. Then her voice came—low, steady, distant. Like it had traveled a great distance just to get here.

“I began mapping these after I crossed the mirror in Shanghai,” she said.

She didn't speak it like a fact. It came out like a memory pulled from a place she hadn't wanted to return to. Her voice carried the weight of someone digging up something fragile and too important to leave buried.

Her hand dropped from the map, fingers curling softly at her side.

“Things changed after that,” she continued. “I didn’t understand it at first. I thought I was seeing ghosts of places, but I was seeing possibilities. Unwritten versions of the world. Edges that didn’t match anymore. Roads that once led one way now led somewhere else.”

I didn’t respond. Couldn’t. I felt the room folding inward, tighter and tighter, like the walls were inhaling. My breath felt caught between then and now.

“The fractures,” she said, her voice thinner now, “they’re not accidents. They’re questions time asked but never answered. Some travelers... are the answers.”

Her words echoed through me like a stone dropped into still water. Each syllable rippled, tugging at something deeper than reason. I stepped forward without realizing it, drawn into the tapestry she had built. There was a rhythm in the chaos—something in the way it all connected that felt deliberate, even kind. This wasn't just a record. It was a language. A pulse. A structure made not of stone and steel but of forgotten paths and possibilities.

My hand trembled slightly as I reached toward the maps. I hovered just above a sepia-toned map of Lisbon, 1755. There, a crimson thread cut through the city's heart, running jaggedly across buildings and shoreline. It veered off sharply and ended somewhere in Kyoto, 1868. My fingertips hovered just above it, and I swear—I could feel the pulse underneath the parchment. A quiet thrum. Like the echo of a heartbeat not my own.

“You said I’d lose myself here,” I whispered, barely trusting my voice to hold.

Sophie didn’t turn. She was staring at a far wall, where three threads crossed in the shape of a broken star.

She nodded slowly. “Every time traveler does,” she said, her voice barely audible now. “Not suddenly. Not violently. It happens the moment you begin to question your own memories. A tiny crack forms in the certainty of who you are. And time... it seeps in through that crack. It begins to blur the edges. To paint over your certainties.”

Her eyes seemed to look through the present, past it, as if watching something unfold behind the thin curtain of now. I watched her carefully, trying to detect any hint of exaggeration, any flair of performance. There was none. Her tone was not

theatrical. It was resigned. Quiet. Like someone who had stopped trying to convince anyone else, and was now only reminding herself.

The lines around her eyes weren't from age. They were the marks of distance—of long wandering through memories that didn't always belong to her. She looked like someone who had lived ten lives in half the time.

Then, without a word, she stepped to a tall stack of pages beside her and retrieved a single folded sheet. She handed it to me with a certain reverence. The way one might hand over a family heirloom or the last letter someone ever wrote.

I took it gently. The paper felt wrong in my hands—not in a bad way, just... different. Old, certainly. But more than that. Like it had been waiting for me. It crackled beneath my fingers as I unfolded it,

delicate as burnt leaves. And though the corners had softened with time, the ink on the page was still bold, urgent. As though the writer had just finished it and stepped out the door.

And in sharp, unwavering letters, the message read:

Eliau V. Arlen, you must go to Prague, 1584. Find Johannes Kepler. He has seen the diagrams.

Be careful. The Inquisition hunts minds that bend light backward.

I stared at the note in my hands, the paper crinkling softly as if it were alive, breathing beneath my fingertips. My heart thudded in my chest—not just from the weight of the message, but from the name itself. “Kepler?” I whispered, the word barely more than a breath. It trembled between my lips like a secret too big to hold.

Johannes Kepler. Not just a name from dusty textbooks or the faint echo of distant lectures in school. Here, in this room, filled with maps and threads and whispered histories, he was something else entirely. A waypoint. A thread woven deep into the tapestry of fractured time. Somehow, impossibly, he was one of us.

Sophie's eyes didn't leave the map. Her gaze was locked on a pattern etched in golden ink—a kind of sunburst radiating outward, faint and glowing, as though the ink itself held a secret light. She spoke almost under her breath.

“He wasn't just an astronomer,” she said slowly, carefully, as if testing the words against the air. “He was one of us.”



Her voice dropped even lower, and I leaned in without realizing it, drawn into the space between her words.

“The mirror,” she continued, “showed him the engine of the universe. It’s not something you can forget—once you’ve seen it, it clings to your mind like a shadow, like a memory you don’t quite own.”

I tightened my grip on the letter, feeling the fragile edges beneath my fingers, as if it held the pulse of something ancient and alive.

“So what did he do?” I asked quietly, the question slipping out before I could hold it back.

Sophie didn’t answer immediately. Instead, she looked at me with a softness that felt almost

mournful—like she was pitying me for the truths I was about to carry.

“He tried to describe it the only way he knew how,” she said at last, her voice low and steady. “Through laws and equations. Numbers that could be written down, studied, accepted. Science is something people trust. So he hid the truth inside it.”

She paused, and her eyes darkened with a weight I didn’t fully understand yet.

“But what he really saw—what he truly understood—was that light doesn’t just travel forward. It listens. It remembers. It folds back on itself.”

The words hung between us, strange and beautiful, and I felt my mind scrambling to grasp the

meaning. Light that listens. Light that remembers.  
Not a simple beam cutting through the darkness,  
but something alive, something that bends and  
folds time itself.

I looked down at the letter again, cradling it like a  
fragile thing. The ink seemed to pulse faintly, like  
the faint heartbeat of the past calling out through  
the centuries.

“But why Prague?” I asked finally, my voice low, the  
question forming before I even fully understood it  
myself.

Sophie turned toward me then, her face softening,  
the lines around her eyes deepening with something  
close to sorrow. There was a kind of tenderness in  
her gaze, like she was handing me a truth wrapped  
in caution.

“Because that’s where your next memory is buried,” she said quietly, carefully. “You think you’re whole now, but you’re not. Not yet.”

Her words settled over me like a dense fog. I felt the weight of them sinking into my bones.

“You left something behind,” she said, “in that city, in that year. Something important. Something you don’t remember yet.”

I swallowed hard, trying to steady the sudden rush of questions flooding my mind. What had I left behind? What part of myself had I abandoned, hidden deep in the folds of history?

Sophie’s eyes seemed to soften even further, and she gave a small, almost imperceptible nod.

“Kepler saw it,” she said simply. “And he left something behind for you.”

For a moment, the room around us felt suspended in time, the maps and threads fading into shadows at the edges of my vision. The silence stretched between us—not empty or cold, but full. Dense with everything we hadn’t said, everything we couldn’t say.

It wasn’t just a silence between words. It was a silence between seconds—between moments that had waited, patiently and unseen, for centuries to be heard.

The kind of silence that hums quietly beneath the surface of everything. A silence that feels like the space between heartbeats. The pause before a story begins again.

# Chapter Eleven: The Cartographer Of The Stars

Prague, 1584.

The city stretched out before me like a story carved from the folds of time itself—ancient, worn, and thick with whispered secrets. From the vantage point on the hill, I could see the rooftops laid out like a patchwork quilt of burnt clay and slate, the tangled maze of streets winding beneath the soaring spires and stone towers. Each building seemed to hold a fragment of a memory, a fragment of a dream I had never dared to claim as my own—until now.

The cathedrals rose like prayers etched in stone, their jagged silhouettes stabbing into the sky, as if seeking some divine answer beyond the reach of mortal voices. The city pulsed quietly beneath them, cloaked in mist and shadow, its narrow alleys curling like serpents in a silent, sinuous dance. Smoke spiraled upward from hearth fires and oil lamps, blurring the sharp edges where earth met sky, wrapping the world in a veil of soft grey that seemed to hold its breath, waiting.

I breathed in, the air thick with the scent of burning wood mingled with damp stone and the faint tang of old ink. It was the smell of centuries pressing down, layered and stubborn, refusing to be forgotten. Bells tolled from some distant chapel, their solemn notes hanging heavy in the air—not simply marking the hour, but mourning every hour that had slipped away, lost to time’s ceaseless tide.

The city wasn't just alive—it breathed. Beneath the worn facades and crumbling walls, beneath the footsteps of the living, there was something ancient stirring, like a heartbeat buried deep beneath the ruin. A presence older than the stones themselves.

I glanced down at myself and stopped cold.

The robes I wore were unfamiliar—dark velvet, heavy and rich, embroidered with strange symbols tracing along the hems and cuffs. Gold thread shimmered faintly in the overcast light, twisting and curling like whispers of a language long forgotten but still spoken by those who knew how to listen. The fabric was both a weight and a shield, carrying with it a history I couldn't yet understand.

At my waist, a thick wax seal hung from a leather cord—a crest I recognized immediately: the emblem of the Holy Roman Empire. The seal was unbroken,



pristine as if untouched by time or fate. My fingers trembled as I touched it, the cold wax hard beneath my skin, its silence louder than any sound in the city around me. It was a reminder that I belonged here, but also that I was an intruder, caught between moments that should never meet.

In the pocket of my robe, the memory compass pulsed. Not with the urgency of something lost or forgotten, but with a slow, insistent rhythm, like a heartbeat calling out in the dark. The needle wavered, trembling with a quiet eagerness—not pointing toward any place, but toward a moment, a point in time I had yet to reach. It tugged at me, pulling me forward through the fog of the past.

I took a tentative step down from the hill, my boots crunching on the worn gravel. The cobblestones beneath me glistened faintly with the remnants of an earlier rain, and the city's breath seemed to

follow me as I moved, heavy with expectation. Each step carried me deeper into the maze of history, the memory compass a silent guide that refused to let me stray.

Around me, the sounds of Prague unfolded—merchants shouting in the market, the clatter of horse hooves on stone, the murmur of voices in alleys where shadows hid like secrets. The city was alive with life, but beneath that life, I could feel the undercurrent of something else: the weight of forgotten truths, the fractures in time Sophie had warned me about.

I paused beneath an ancient archway, its stonework worn smooth by countless hands. My eyes caught the flicker of movement—a figure, slipping silently through the fog, disappearing before I could focus. Was it a trick of light? A ghost? Or someone like me, lost between moments?

The memory compass pulsed again, steady and sure now, its pull growing stronger, as if urging me toward something just beyond the veil of perception.

I pressed on, each breath drawing me closer to the memory buried deep within this city—an echo waiting to be found, a fragment of myself left behind in the folds of a year long past.

Prague was more than a place; it was a crossroads where time folded in on itself, where the past and present tangled until they were impossible to separate. Here, in this city of spires and shadows, I was beginning to understand what Sophie meant—that I was not whole yet, that there were pieces of me scattered across centuries, waiting to be reclaimed.

And so I walked, the compass steady in my pocket,  
the wax seal heavy at my waist, following the slow,  
insistent

pulse that guided me forward into the heart of the  
fracture.

I moved through the city like a shadow—unseen but  
present, slipping quietly between the narrow alleys  
and bustling squares of Prague. The sounds around  
me were a tangle of languages—Czech voices  
bartering over prices, the clipped rhythm of Latin  
from withdrawn scholars, and the rough bark of  
German merchants hawking dried herbs,  
parchment, and baked bread. Their calls mingled  
with the clatter of horse hooves on stone and the  
distant chime of bells marking the passing hours.

I felt oddly detached, as if my presence in this place  
belonged to another time, another self. The heavy

velvet robes weighed on me, the embroidered gold threads catching faint glimmers of the weak sunlight breaking through the overcast sky. I brushed my fingers lightly over the wax seal hanging from my belt—still unbroken, perfectly preserved, a silent testament to some mission or message I had yet to understand fully.

The compass pulsed steadily in my pocket, its soft vibrations growing stronger as I neared the Old Town Square. I paused just beyond the cluster of vendors and merchants to gaze up at the Astronomical Clock. It loomed over the square like a relic (object surviving from a long time) of an era when time was something to be revered, not rushed. The great golden ring traced slow circles, marking the heavens, not minutes; the hands moved not with the tick-tock of a watch but with the gravity of epochs. Time here was not a straight line but a spiral, folding over itself, refusing to be pinned down.

The memory compass in my hand trembled, its needle quivering as though uncertain yet desperate to guide me onward. I followed its pull away from the square, threading through silent walkaway where the air smelled faintly of dust and old prayers. The stone corridors echoed faintly with the footsteps of monks long gone, their chants lingering like ghosts between the thick walls.

At last, I found myself in front of a church whose stone was weathered and wrapped in thick ivy, the green tendrils clinging stubbornly to the ancient walls. The heavy wooden doors rose before me like gates guarding a secret too heavy for the daylight. Taking a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding, I pushed through into the cool darkness inside.

The air was thick with incense, curling in delicate spirals that caught the stained-glass windows' muted light. Rays of violet and gold fractured the

shadows, painting the stone floor with bruised colors. The silence was profound, a stillness that felt like the holding of a breath across centuries.

Behind a worn tapestry, barely hanging on rusty hooks, I discovered a narrow spiral staircase carved from stone. The steps were uneven, worn by the weight of countless feet. Each creaked beneath my boots as I climbed higher, the air growing warmer and heavier, scented with melted wax and the mustiness of old paper. My heartbeat quickened with a strange mixture of anticipation and dread.

At the top of the stairs, the chamber opened into a small room, barely larger than a closet. It was cluttered with curious instruments—brass rings and astrolabes, rolled scrolls tied with faded ribbons, and celestial charts covered in minute markings. The light came from a single flickering candle that cast trembling shadows on the walls.

Leaning over a wooden desk was Johannes Kepler. His figure was slight, his shoulders bent from years of study and strain. His fingers moved with deliberate precision, adjusting the arms of an astrolabe that looked older than the chamber itself. There was a quiet intensity in his work, as if every motion were a careful extraction of hidden truths from the stars.

I watched him in silence, feeling a strange connection, as if he were a tie with a rope in the tangled web of time I had been unraveling. Here was a man who had glimpsed the universe in ways most couldn't comprehend, who had felt the pull of light and shadow bending backward through the ages.

The compass pulsed fiercely now, urging me forward, but something held me rooted in that moment—the weight of centuries pressing down,



the gravity of the unknown stirring in the air  
between us.

I swallowed hard, unsure if I should speak or  
remain silent in the presence of someone who had  
become more legend than man.

And yet, despite the strange certainty pulling me  
here, the question lingered in my mind like a  
whisper from a half-remembered dream: What had  
Kepler left behind for me? What memory buried in  
this city, in this year, was waiting to be found?

The compass pulsed—slowly, insistently. The  
needle trembled like a frightened thing, uncertain  
but eager. It was not pointing toward a destination  
in space, but in time. Its pull had brought me here.

His hair was wild and tangled, his eyes sunken deep with exhaustion, but there was a fierce light burning inside them—a flicker of something too immense to hold back. It wasn't just madness; it was the kind that comes from seeing too much truth, too quickly.

“You're late,” he said without even glancing up.

The certainty in his voice caught me off guard. It wasn't loud or angry, just... definite, like we'd been speaking in a conversation that never actually started.

“Were you expecting me?” I asked, uncertain if I was more curious or uneasy.

Kepler finally turned to face me. His eyes, dark and unwavering, studied my face carefully. “I see you in

the diagrams,” he said, tapping the parchment beside him with a slender, ink-stained finger.

“You stand at the fourth intersection. The place where time begins to disobey.”

I stepped closer, careful now. The parchment was unlike anything I’d ever laid eyes on—filled with sprawling symbols, perfect circles intertwined with jagged, unfamiliar shapes. Stars were mapped beside ruins. Arcs of light bent backwards in impossible curves. Latin phrases fluttered along the edges, like tiny creatures trapped in starlight.

One phrase caught my eye, written in delicate, looping script:

Sine Tempore

—Without Time.

Leaning forward, Kepler's eyes gleamed. "You come from a century that's forgotten wonder," he said softly. "You ask too many questions and believe too few answers."

His words cut through me—not as an allegation, but as a quiet sorrow.

"I was told you could help me," I said, fighting to keep my voice steady.

"I can," he replied, "but nothing comes free—not even understanding."

I braced myself, expecting him to ask for gold, loyalty, or some secret in exchange. Instead, he reached beneath his desk, fingers brushing

something hidden in the shadows. He pulled out a small, jagged piece of obsidian—flat, polished, glowing faintly like it held a fragment of dying starlight.

It pulsed once as he placed it gently on the table in front of me, the light flickering in time with my heartbeat.

“This,” he said sincerely & formally , “came from the First Mirror.”

I stepped back instinctively. A cold breath seemed to crawl along my spine, as if the shard itself had exhaled.

“It remembers the moment time was born,” Kepler whispered.

“What do I do with it?” I asked, though part of me already knew.

He met my eyes, voice dropping to a reverent hush.  
“Look. And you will see what you have already begun.”

My hands trembled as I picked up the shard. It was lighter than I imagined—but the cold was unbearable, biting into my skin like the harshest winter. As I looked into it, the world around me slipped away.

My reflection twisted and fractured, no longer one but three.

One version of me stood soaked in shadow, weeping and clutching something unseen with desperate hands.

Another laughed wildly, eyes gleaming with joy or madness—it was impossible to tell which.

The third was silent, still, mouth open in a scream I couldn't hear.

My breath caught, frozen.

The shard pulsed in my hand—not with song, but with memory. I saw cities I'd never been to. I heard my name whispered in voices that were not my own.

I felt myself standing in many places all at once—on rooftops, in graveyards, inside cathedrals and beside oceans. I saw mirrors—countless mirrors—each one shattering as I stepped through it.

Then the visions vanished.

I gasped, almost dropping the shard.

Kepler remained calm, watching me patiently, as if he'd expected this all along.

"You've begun the fracture," he said gently. "And you must carry it. Until it carries you."

I closed my hand around the shard, feeling its cold burn sear into my palm, as if it was engraving itself onto my very memory.

"What happens next?" I whispered.

Kepler turned back to his diagrams without hesitation.



“You chase yourself now. Through time, through memory, through meaning. The shard will show you where to go. But not where to stop.”

Outside, a bell tolled, its sound echoing through the bones of the tower. Time was passing—or maybe returning. I wasn’t sure anymore.

I tucked the shard away, my fingers brushing its cold surface.

I didn’t know what I had just begun.

But I knew I couldn’t turn back.

# Chapter Twelve: The Archivists

After Prague, time lost its straight lines. It no longer moved forward like a river. It twisted. Curled back on itself. Spilled sideways through cracks I didn't even know existed. I stopped trying to count the days. Or the years. Or whatever they were now. Each step forward felt more like falling in slow motion through memories that weren't always mine.

I kept crossing thresholds—places, times, fragments of other people's lives stitched into my own. The thread that connected everything... it was fraying. Or maybe I was. The world around me had started to feel like glass right before it shatters—held together by nothing but tension and inevitability.

And then I found them.

Or maybe—maybe they found me.

The Archivists.

I'd come to Istanbul chasing a historian. Or that's what I told myself. But in truth, I wasn't chasing anything anymore. Things were chasing me. Or drawing me in. Istanbul was layered—so layered it felt like it had lived multiple lives and remembered all of them. The air tasted like centuries. Mosques stood where churches once had. Marble stones were worn smooth by millions of forgotten footsteps.

I moved through the Grand Bazaar, aimless but not lost. I touched fabrics I didn't need, fingered old

rings and rusted keys, as if they might remember something I didn't. The place was alive, humming with echoes. I kept seeing strange symbols—burned into tiles, chalked onto crumbling walls, scratched beneath iron balconies.

Circles within circles. A mirror inside a mirror.

I didn't know what it meant then. But it followed me.

A man selling clocks—an old one with no visible age—called out to me in a language I didn't know but somehow understood. He didn't ask for money. He didn't even ask my name. He pressed a folded scrap of paper into my hand like it had always belonged there. Didn't say a word. Didn't look me in the eye.

The paper was blank. Until I tilted it toward the light. Then, slowly, a word began to bloom across the surface like ink blooming in water:

Below.

I didn't sleep that night. Something in me already knew where to go.

The Hagia Sophia waited like it always had—silent, massive, tired of being rewritten. Church, mosque, museum—it had been all of them. Maybe still was. None of its identities had fully faded. They just overlapped, like paint on old canvas.

It didn't feel like a place anymore. It felt like a question someone had stopped asking.

I wandered through the outer courtyard long after the last tourists were gone. I don't know what I was looking for. I wasn't even sure what I was following. But then—something shifted beneath me. A tile sank under my boot, just slightly, just enough. There was no dramatic sound, only a faint exhale. Like the city itself had recognized me.

I pressed again. The stone moved deeper. And a nearby wall—blank, aged, familiar—unfolded inward.

No grand passage. No dramatic reveal. Just silence. And steps.

I went down.

The descent felt longer than it should have. I kept expecting it to end. It didn't. The air changed. Grew

thicker. Older. I could smell stone, dust, maybe myrrh—or something close to it. The kind of scent that lingers in ancient libraries and forgotten tombs.

And then, light.

Not fire. Not electricity. But a pale silver glow that spilled from above. The space I entered wasn't a room. It was something deeper. An atrium carved into the body of the city.

Twelve figures stood in a circle.

They didn't move. Didn't speak. They wore long robes that shimmered like oil in water. Their faces were hidden behind masks—bone, copper, obsidian. Not decorative. Not ceremonial. Masks that felt like identities worn too long.

The light came from the ceiling—a dome overhead, etched with constellations. They pulsed, soft and slow, like breath. Not stars. Not exactly. Something else. Something older.

Memorylight.

And still, they didn't speak. Not with mouths. But I knew—somehow—I had been seen. Known. Named. The air carried it. A vibration that moved over my skin like sound without sound.

Then one stepped forward. The tallest. Their mask was black glass, like frozen shadow. When they spoke, the voice echoed somewhere deeper than my ears.



“You are a Key.”

The voice wasn't male. Or female. It floated between both, yet older than either. It didn't speak to me. It remembered me.

“We have waited many lifetimes.”

And suddenly, I wasn't scared. I wasn't confused. I was something else entirely.

I felt the pull of something ancient and inevitable, something too big to be explained with words.

“For what?” I asked, though something inside me already knew.

The fear in my voice was quiet, but it was there—  
like a shadow I couldn't shake.

“For the mirror to choose again,”  
the figure answered, their words soft but heavy, like  
they carried the weight of centuries.

And then, behind them, a door opened—huge,  
ancient, but silent. No hinges creaked. No sound  
echoed. It just opened, like it had been waiting.

They led me through a maze of hallways. Some  
narrow, some wide. The stones felt old, older than  
memory. Strange whispers brushed against my  
ears, voices speaking in forgotten languages I didn't  
understand but somehow felt. Symbols drifted  
above us, glowing faintly—moving across the  
ceilings like stars changing shape. Everything felt  
slower here, like time was breathing differently.

I couldn't see my breath anymore. The air had changed. I wasn't in the world I knew.

And then we reached it.

A room that didn't feel like a room at all. More like the edge of everything.

It was a library. But even that word felt wrong. This place was more. So much more.

The walls stretched out forever, curving, rising until I couldn't see the top. Shelves lined every inch, packed with books I couldn't imagine. Some of them shimmered, some floated. A few flickered in and out like they were caught between moments.

One scroll was made of light—soft and warm,  
pulsing gently like it was alive.

I saw a book that aged in front of me, growing old  
and then young again with every blink.

Time didn't work here. It folded, curled, twisted.  
Like it was trying to remember itself.

One book caught my eye.

Its cover was silver, with tiny patterns etched like  
frost. The title read:

“The Future That Forgot Itself. I stepped closer.”

Then I saw another one. Older. Fragile. The pages  
looked like they'd crumble if I breathed too hard.

But it had a name.

Elian V. Arlen.

My name.

I froze.

“You are writing yourself,” one of the Archivists  
said behind me.

Their voice didn’t try to explain. It didn’t need to. It  
just told the truth.

“Every choice you make etches a new page. Every moment you live, every step you take, shapes the narrative of your existence.”

My hands shook as I reached out. I didn’t know why I was so scared, but I was. I opened the book.

It was blank.

No words. No lines. Just emptiness. Waiting.

The silence that followed was so deep it felt alive. Pressing in on me. Wrapping around my chest.

Heavy. Absolute.

I looked up. The Archivists were still there. Still silent. Watching. Not cruel. Not kind. Just... there. As if they'd always been.

They didn't offer comfort. Didn't offer answers.

They weren't here to help me.

They were here to remember.

"You must recover your memories," the Archivist said again.

This time their voice was firmer. Almost urgent.

"Not the ones from Oxford. The ones before. The ones buried beneath your birth."

A chill ran through me, deep and sudden, as if something ancient had stirred inside my bones.

The words the Archivist had spoken weren't just answers—they were truths. Heavy, painful truths that knocked against something buried far beneath my thoughts.

My memories—scattered, thinning—suddenly felt more important than anything. I had lost so much already. Faces, names, moments. And now I was being told they mattered more than I knew.

But what memories? Which ones?

My throat tightened. I could barely speak.



“What am I?”

The words came out dry, cracked, as if I hadn’t spoken in days. Or maybe lives.

The Archivists spoke together. Twelve voices folded into one. Their tone was not cruel, not kind—just real.

“You are not from now.”

It hit me hard. Not like a mystery being solved, but like a wall collapsing. A truth I hadn’t wanted to hear, suddenly undeniable.

I wasn’t just lost in time.

I wasn't part of it at all.

My knees almost buckled. I grabbed the book with my name on it, held it like it could keep me from falling. But it didn't feel solid anymore. It felt like paper pretending to be a stone.

I searched my mind for something real—Oxford, Prague, my childhood—but everything felt blurry. Too clean. Too convenient. Like someone had placed those memories inside me for safekeeping... or for hiding.

“You were planted in time,”

one of the Archivists said quietly,

“like a seed whose fruit has not yet emerged.”

I blinked, my head lifting.

“Planted?”

“A contingency,” said another.

“For when the cycle must be broken.”

I felt my breath catch.

“What cycle?” I asked, my voice breaking into something raw and real. “What am I supposed to do?”

One of them stepped forward, almost gliding across the floor. Their robes didn’t make a sound. From

the folds of their sleeve, they brought out a black shard, no bigger than my palm.

It looked familiar. Too familiar.

“This is a memory shard,” they said.

“It does not contain knowledge. It contains potential. When it touches your skin, it will awaken a thread buried deep inside you.”

I stared at it. My hands refused to move.

“You may not like what you find,” they added.

“But you must see it.”

My fingers finally reached out and brushed the surface of the shard.

And the world—my world—collapsed.

Not like a dream ending. Not like a fall. But something deeper. As if I had been peeled open, pulled inward, past everything I thought was real.

Through time. Through versions of myself.

I saw a city in the sky, all glass and towers, floating over a sea the color of blood. I saw myself again—older, maybe stronger, maybe shattered—standing before shadowed figures, cradling something strange and glowing: a clock made of bone and light.

And then I saw it.

The mirror.

Always, the mirror.

And behind it... a door.

The shard slipped from my hand with a quiet tap against the floor. I gasped and found myself back in the Archive, on my knees, soaked in sweat.

The Archivists hadn't moved.

# Chapter Thirteen: The Mirror's Return

The chamber was silent, yet it pulsed with a presence that felt ancient and knowing. I stood there, the weight of the obsidian shard still lingering in my palm, its coldness seeping into my skin as if trying to anchor me to a reality I was only beginning to comprehend.

One of the Archivists stepped forward, their voice a blend of tones that resonated deep within me.

"You've seen the threshold," they said. "Few return unchanged."

I swallowed hard, my voice barely a whisper. "I... I don't understand. That wasn't Earth. That wasn't now."

The tallest figure nodded slowly. "No," they replied. "That was before."

Before?

"Before what?" I breathed, the question hanging in the air like a fragile thread.

"Before you were rewritten."

Silence enveloped the chamber once more, thick and profound. It was not the absence of sound but the presence of something deeper—a sacred stillness that demanded reverence.



Without a word, they led me down another passage, narrower and darker than the ones before. The light dimmed with each step, shadows dancing along the walls as if they held secrets of their own.

We arrived at a small chamber, its center dominated by a single chair. It was an unsettling fusion of ivory and rusted steel, designed to cradle and confine simultaneously.

"We call this the Anchor," an Archivist explained.  
"If you sit in it, you will see. But you may not return as yourself."

I hesitated, the weight of the decision pressing down on me. "What happens if I don't sit?"

"Then the cycle repeats," another said. "The world forgets. And so do you."

A deep sense of inevitability settled over me. Though I had no concrete reason to trust them, every fiber of my being recognized this moment. It had come before, countless times.

I sat.

The chair responded instantly. Not with force, but with a deliberate, encompassing pressure, as if memory itself was wrapping around me.

Light filled my vision—not blinding, but infinite. It was a light that seemed to contain all colors and none, a canvas of possibilities.

Within that light, I saw:

My birth, not as Elian, but as something older. A  
Watcher. A traveler between dimensions. A  
custodian of the Mirror—the last of seven  
mechanisms that kept the timelines stable.

I witnessed the collapse of the Mirror Cycle, a war  
waged across eras, betrayal, and the scattering of  
my own soul across timelines to hide, to survive, to  
begin again.

I had buried myself inside Elian V. Arlen. A  
disguise. A delay. A clock beneath the skin.

The chair released me.

I gasped, rising too quickly, stumbling forward. My legs trembled, barely supporting me. The Archivists remained still, their gazes unwavering.

"You remember," one said.

"I remember enough," I replied, my voice hollow, the weight of revelation pressing down on me.

"What will you do with it?"

"I... I don't know." I looked at my hands, now trembling.

"The clock is almost wound," said the Archivist with the shard. "There is little time left. Others have awakened. Not all of them wish for the Mirror's return."

I swallowed hard, the enormity of the situation settling in.

"So what am I now?"

"Choice," they said.

"You are the choice made manifest. The decision carved from recursion."

A bitter, breathless laugh escaped me. "How poetic," I muttered.

"Poetry is how time remembers itself," another replied.

They handed me the book again—Elian V. Arlen.  
This time, the first page was no longer blank.

It read:

"When time failed, he began again."

A weight settled into my chest—not fear, but  
certainty.

I turned toward the passage that led back to the  
world above. Istanbul waited. And beyond it,  
Prague, Oxford, and cities I hadn't yet returned to.  
The cycle was stirring. Somewhere out there, others  
were awakening. The game had resumed.

As I stepped back into the corridor of  
constellations, I realized something vital:

The past was not behind me.

It was chasing me.

# Chapter Fourteen: Ashes Of Alexandria

I stepped through the mirror in Istanbul with the obsidian shard clenched tight in my palm, as though letting go of it might unravel me. The Archivists had told me to follow the smoke—not with my eyes, but with memory.

And just like that, the world shifted.

The quiet sanctity of the Hagia Sophia dissolved like mist. I wasn't in the basilica anymore.

The scent arrived before the sight—burnt parchment, sea salt carried on a dry breeze, and the



faint, aching trace of jasmine oil. Alexandria. 391  
AD.

I knew it, not because someone told me, but  
because my bones remembered.

I stood atop white marble steps that overlooked the  
Library of Alexandria, watching history ignite  
before me. A thick column of black smoke coiled  
into the sky like a serpent loosed from the  
underworld. The air swirled with ash, falling softly,  
darkly—like snow made of words and memories.  
Screams rose from the narrow stone alleys, echoing  
with terror and fury. Torch-bearing zealots flooded  
the once-quiet halls of knowledge, their eyes wild,  
hands eager to destroy what they did not  
understand.

They moved like a fever through the great halls,  
ripping scrolls, shattering jars of ink, pulling

shelves to the ground with the force of blind conviction. I watched as a man hurled a gilded astrolabe through a stained glass window, the shattered pieces scattering like stars across the floor.

The flames licked at the sky, orange and hungry, but it was never really the books they wanted to destroy—it was the light inside them. The voices that refused silence. The ideas that dared to endure.

I looked down at my hands. They were not mine—not as I knew them. My skin was darker, sun-warmed, my fingers calloused, my wrists bound in simple linen. I wore a robe that smelled faintly of olive oil and ink. A scholar's garment, I guessed. Or maybe a scribe's. I felt younger, yet impossibly older at the same time.

Somehow, I had become someone else again.

And yet, it didn't feel foreign.

There was a strange comfort in the way the wind pulled at my robe, in the smell of salt on fire. I knew this city—not in the way tourists know ruins, but deeply, as one knows an old dream or the echo of a song once sung to them in childhood. This was not a memory I was seeing—it was one I had lived, though I could not yet recall the details.

The flames cracked and hissed as I descended the marble steps, slowly, each footfall measured against the groaning weight of loss. Every corner of Alexandria seemed to bleed. The streets wept knowledge and smoke. The wind carried the sound of prayers tangled with curses. The line between mourning and rage had vanished.

This was not simply the destruction of a building.

It was the death of an era.

A worldview collapsing in real time—where logic once stood shoulder to shoulder with myth, where the stars guided both ships and souls. Alexandria had been a sanctuary of synthesis, a place where truths met without demanding submission. Now it was being erased by fire and fear.

I moved through the labyrinth of ruins – a maze, the obsidian shard growing warmer in my hand with every step. In my other pocket, I felt the soft pulse of the compass the Archivists had given me. It beat like a second heart, guiding me not toward a place but a purpose. The heat intensified as I reached a narrow side path, half-hidden behind crumbling walls and thick smoke.

There, past the ruined colonnades and fractured mosaics, I found a quiet courtyard the fire hadn't yet reached. It was tucked away, shielded by the remnants of marble archways and fig trees now slick with ash.

And in the center of that courtyard, standing calmly among the ruin, was a woman.

She did not look afraid.

Tall, statuesque, clothed in deep cerulean – deep blue robes embroidered with constellations and sacred geometry, she glowed with a calm that defied the violence surrounding us. Her presence alone pushed the chaos away, like a stone placed at the center of a whirlwind. She was radiant—but not fragile. There was iron in her stillness.

Hypatia.

Even before she turned, I knew her name. The last great philosopher of Alexandria. Mathematician. Astronomer. Guardian of wisdom in a world growing increasingly hostile to it.

But the moment she looked at me, I understood she was more than history had dared to remember.

Her eyes—piercing, gold-flecked, impossibly old—met mine as if she had seen this moment before. As if time had curled in on itself just to deliver me here.

“You are here for the Codex,” she said, her voice steady, low, and clear. It rang through the courtyard like the first note of a forgotten melody.

There was no doubt in her. No question in her tone.  
She knew.

“I... I think so. I’m not sure anymore.”

She smiled gently, but it was not a smile of  
kindness.

It was the smile of someone who had paid too high  
a price for knowing—and who had lived long  
enough to understand that some truths weigh  
heavier than silence.

“You come from a century that mistakes knowing  
for wisdom,” she said, her voice as calm as a pond  
untouched by wind. “You want answers, but what  
will they cost you?”

Her words didn’t accuse—they mourned. As though  
she had seen the future, and we had failed it. I  
opened my mouth to reply, but there was nothing I

could say that wouldn't sound hollow in the face of the inferno still raging above us.

She turned, and I followed her across the courtyard's fractured stones, past pillars etched with symbols I couldn't yet decipher. Beneath a slab of earth carved with crescent moons and planetary sigils, she revealed a narrow staircase descending into the dark. Without a torch, without hesitation, she led the way.

The vault beneath the courtyard wasn't lit by flame or lantern. It glowed with an ambient light, a kind of soft, invisible energy that seeped from the walls. The air here was different—thicker, charged, like I was inhaling memory instead of oxygen.

I looked around, my breath caught somewhere between awe and disbelief.



The chamber was circular, vast and still. The stone walls were covered with charts—some star maps, others filled with notations and measurements in scripts I didn't recognize. These were not maps of the stars we knew, but stars that had yet to be named. Time itself was drawn on these walls, curled and woven like strands of hair. My eyes darted from one chart to another, struggling to comprehend the enormity of what they depicted. This place—this hidden vault beneath a dying city—felt untouched by centuries. Unaging.

At the center floated a bronze orb, suspended as though gravity had never applied to it. It hovered silently, spinning with impossible grace. It wasn't attached to anything. It didn't sway. It was held there by something deeper than science.

“This is the Codex Aeternum,” Hypatia said, her voice low and reverent. “It is not written on paper, but in time itself. It exists outside of time, yet within it. It remembers everything and nothing.”

She stepped closer to the orb and did something that should not have been possible. Her hand passed through the surface of the metal—not like breaking glass or parting water—but like stepping between dimensions. The orb shimmered slightly, acknowledging her, then stilled again.

When she withdrew her hand, she held a single piece of parchment between her fingers.

But it was no ordinary parchment. It shimmered—not like light, but like thought. It felt... sentient. The edges fluttered though there was no wind, and the symbols on its surface shifted like dreams you could almost remember.

“This is yours,” she said, offering it to me. “It will only reveal itself when you remember who you were.”

I took it with trembling hands.

It was warm. Not like fire. Like skin. Like something that had waited a long time to be held again. The moment I touched it, symbols began crawling across its surface. Not letters—symbols. Not words—ideas. They flickered and danced, elusive and strange. Sometimes Greek, sometimes hieroglyphic, sometimes something entirely alien. The page was alive, reacting to me. To my thoughts. It was like holding language in flux, a living equation constantly rewriting itself based on the soul that held it.

I stared at it, mesmerized.

“You knew I was coming,” I whispered, more to myself than to her. But she heard me.

Hypatia nodded. “There are echoes of you in every century. You think you’re discovering the past, but the past remembers you. Always.”

I wanted to ask what that meant, but the words caught in my throat. Something old and vast stirred in my chest. A pressure behind my ribs. The beginning of remembering.

Above us, the flames still raged—the chaos of Alexandria’s final breath—but down here, it all felt far away. Like listening to a war unfold in another lifetime. The roar of destruction had dulled into background noise.

“They’re destroying everything,” I said, the sorrow pressing into my spine like a weight. “Everything you’ve built.”

Hypatia didn’t flinch. She didn’t argue. She simply looked up toward the stone ceiling of the vault and said, “Fire can consume parchment, but not the mind that created it. Alexandria was never just a library—it was a belief that the universe could be understood. That idea cannot be burned.”

Her voice didn’t shake. Her calm wasn’t cold. It came from conviction so old it no longer needed to defend itself.

Her words struck something inside me—clear and crystalline, like a bell that had waited centuries to

be rung. I staggered back a half step, overwhelmed not by the heat or the light, but by the clarity.

I raised the parchment, its shifting script still elusive. I let my fingers skim its surface—featherlight, as if afraid I might damage something eternal.

And then, something changed.

A name appeared. Just for a moment. Only once.

A name I didn't know, but that knew me.

Aurelius Thane.

The letters didn't shine or scream. They didn't burn with revelation. But they hit like a silent earthquake, shaking everything loose inside my mind.

It wasn't my name. At least not the name I knew.

But it wasn't a stranger either.

It was... another version of me. Another self. A life I had worn like a coat and cast aside. A name buried under Elian V. Arlen, under years, under forgetting.

And though I had never heard it before, it echoed in me.

It was a name I had never heard before—and yet it shook something loose in the hidden alcoves of my mind.

Visions flickered—celestial charts drawn in gold ink across black vellum, a woman in crimson robes turning away from me beneath a moonless sky, and a whisper at the edge of sleep that sounded like my name and not my name all at once. It came like the memory of a memory—half-formed, yet painfully intimate.

Hypatia's gaze narrowed slightly, as though she could see the images playing behind my eyes. "That name belongs to a part of you long buried," she said. "A life you lived when time was still whole."

Her words were gentle, but they cleaved through me with the force of thunder.

A life you lived.



Not imagined. Not dreamed. Lived.

I opened my mouth, unsure if I meant to question her or simply plead for clarity—but before any words could form, the vault beneath Alexandria trembled. A low, guttural sound, deep and resonant, like the earth groaning in its sleep. Dust sifted down from the ceiling in a light rain, catching in the still glow of the orb's wake. The tremor passed, but it left a tautness in the air, the kind that came before collapse.

Hypatia moved with sudden urgency. She turned, her robes flowing like liquid shadow, and approached the place where the orb had once floated. With the familiarity of someone who had done this many times, she opened a hidden panel in the stone wall—seamless to the naked eye—and slid the Codex Aeternum inside. The wall sealed itself again with a quiet sigh.

“We have little time,” she said, without turning around. “The Codex cannot fall into their hands.”

“Whose?” I asked, stepping toward her, my voice hoarse. “Who are they? The ones destroying the library?”

She turned, and the look in her eyes was colder now. Focused. Righteous. “Fanatics,” she said. “But not only that.”

Her fingers brushed the edge of the seal on her belt, an ancient symbol of spirals and suns I had seen etched into the compass shard the Archivists had given me.

“There are forces beyond faith and empire,” she continued. “Forces that despise memory. That fear what remembering truly means. They wear many names—history has dressed them as tyrants, saints, prophets, kings.”

Her eyes found mine.

“Some wear crowns. Some wear robes. Some wear your face.”

That last part struck like a hammer to the ribs.

“My face?” I echoed, uncertain whether to laugh or recoil.

Hypatia stepped closer, and the glow of the chamber seemed to cling to her like reverence. “You are not the only you,” she said.

And in that moment, I understood something I hadn’t dared to believe. The timelines weren’t just echoes—they were mirrors. And some of those mirrors reflected back versions of me that had made different choices. Some that had fallen. Some that had turned.

The vault trembled again. This time the sound was sharper—stone cracking, ancient supports groaning under centuries of fire and neglect. The past was no longer collapsing metaphorically. It was falling down, brick by sacred brick.

Hypatia pressed something into my hand—a medallion, perhaps. Bronze, warm, etched with a

spiral identical to the one the Archivists had once shown me in the catacombs of Istanbul.

“Find the Temple of Echoes,” she said, her grip tightening around mine. “Before the moon forgets itself.”

I wanted to ask more. About Aurelius Thane. About what the Codex truly was. About why me.

But the current came again—that strange, magnetic pull that wasn’t quite time, wasn’t quite space. It was like being caught in a tide that moved through memory rather than water. The parchment in my satchel pulsed. So did the obsidian shard. Their rhythms matched, like twin hearts sensing one another across lifetimes.

Behind me, the door began to form. Not of brick or wood. Not even of light. But of memory—raw, unfiltered, and piercing as grief. The kind of memory that reshaped the world.

Hypatia stepped back, the chaos of the crumbling vault casting wild shadows behind her. But she stood tall, as if she belonged to the fire now.

“We all burn,” she said, her voice calm and certain.  
“But some of us are fire.”

And then she was gone.

Stone fractured behind me, splitting in slow agony. I turned away and stepped through the doorway.

What followed felt like drowning—except instead of water, it was thought that closed around me. Waves of vision, scent, and fragmented feeling crushed inward. I fell through myself—through versions of me I did not know. Through births and deaths I had never lived but still remembered.

And when I emerged... I was elsewhere.

It was night. Cold, starless, unfamiliar.

A wind bit at my skin as I staggered upright. I was standing in a desert. Not a metaphor, not a dream, but a real desert—sand stretching outward like a golden sea, empty except for ruin and silence. The horizon was flat and endless. The sky above was ink-black, without even the faint comfort of starlight.

I took a slow breath, startled to see it crystallize in the air. The sand beneath me was warm. The air above it was frigid. Time here was breaking down in ways I couldn't explain.

The Codex was still in my hand. But it had changed.

No longer a parchment.

It had become something else—a cube of gentle light, its surface flickering with a heartbeat all its own. I held it for a moment, just long enough to feel the weight of whatever it had become, then slid it into my satchel.

And from the wind, a whisper reached me—too quiet to be sound, too certain to be imagined.



“Temple of Echoes...”

So I walked.

I don’t know for how long.

Hours bled into minutes. Days folded in on themselves. My own shadow grew longer then vanished. Time moved like breath underwater—halting, disjointed. There were moments I felt like I was walking forward and backward at once. There were moments I forgot what feet were, and then remembered.

And then I saw it.

Rising from the sands, cracked and solemn, stood the Temple of Echoes. Its columns looked like the

bones of something ancient and titanic—its walls half-buried, scorched, inscribed with alphabets that hadn't been spoken aloud in centuries. I could feel its presence before I could make out its shape. Like it remembered me.

The doors had no hinges.

No handles. No mechanisms.

They didn't open with force.

They opened with remembrance.

I stepped inside, and the silence swallowed me whole.

It wasn't empty.

The interior of the Temple wasn't what I expected—not ruins, not sanctuary. It was a maze. A living,

shifting maze of mirrors and thresholds that didn't obey the laws of reflection.

The air inside was colder than the desert outside, but it wasn't just temperature. It was the chill of being watched—by yourself.

Reflections twisted unnaturally, some delayed like echoes of thought. Others jumped ahead of me, performing gestures I hadn't made yet. There were versions of me that smiled with something too wide to be comforting. Others wept, shoulders trembling silently behind the glass. One simply stood there, back turned, as if refusing to acknowledge me at all.

The silence pressed in, thick and humming with unseen weight.

Then a voice stirred it—low, metallic, threaded with an ache I recognized but didn't understand.

“You came.”

I turned, startled, and there they were. The Archivist.

The same one who had spoken to me in Istanbul. Only now, the mask was gone.

And what I saw...

It was me.

Not a perfect reflection. But close. Their face was like a painting weathered by centuries—creased,

exhausted, and laced with the kind of weariness that doesn't come from age, but from carrying too many truths. A version of me where the eyes had forgotten how to be surprised.

"You've seen Alexandria," they said, not asking.

"Yes."

"You saw it burn?"

"Yes."

"Then you've begun to understand the cost of forgetting."

I nodded slowly, the words clinging to my ribs like smoke. “Hypatia told me to find this place.”

“She told all of us,” the Archivist said. “In different forms. Across different lives.”

They raised their hand—not with ceremony, just the quiet gravity of someone showing you something inevitable.

Behind them, mirrors rose. Not just one or two—but a dozen, maybe more, circling the chamber like sentinels. And in each of them, I saw... me.

Not quite me.

One was younger, barely past boyhood, eyes filled with a hope I barely remembered. Another was

armored, gauntleted, standing over a battlefield strewn with bodies I didn't recognize but somehow mourned. One had a long scar where his left eye should've been. One had no mouth. Another wept silently, the tears constant.

Each one of them looked back at me.

And none of them did.

"We are fragments," the Archivist said. "Scattered across the river of time. Each of us carries part of the truth. Each of us forgets something vital."

They gestured toward the Codex in my satchel. "The Codex... is the only way to remember whole."

I stared at it. It pulsed like it knew it was being mentioned.

I stepped forward, the floor beneath me humming faintly with every footfall. “Why?” I asked. “Why all of this? Why me?”

The Archivist didn’t answer right away. Instead, they turned toward one of the mirrors. This one showed a version of me unlike the others—blood on his cheek, sword in his hand, gaze hard as obsidian.

“Because you were the first to break the Mirror,” the Archivist said, as if it were a sentence from scripture. “And now, you must repair it.”

Before I could ask how—before I could even breathe—the temple shook. Not a dramatic quake,



but a slow, sorrowful rumble, as though the building itself was remembering it shouldn't exist.

The mirrors shimmered in unison.

"What does that mean?" I asked, heart tightening.

But the Archivist didn't speak.

The mirrors did.

Not in words. In visions.

They filled with scenes I didn't recognize but felt in my marrow. A war beneath an obsidian sky where stars cracked like glass. A woman in white singing to a dying star, her voice bending gravity. A child

huddled in a clocktower, clutching a rusted  
hourglass. A silver key falling into an endless pit. A  
book titled The Future That Forgot Itself, its cover  
bleeding ink.

I staggered back, breath caught in my chest.

The Archivist placed their hand on my shoulder.  
Their touch was steady—too steady.

“Do not fear what you remember,” they said, voice  
soft as cloth. “Fear only what you choose to forget.”

I turned, slowly, toward one of the mirrors. I didn’t  
want to. I needed to.

And this time... I saw something else.

Not a reflection.

A memory.

A boy, no older than ten, sitting in a quiet room bathed in candlelight. No one else was there. He was writing—scribbling furiously into a notebook, pages torn at the corners. Alone. Eyes bright with stories too big for the world he lived in. His hand trembled, but he kept writing.

It wasn't fiction.

It was the beginning.

A story about time. About memory. About identity.  
A story he didn't know he was inside.

It was me.

And I'd forgotten.

I turned to the Archivist, my throat dry, my heart racing like it wanted to claw its way back through centuries.

"What happens now?" I asked.

The Archivist smiled. It wasn't a joyful smile. It was the kind of smile you give someone just before saying goodbye.

"Now you must go back."

I almost laughed, but it got caught somewhere in my chest. “Back where?”

Their answer was calm. Final. “To where the fracture began. Before Prague. Before Oxford. Before even Elian.”

The Codex flared in my hand, sudden and angry. It burned—not painfully, not exactly. It was the kind of burn that wakes something up. I clutched it tighter. I had to. If I let go now, I wouldn’t be able to find myself again.

The memories came flooding back.

Not in pieces. Not as ghosts.

All at once.

Life upon life. Truth upon truth. The weight of  
every version of myself crashing into this one body.  
My knees buckled. But I held on.

The temple began to unravel—stone fading, mirrors  
shattering into fragments of sound and light.  
Reality itself seemed to buckle inward, a house  
folding in on its own foundation.

I closed my eyes. I let it take me.

Back. Back. Back.

To the ashes.

To the clock beneath the skin.

To the first forgetting.

# Chapter Fifteen: The Self That Chose To Stay

I returned through the mirror not as the person who had entered it, but as something cracked open and reassembled. The Codex was sealed inside a copper tube, now strapped across my back like a relic or a burden—or maybe both. It had changed form since I last touched it directly, but it hadn't grown heavier in any physical sense. The weight was stranger, harder to articulate. It was like carrying a dream—too vast to fully contain, the edges always spilling out into everything else. A dream too large for any single night to hold.

I didn't just feel changed—I was changed. There was no ceremony to it. No bright light. Just this quiet truth: I had died somewhere inside

Alexandria and hadn't come back entirely whole. Or maybe I had returned too full—of flame, of memory, of centuries I hadn't lived and still somehow remembered. The fire that had eaten through the ancient scrolls and paintings and maps—it now smoldered behind my eyes. I could feel it.

Time had stopped behaving normally around me. It didn't tick or pass. It watched me now. Mirrored me. Sometimes it bent away entirely, diverse off course like a frightened bird. I had the eerie sense that I was no longer just moving through time like everyone else. I was becoming part of it, like a thread woven too tightly into the larger fabric to ever be pulled out again.

The haven was just as I had left it, but even it felt altered now. Sophie stood by the great map table at the center, her figure illuminated by the flicker of dozens of candles. Papers and charts lay scattered



in disorganized piles—maps of timelines, notes written in loops and symbols, scribbled cartographies of futures still soft around the edges. She didn't look up right away. I watched her eyes scan a constellation diagram, her brow furrowed slightly, as if she were trying to memorize something that refused to stay still.

When she did turn and saw me standing there—saw the copper tube slung across my back—her expression changed. Her breath caught, just for a second, and she stepped forward. Then, just as quickly, she stopped. That one step held so much—hope, fear, a past barely touched.

“You found it,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

I shook my head gently, not out of denial but because it didn't feel that simple. “It found me,” I

said. “Or... maybe it always had me, and I’m just now noticing the grip.”

I unslung the Codex and laid it on the table. The metal glinted softly in the candlelight. Sophie reached toward it, her fingers hovering a fraction above the casing as if the thing radiated heat—or memory. When she finally made contact, her whole body tensed, and she pulled her hand back like she'd been shocked.

“It remembers,” she said, half to herself. “This is part of the original pattern. You’ve touched something older than time.”

I nodded slowly. “It felt like it touched me back. Like it... like it knew me.”

Her eyes drifted toward the tall windows at the far end of the room. They didn't show much—just the shimmer of falling dusk, that strange not-light that hovered when the sky hadn't yet committed to night. “You should sit,” she said, without looking at me.

I obeyed, lowering myself onto the old wooden bench that had been carved with thousands of names, initials, symbols—remnants of other visitors, other versions of us maybe. The Codex sat between us, pulsing gently, not with sound but with presence.

“There's something you should know,” she said after a long pause. “You remember Oxford. The tower. The museum. The fracture. But in another thread of time—a different strand—I didn't vanish like I was supposed to. I stayed.”

She opened a drawer in the table and retrieved a photograph. It was old, maybe a hundred years old in terms of how it felt. The edges were curled. The image was faded, touched by sunlight and time. It was her—Sophie—but older. Her hair silver, her face marked with the small joys of aging. She was standing in a garden I instantly recognized. Not from life. From dreams. From those quiet, half-waking moments where reality feels thin.

There were two children beside her. A boy and a girl. Both laughing, caught in mid-motion.

“That garden,” I said slowly, “I’ve seen it in my sleep. The crooked stone path, the lavender bush that never quite bloomed...”

“I lived that life,” she replied. Her voice didn’t tremble, but something inside it did. “I left that version of myself behind when the memories came

back. But part of her still lingers. An echo. Some days, when I walk past a mirror, I see her watching me. And sometimes... she looks disappointed.”

I didn’t know what to say. I just looked at the photograph again, at the light in her eyes. That version of her had lived a still life. A tender, rooted life. The Sophie in front of me had chosen the storm instead. The movement, the burning edges of reality.

“I held onto that version of myself for decades,” she said. “I taught students. I laughed. I had a partner who brought me tea every morning at exactly 7:03. I had a garden that never stopped smelling like thyme. And one day... I woke up and felt like a story that had ended without warning. Like there were pages I’d forgotten to write.”

She looked at me with eyes that were younger and older than time.

“I started remembering. You. The mirror. The Codex. The Clock beneath the skin. So I left.”

I swallowed a question that tasted like grief.

“Do you regret it?” I asked. “Choosing this path?”

Her fingers touched the rim of her teacup absently, like she was trying to decode a language only she remembered. Her silence stretched for long seconds.

“No,” she said finally. “But I mourn the path I didn’t choose.”

There was no need to respond. The room filled with a quiet that didn't feel empty. It felt thick. Lived-in. It was the kind of silence that settles when something sacred has just been shared—something irrevocable. We weren't just people anymore. We were echoes of decisions. We were versions.

And in that moment, I understood something. We were never just one self. Never a single line through time. We were dozens—hundreds maybe. Living alongside one another. The one who said yes. The one who walked away. The one who kissed her. The one who turned his back.

All of them true. All of them alive in some branch of time.

“I saw you once,” I said, voice softer than I intended. “When I was eleven. Standing at the edge of the Thames. It was just after sunset. I looked into

the water and saw a woman watching me from underneath. She looked just like you.”

Sophie looked up sharply, her lips parting slightly in surprise. “That wasn’t a memory I thought you still had.”

“You were there?”

She hesitated. Then nodded.

“I wasn’t supposed to be,” she said. “But I couldn’t help myself.”

“You came back just to look?”



“Yes,” she whispered. “Just once. To see who you would become. I stood at the edge of the fragment, knowing I could fracture the whole thing just by reaching out.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No. Because I was afraid. Afraid I might keep you there.”

That moment at the river—the strange one that had clung to the back of my mind for years like fog in the corners of a mirror—suddenly clicked into place. It stopped being a dream, stopped being a fragment. It was real. All of it. Sophie had been real. That watching presence, the feeling of being seen when I thought I was alone—it had been her. And that meant something else too. That my story didn’t really begin in Oxford. Or even in Istanbul. It didn’t begin with clocks or letters or broken glass. No. It

began much earlier. Before I had the language to name it. Before I knew there was even a story to live through.

“I think...” I paused, unsure if the memory was mine or planted, dreamt, borrowed. “I think I remember something else.”

Sophie tilted her head, eyes narrowing slightly. Listening, not just to my words, but to what was underneath them.

“A melody,” I said. “Something soft. Played on a... a box. A music box, I think. It came from a mirror. I didn’t know what it meant then. I didn’t even know if I’d imagined it.”

Wordlessly, she turned and reached behind her, to a drawer she seemed to know by heart. Her hand

moved slowly, with a kind of reverence. She lifted out a small wooden box—aged, carved with unfamiliar constellations across its lid. It looked ordinary and holy at the same time. She opened it.

The sound that came out—God—it stopped everything. A circular tune. Simple in structure, but echoing with something much deeper. A sadness. Or maybe a memory that belonged to more than one life.

“That melody,” I said, barely breathing, “That’s the one.”

“It’s the tune that opens the Codex,” she said, not even looking at the box now. Her eyes were far away. “It doesn’t just store knowledge—it sings it.”

I turned toward the copper cylinder still resting on the table. And as the melody played, I swore I heard the Codex answer—so faint I thought I was imagining it. A soft hum, like a vibration in the chest, not the ear.

“Are we the only ones?” I asked.

She shook her head slowly. “No. Not even close. There are others. They exist across the fractures. Across the consequences. Some of them move forward, like us. Others walk backward. Some become archivists. Some become... mirrors.”

I blinked at that. “And me? What am I?”

Sophie looked at me then with something like quiet grief and quiet pride, tangled together. “You’re the question. Not the answer.”

The fire in the hearth cracked once, throwing up a gentle plume of sparks. Outside, night had fully settled, but I hadn't noticed until now. Time was slipping in strange ways again.

The silence that followed wasn't simple. It was a silence full of everything—what had been said, what had not, and the weight of what was waiting ahead. Her words seemed to linger in the air long after they were spoken, staining the room like smoke on old pages.

I found myself glancing at the Codex again and again, half-expecting it to flicker open or whisper something ancient and urgent. But it didn't move. It just... was. Quiet. Patient. Waiting.

“What happens now?” I asked, though I wasn’t even sure what I meant. The Codex? Me? The whole tangled thing we were inside?

Sophie rose to her feet and walked toward the map behind her—the one pinned to the wall with lines like veins and scars. Most of it was marked by hand, small notes, errant ink strokes. She ran her fingers along one of the bolder lines that cut diagonally through the chart.

“There are two kinds of travelers,” she said slowly, as though repeating something she’d been told long ago. “Those who move with time. And those who move against it. But there’s a third kind too. Rarer. More dangerous, maybe. Those who move between its fractures.”

She looked over her shoulder at me. “That’s what you’ve become.”

“And what does that mean?” I asked, my voice suddenly too loud in the hush of the room.

“It means,” she said, turning back to the map, “that time no longer defines your borders. Your boundaries now... they’re made of choice. Of memory. Each time you remember something you forgot—that you buried or lost or dreamed—you open a path that was closed.”

I stepped beside her. The map made no more sense to me now than it had before, but I looked anyway.

“But if every memory makes a new path,” I said, “if every choice leads to another fork, then... what’s the original path? What’s real?”

Her expression shifted, softened. “Maybe there isn’t one. Maybe we invented the idea of a single timeline just to feel less afraid. Less alone. But time—real time— isn’t a line. It’s a constellation.”

I took a long breath. “And that means we’re constellations too?”

She smiled. Just a little. “Yes. Made of choices. Made of versions. All of us—echoes that chose differently.”

It hit me then—not as a thought but a bodily thing. A tremor inside the chest. My memories were not just echoes of the past. They were doorways. Versions of me scattered across timelines I’d never touched. I wasn’t remembering—I was remembering myself.



Sophie's voice came back, lower this time. "You asked me once if I regret this path I'm on. I told you I didn't. But that wasn't all the truth."

I nodded, inviting her to keep going.

"I can take the truth," I said.

"Good," she replied, folding her arms tightly.

"Because the truth doesn't care if you're ready."

She stepped away for a moment and pulled a satchel from the shelf. Inside it, wrapped in fabric, was a journal—leather-bound, worn, the kind that looked like it had passed through hands and years. On the cover were words etched softly into the skin:

For the Self That Stayed.

“This belonged to the other me,” she said, pressing it into my hands. “The one who lived the quiet life. The one who didn’t disappear.”

I opened it carefully. Her handwriting, unmistakable but gentler, filled the pages. Notes to her children. Sketches. Recipes. Dreams. Little nothings that meant everything. But as I moved through it, something shifted. There were entries about memories that didn’t belong to that timeline. Words like: “reflections that weren’t mine,” and “the mirror knows too much.”

Then, one page. Two lines.

I saw the mirror again today.

I think it’s time.

“She started remembering,” I murmured, feeling the weight of it all.

Sophie nodded. “And in her final days, she remembered everything. She died with two timelines in her head. Two lives.”

“She died?” I asked, stunned.

“Quietly,” Sophie said. “Peacefully. But not without pain.”

She took the journal and flipped to the final page. Her voice didn’t waver as she handed it back.

It read:

If you ever come back, tell her I forgive her.

But she must forgive herself too.

My chest tightened. The ache was sudden, sharp.

“She meant you,” I said.

Sophie closed her eyes. “I’ve carried that for a long time.”

“And have you?” I asked.

“I’m trying,” she said, her voice barely audible.

“Every day.”

We sat down again, the journal between us now.  
The silence this time was softer, not heavy but  
whole. It didn't need to be filled. It just was.

Eventually, she broke it. "The Codex is locked," she  
said. "But not with any key you can hold. It doesn't  
respond to sight or sound. It opens with memory.  
With something buried. Something forgotten so  
deeply it became your shadow."

I looked at it, helpless. "But how do I remember  
something that lost?"

"You don't chase it," she said. "You invite it."

Then she handed me a small silver key, old but  
warm in my hand. "Go downstairs. Find the Room  
of Reveries. You'll know it when you see it. Sit  
there. And wait."

“Wait for what?” I asked.

She looked straight at me. “For yourself.”

The stairwell was colder than I expected. The kind of cold that wraps around the skin and slips through your sleeves like it knows where to hurt you. The air smelled of stone and dust—and faintly of something floral, like lilies left too long in a room where no one speaks.

At the bottom, I found a door. Plain, except for the handle—shaped like an eye. It watched me, or maybe I imagined that too.

The key turned with no resistance. The door swung open into a room so quiet, I could hear my breath like paper being folded.

It was small. No furniture. No windows. Just mirrors. Hundreds of them. Covering every inch of wall. Some as tall as doors, some tiny, oval, warped. They didn't just reflect me—they reflected versions of me. Younger. Older. One with a scar I didn't have. One who wore a blue coat I'd never owned.

I stepped into the center and sat cross-legged. Closed my eyes. Breathed.

And the room shifted.

Not physically. Not in any way that made sense. But the mirrors changed. Or rather—the people in them. The me's. They moved.

They smiled. Looked away. Some stared back, full of knowing. Some turned their backs. Some stepped forward like they might speak, and then didn't.

One by one, they came alive.

The past was not behind me. It was chasing me.



# CHAPTER Sixteen:

## Echoes of Choice and Shadowed Paths

Suddenly one, in a mirror shaped like an old windowpane, began to speak softly, almost hesitantly, as if the words had been buried too long beneath layers of silence.

“You don’t remember me yet,” he said, his voice low and a little cracked, like someone waking from a long, restless sleep, “but you will. I’m the one who chose silence.”

“Silence?” I breathed out, barely louder than a whisper, my heart tightening at the weight those words carried.

“Yes,” he replied, eyes full of a distant sorrow. “I had the chance to speak up. To tell the truth. But I didn’t. I thought safety was the wiser path. Maybe it was—at least for a while. But silence became my prison, a cell made of things left unsaid.”

He took a slow step back, fading gently into his mirrored world, as though retreating into the past.

Another version of me stepped forward—a wilder version, hair tousled like a storm, skin kissed red by the sun, eyes burning with restless fire. “I ran,” he said with a bitter simplicity. “I ran from everything. From the past, from the present, from the future. I lived, yes, but I never stopped moving. Never stopped escaping.”

Then another appeared—calmer, quieter—one who stayed rooted in one city, tending to books, to stories, to forgotten pages.

“I never found her,” he said. “Never opened the clock. I stayed put. Safe, but empty.”

They kept coming, one after the other—dozens of versions of me shaped by the choices I had made or refused to make. Each face told a different story. Some marked by joy, others by regret. Some hopeful, some broken.

And then, suddenly, I saw him.

He didn’t say a word. Didn’t move a muscle. But I knew him immediately.

He was the self who had loved Sophie—who had stayed.

His eyes met mine through the glass, and for a brief, endless moment, I felt everything—the weight of every memory, every smile, every bitter argument, every shared dream, every painful silence we had endured together.

He stepped forward slowly, pressing his hand to the glass between us. His lips moved soundlessly, mouthing the words I felt inside my chest.

“I forgive you.”

And then, as quietly as he had appeared, he was gone.

At that moment, the Codex unlocked with a soft, almost reluctant click.

When I returned from the Room of Reveries, I found the copper cylinder lying open on the table, no longer sealed or mysterious. The Codex lay before me like a living thing, its surface shimmering with the fluidity of thought itself—folding language into images, images into feelings, feelings into memories.

I didn't read it in any ordinary way. I absorbed it—like music resonating through bone, like a dream recalled not by logic, but by the very soul.

Each page was a memory—some mine, some not. Versions of me, scattered across countless timelines, fractured choices stitched together by the invisible threads of fate and will.

There was Elian the watchmaker, quietly living out his days in Prague, never daring to touch a mirror again.

Eliau the archivist, trapped within the crumbled ruins of the vanished Library of Shadows, tirelessly scribing stories no one would ever read.

Eliau the warrior, the diplomat, the monk, the recluse.

Every self that had ever touched time rippled outward like the echo of a bell tolling far away.

And then something appeared that I couldn't explain.

A moment that hadn't happened—yet felt more vivid, more real than any memory I had ever known.

It was me, standing on a beach of silver sand  
beneath a sky as black as spilled ink, filled with  
constellations I did not recognize.

Sophie stood beside me, older now, her hair  
streaked with white like moonlight caught in silk.

In her hand was the Codex. In mine, an obsidian  
shard worn smooth by years of use.

We didn't speak. We simply were—two figures  
suspended in time, whole, complete.

As if we had finally arrived at the heart of  
everything.

And for the briefest heartbeat, I understood what  
the Codex truly was.

Not a book. Not a map.

But a mirror.

A mirror reflecting all those who had ever asked the same question: What if I had chosen differently?

When I closed the Codex, Sophie was waiting in the doorway, watching me with eyes full of something like hope, or maybe recognition.

“You saw it, didn’t you?” she asked, voice gentle.

I nodded, still feeling the echoes of those countless selves.

“And do you still want to keep going?”

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “But I think I have to.”

She smiled, not out of joy, but something deeper—recognition, acceptance.



“Then come with me. There’s something I need to show you.”

We walked silently through the haven, past the Map Room, the Archive of Broken Clocks, the Corridor of Untold Stories.

I realized I had never truly noticed how vast this place was, how many sealed doors it held, how many layers of secrets it concealed beneath its quiet surface.

At last, we arrived at a narrow spiral staircase.

Sophie handed me a lantern. Together, we began our descent.

Below the haven lay a cavern—ancient, natural.

Stalactites hung like jagged teeth from the dark ceiling.

The walls glowed faintly with bioluminescent moss, casting eerie, shifting shadows.

At the center of the cavern was a circular platform, carved from polished stone, inscribed with strange, unfamiliar symbols.

“This is where I first found the Codex,” Sophie said softly.

I looked around, breath catching. “Here?”

“Yes,” she said. “It was embedded in the stone, waiting for me. I thought it was just a trick of the light, but when I touched it, it recognized me.”

“Who built this place?” I asked, voice barely above a whisper.

She shook her head. “No one knows. Maybe it was us. Maybe one of us who chose differently.”

She stepped onto the platform, beckoning me to follow.

“There’s something you need to understand about the Codex,” she said.

“It doesn’t just reveal what was. It protects what could be.”

A chill ran down my spine.

“And someone is trying to destroy that.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, heart tightening.

“There are others—like us, but not like us,” she said.

“They don’t believe in memory. They believe in singularity.”

“They want to collapse all branches of time into one timeline.”

“One truth.”

“One history.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s neater. Cleaner. No ambiguity. No regrets.”

“But also no freedom,” I said, feeling the weight of her words settle.

“Exactly.”

She reached into her coat and drew out a small metallic object.

Round, palm-sized, engraved with the same eye-shaped glyph I had seen on the door to the Room of Reveries.

“They call themselves the Chorus,” she explained.

“They don’t erase people. They erase potential.”

“If they find a branch they don’t like—a version of events—they prune it.”

I remembered then—the mirror in the Temple of Knotted Threads that shattered without touch.

The strange figure watching from the crowd in 391 AD.

The missing page from the Codex when I first found it.

I had assumed these were coincidences.

But they were not.

“You’ve seen them before,” Sophie said, reading the shock on my face.

“Yes,” I whispered. “I didn’t realize.”

“No one does—at first.”

“That’s their power.”

“They are subtle. Efficient.”

“And very patient.”

I stepped closer to the platform, feeling the cold stone beneath my feet.

“And what do we do now?” I asked.

She placed the metallic object in the center of the circle.

It pulsed once, a quiet heartbeat, then vanished into the floor.

“We find the Fracture Points,” she said.

“Moments in history where a major path was diverted.”

“And we protect them.”

“Like Alexandria?”

“Exactly.”

“Or Oxford.”

“Or the day your mother vanished.”

I stiffened.

She noticed immediately.

“You haven’t remembered that part yet, have you?”

I shook my head slowly.

“No.”

“I just know... something happened.”

“It wasn’t just something,” she said gently.

“It was the first fracture.”

“Your first choice.”

I felt as if the air had been sucked from the room.

My memory spun, raw and ragged.

The mirror.

The scent of magnolia.

A woman's voice, crying out through smoke.

But it wouldn't settle.

Not yet.

Sophie didn't push. Not once. She simply looked at me with a calm that felt ancient—like the kind of calm that had seen a thousand lifetimes pass in silence, that knew waiting was sometimes the only answer.

“When you're ready,” she said softly, almost like a whisper meant only for me, “it'll come.”

We stood there, the two of us, in a place that felt older than any memory I had ever known. A place where time seemed to fold back onto itself, where past and future were threads tangled in a single,



endless knot. We stood on a platform shaped like a question no one had yet dared to fully ask, or maybe even understand. And for the first time since this whole strange journey began, that uneasy feeling of being lost—the endless searching and grasping—fell away. Instead, I felt something different. Something less like direction and more like suspension.

Suspended between selves. Between choices made and choices still waiting to be made. Between moments that had already slipped past and those still shimmering on the horizon.

The silence between us was comfortable now, not awkward or heavy. We didn't need words to fill it.

After a moment that felt like hours, we began our slow ascent back to the surface. No words were spoken. Just quiet footsteps echoing on ancient stone.

That night, sleep refused to come. My mind was a whirlwind of half-formed thoughts and memories, of visions caught between waking and dreaming. I wandered through the long, twisting halls of the haven—the place that had become something like a home, though nothing about it felt familiar. The clocks ticked around me, but not in perfect harmony. Some were a second ahead, some a second behind, their hands moving just slightly out of sync. It was like time itself was fragmented here, scattered like leaves in a restless wind.

Outside, the wind hummed through the chimes hung on the veranda. The notes were soft and sad, and somewhere in the distance, faint but unmistakable, a piano played. I looked toward the music, but there was no one sitting at the bench. No hands moved over keys. Just the melody, drifting and lingering like a ghost.

Eventually, pulled by a strange force, I found myself back in the Room of Reveries.

The mirrors stretched around me in a silent, unblinking circle. This time, they did not shimmer or flicker. They waited patiently, as if they had been holding their breath for my return.

One reflection stepped forward again—it was the version of me who had stayed. The self who chose peace instead of endless wandering.

But he looked older now. Worn by years, yes, but in a quiet way. There were laugh lines carved gently around his eyes and a calmness in his posture that spoke of acceptance. And he wasn't alone.

Beside him stood Sophie.

And between them, a small child, barefoot and bright-eyed, grinning wide. She held a tiny pocket watch in her small hand, turning it over as if it were the most precious treasure in the world.

They didn't speak. They didn't need to. Words would have been useless here.

But I understood.

There was a version of me—one who had chosen to stay, to live a life less fractured, less torn by endless questions.

And perhaps, if I was careful, if I fought hard enough, if I could find the strength in memory and

choice—the version of me who held that peace might still be possible.

The night passed quietly after that, but in the long hours that stretched on, the stillness of the haven grew heavy and oppressive. I couldn't shake the image of the child—her bright smile, the way she cradled that pocket watch as if it held the meaning of everything.

I had never truly known such versions of myself existed, or that they could look so whole, so complete.

By morning, Sophie seemed different. There was something in her eyes—less guarded, more certain. A quiet determination, like she had made a decision she could no longer avoid.

She led me down the hall toward the Room of Mirrors, the place where all versions of me—past, present, and possible futures—converged in one infinite reflection.

“You’re thinking about the child, aren’t you?” she said gently as we walked.

I nodded, words failing me. “How could I not? She seemed so... complete. So happy.”

Sophie stopped and turned to look at me. Her voice was soft, but beneath the calm was an edge of deep understanding—almost sorrow.

“That’s the thing about choices, Elian,” she said quietly. “We get caught up believing the path we’re on is the only one that matters. The only one that’s real. But there’s always a version of us who chose

differently. And we have to live with that. Carry that with us.”

Her words struck deeper than I expected, a sudden sharpness cutting through me.

I had spent so long chasing answers, unraveling timelines, trying to find where my story truly began. I believed that was what mattered most. But maybe Sophie was right.

Maybe it wasn't just about answers or knowing every fracture in time.

Maybe peace was just choosing a path, truly choosing it—and then letting go of the rest.

# Chapter Seventeen :

## “Reflections of What Could Have Been”

We stepped cautiously into the Room of Mirrors. The moment we crossed the threshold, the air seemed heavier, almost thick with the weight of possibilities—so many that I couldn’t even begin to count them. Each one hung there silently, just out of reach, like invisible hands waiting for me to make sense of them.

All around me, countless mirrors reflected different versions of myself, each one frozen in the glass like a moment trapped in time. Some looked happy—smiling with ease, carefree and light. Others looked broken in quiet ways, with tired eyes or shoulders that slumped under some unseen burden. But no



matter their differences, all these reflections shared one thing for sure: none had made the same choices I had. Every one of them was living a life I never did.

Sophie stood beside me, silent but steady. Her expression was hard to read, like she was trying to hold back a storm brewing inside her. Maybe it was the weight of a thousand lost chances or a sadness too deep to put into words.

“Every choice you make,” she said softly, her voice low and almost fragile, “sends ripples through the fabric of time. Each decision, even the smallest ones, branches out and creates a new version of you—a new reality, like the endless branches of a tree that never stops growing.”

She paused, letting the meaning of her words sink in. “But some choices... they’re permanent, Elian. There are fractures in time that can never be fixed. No matter how much you wish they could be.”

I stepped closer to one particular mirror, drawn like a moth to the light it cast. The figure staring back was a version of myself I hadn't seen before. He was older now, his hair streaked with gray at the temples.

He wore the same worn coat I had in Prague, like a shield against the cold winds of the world. But it was his eyes that caught me—those eyes carried a sadness I hadn't seen in any other reflection. There was a quiet resignation in them, like someone who had given up long ago.

Sophie's voice came again, soft and almost sad. "He chose not to fight. He let go, Elian. Instead of trying to fix the broken pieces around him, he just... let them fall apart."

The weight of that choice settled in my chest, heavy and cold. Could I have been that man, in some

other life? Could I have walked away from this endless search, this craving to understand time and truth? The thought felt foreign, almost wrong, but the man in the mirror was proof it was possible.

“What happens to him?” I asked quietly, voice thick with unease.

Sophie met my eyes, steady and sure. “He fades. Just like all the others who find peace by accepting their fractures. Those who stop fighting, who accept their fate without resistance—they disappear. They slip into the folds of time, where no one can reach them anymore.”

I turned away, the image lingering painfully in my mind. Was that what I was risking if I stopped fighting? Was peace just fading away into nothing, losing myself to the past, never truly living in the moment I had now?

Sophie placed a firm hand on my shoulder. “It’s hard to accept, Elian. That we’re not just the sum of our actions, but also the sum of what we refuse to do. The moments we freeze. The choices we avoid. Letting life just pass us by while we stand still.”

I swallowed hard, trying to push the fading man from my thoughts, but he lingered like a shadow just out of reach. “What do I do, Sophie? What choice do I have?”

She didn’t answer immediately. Instead, she moved slowly across the room toward the far end, where the mirrors warped and twisted into something darker and more unsettling—as if the glass itself was bleeding shadows.

“You have to confront the Chorus,” she said finally. “They’re the ones trying to erase all these branches, all these versions of yourself. They want to collapse the timeline into just one story, one version. You have to stop them—before it’s too late.”

A tremble rose in my voice. “But how? How do you fight something that exists beyond time itself? Something that can erase everything I’ve built? Erase me... completely?”

Sophie turned back to me, her eyes fierce and determined, burning with a quiet fire. “You fight by remembering. You reclaim every fracture they try to wipe away. Every memory, every choice you’ve made—especially the ones you’ve tried to forget—they’re weapons in this fight. You just need to learn how to wield them.”

I nodded slowly, though doubt gnawed at me. How could I fight an enemy that wasn't bound by time? How could I possibly stop the Chorus when they could erase me from existence, delete every memory of me from the timeline?

Seeing the doubt on my face, Sophie stepped forward and placed the Codex gently in my hands. "This is your key," she said softly. "It will show you the way. But only if you're ready to see it."

I stared down at the Codex, feeling its weight settle deeply into my palms. The pages shimmered faintly, alive with something beyond ordinary ink and paper—as if the very universe breathed beneath their surface.

I had always thought the answers lay inside its pages, but now I realized it was more than just a book. It was a map of possibilities—an atlas of the many lives I could have lived, and maybe still could.

Looking back at Sophie, my heart heavy with the weight of what lay ahead, I asked, “How do I start?”

She smiled then, a mix of sadness and pride shining in her eyes. “You’ve already started. By choosing to remember.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, letting the weight of Sophie’s words sink slowly into my mind, twisting and turning inside like a storm that wouldn’t settle. The memory of my mother flickered at the edge of my thoughts—the way her voice used to calm me, the things I never fully understood back then.

The fractures I’d ignored all these years, the cracks in the timeline that I thought were distant but were really right beneath my feet, shaping everything. The lives I’d lived, the choices I’d made—each one was a thread, tangled and frayed, but somehow all

connected, all pulling me here, to this exact moment in the Room of Mirrors.

When I opened my eyes again, the mirrors didn't feel so distant or cold anymore. They weren't just reflections of other lives, or different versions of me trapped behind glass. No, they were something else entirely. They were doorways—pathways that led to different futures. Each mirror held a choice, a turning point that could take me somewhere new, somewhere unknown. And suddenly I understood with a strange clarity that no matter which path I took, it wasn't just my own future that would change—it was the future of the entire timeline. The fate of everything, all stretched out in front of me, waiting for a decision.

I stood there, motionless, fingers curling tight around the Codex like if I let it slip from my grasp, everything might fall apart. Sophie stayed behind



me, silent but close, like a shadow I couldn't shake. Her presence was comforting and yet unsettling at the same time—as if she was holding back a thousand things she wasn't ready to say. Between us hung a thick tension, heavy and quiet, filled with unsaid words like an invisible contract we were both bound to.

I realized then that by accepting the Codex, by stepping into this fractured, splintered reality, I had already made my choice. Now I had to learn what it really meant to hold that power. To understand what it meant to wield the Codex.

The question wasn't if I could defeat the Chorus anymore. It was whether I was truly ready to lose everything in the attempt.

“Where do we go from here?” I finally asked, my voice barely more than a whisper, trembling like I was afraid to hear the answer.

Sophie's eyes softened, and with a careful motion, she reached out and took the Codex from my hands. The moment her fingers touched the book, a sudden ripple of energy passed between us—a flash of lightning so quick and sharp it was almost impossible to catch. She opened the Codex slowly, fingertips brushing over the shimmering pages as if she was reading a secret no one else could see.

“There's a place,” she said carefully, her voice low and deliberate, “where the Chorus gathers. They call it the Nexus. It's not like any place you've known—it's outside of time itself, a void where every timeline converges. It's where they can strike, where they can erase everything at once—every branch, every choice, every reality.”

I felt a cold chill crawl up my spine. A place outside of time. A void where everything ends—or is erased. The thought was terrifying beyond words.

“How do we get there?” I asked, dread tightening around my chest like an iron fist.

Sophie closed the Codex with a snap, her face hardening with grim determination. “We can’t get there by traveling like we normally do. The Nexus isn’t bound by time or space. It doesn’t follow the rules we know. To reach it, you have to be willing to let go of everything. Every path you’ve walked, every choice you’ve made... You have to be ready to sacrifice yourself completely.”

Her words hit me like a blow to the gut, knocking the breath out of me. Was she really asking me to disappear? To give up everything that made me who I am? The very essence of myself?

“Are you saying we have to erase ourselves to fight them?” I demanded, my voice shaking with disbelief.

“No,” Sophie said firmly, holding my gaze without flinching. “Not erase ourselves. But we have to sever the ties—to every version of you, every reality you’ve been part of. You have to become a ghost in time. A shadow that can slip between realities unnoticed. Untethered. Free to move where the Chorus can’t follow.”

I blinked, trying to wrap my mind around what she was saying. A ghost in time. To be disconnected from every version of myself that ever was, or could have been. To become something less than whole, but somehow more powerful.

“But how can I fight if I’m nothing?” I asked, my voice thick with doubt and fear. “If I’m just a shadow, a ghost, how do I make a difference?”

“You won’t be nothing,” she said gently, her voice soft but full of meaning. “You’ll be the one who remembers. The Codex will give you the power to hold on to your memories, to every fracture, every choice, every path you’ve walked. No matter how broken or scattered the timeline becomes, you’ll carry the truth inside you. That’s your strength.”

Her words settled on me, heavy but somehow warming. I thought about what that meant—the idea of carrying all those memories, all those versions of myself, even the ones I didn’t want to face.

“You have to be ready,” Sophie continued, “to face every version of yourself. Even the ones who gave

up. The ones who walked away. The ones who lost everything. They're still a part of you, and you have to confront them if you want to stand a chance."

I swallowed hard, feeling the weight of what lay ahead. The battle wasn't just against the Chorus out there—it was against the fractures inside me, the broken pieces of my own past and potential futures.

Sophie's eyes searched mine, steady and sure.

"Remember, Elian, this isn't just a fight to save the timeline. It's a fight to save yourself. To remember who you are beneath all the cracks and shadows."

I looked down at the Codex in my hands, feeling the shimmering pages pulse softly as if alive with possibility. The path ahead was uncertain and terrifying, but I had taken the first step. I was ready, even if I wasn't sure how far I could go.

And so, with every fragment of courage I could muster, I prepared myself to become the ghost in time—the one who remembers.

I took a deep breath, the air thick and heavy in my lungs, my mind spinning in a cyclone of confusion and fear. Sophie's words echoed in my head, but I still didn't fully understand what she was asking of me. It sounded impossible—sacrificing parts of myself, severing ties to every version of me in the fractured timelines. Yet despite all the questions, a strange certainty settled in. This was the only choice left. The only path forward.

If I refused, if I let the fear of what I might become hold me back, then the Chorus would win. They would erase everything—my memories, every version of myself, every choice I had ever made or

might have made. All of it would vanish like smoke in the wind.

I couldn't let that happen. I wouldn't.

"I'll do it," I said quietly, my voice firming up despite the tremor inside. "I'll face them."

Sophie's expression softened as if she'd been waiting for me to say those words. She nodded once, slow and sure. "Then we begin."

The rest of the day passed in a strange blur. We prepared, though I still didn't quite understand what exactly we were preparing for. Sophie guided me through rituals that felt more like meditations than anything physical. The process of severing the ties to my other selves wasn't painful. There was no flash of light, no sudden break. It was something



quieter—an awareness shifting inside me, like waking from a deep sleep and realizing you're not the same person you were before.

I felt threads stretching, fragile and thin, pulling tight across my mind. And then snapping. The connections between all the different versions of me started to splinter and fade away, dissolving into nothing.

Images flashed before my eyes. Past selves, shadows of choices I hadn't made. Some of those versions looked peaceful—content in their quiet lives, like the one who had never left Oxford, who stayed safe and small, never seeing the world beyond the university walls. His life was simple but empty, a seed that had never grown.

Another version never went to Prague. Never met the Archivists. Lived a quiet, unremarkable life, unaware of the battles raging across the timelines.

Then there was the one I feared the most—the version Sophie warned me about. The me who gave up. He was old and worn, eyes hollow like a fading candle, spirit broken and lost. It was a future I refused to let happen.

Sophie's voice brought me back to the moment. "Remember," she said softly as she guided me through the last parts of the ritual, "you are not just the sum of the choices you've made. You are also the sum of all the choices you didn't make. The roads you didn't take. The things you left behind."

I looked into the mirror beside us. The reflection staring back wasn't tied to any one timeline anymore. I was no longer bound by the weight of all

those fractured lives. I was something else now—something like a flicker in the dark, a memory waiting to be born. And in that quiet space inside me, I felt something stir—a power I never knew I had, waking up from its long sleep.

“You’re ready,” Sophie said, her voice low and certain. “Now, we can confront the Chorus.”

The world around us shifted. Sophie reached out her hand, and suddenly a portal tore open in the air before us—a raw rip in reality that stretched out into an endless, empty space. I could feel it pulling at me, tugging on the very core of my being like gravity made of nothingness.

I stepped through.

The haven where I'd felt safe vanished behind me, replaced by a place that wasn't really a place at all. It was formless, infinite, and silent except for the sound of my own breath echoing in the void.

And then I saw them. The Chorus.

They stood at the edges of this empty nothingness—tall figures wrapped in shifting shadows, their faces hidden behind masks that gleamed silver and black. They weren't bound by time, or space, or any rules we understood. They were the architects of the timeline itself, the ones who shaped reality and erased it whenever it no longer suited their plan.

My heart thundered in my chest. The Codex was heavy in my hands, but it no longer felt like a simple book. It was a weapon—an instrument of truth and defiance.

The leader of the Chorus stepped forward. Before I even saw him, I felt his presence—cold and sharp like a blade. He was tall, thin, and his eyes glowed with an eerie light, like fire burning under ice.

“You should not have come here,” he said, his voice a whisper that echoed endlessly through the void. “You are nothing. A shadow, a fragment of time with no place in this world.”

I lifted the Codex, feeling power rise inside me, steady and fierce. “I am not nothing. I am everything.”

The leader tilted his head, as if surprised by my answer. His glowing eyes locked onto mine, piercing and deep, like he was trying to see into my

soul. The silence between us stretched long and heavy before he spoke again.

“You speak of being everything,” he said, voice thick with both disdain and curiosity. “But you are nothing but a crack in time, an anomaly. A mistake that should never have been made. And yet, here you are. Challenging the order of everything.”

I clenched my fists, the Codex solid and unwavering in my grip. “I’m not a mistake,” I said, voice growing stronger with every word. “I’m the choice you tried to erase. I’m the one who remembers. The one who sees the cracks in your perfect design.”

The Chorus leader laughed. It wasn’t a laugh of amusement, but one that echoed with the weight of countless endings—the kind of laugh that had wiped clean entire timelines more times than I could count.

“You think you can remember what’s not meant to be remembered?” His voice climbed, a powerful roar in the emptiness. “Your memories, your life—they were never meant to exist. You are an echo of a shadow, a forgotten thing that should not be.”

I took a step forward, his words trying to crush me, but inside something pushed back harder. I wasn’t just a shadow. I was the light refusing to be snuffed out.

“I am not just a memory,” I said, my voice steady even under the pressure of his gaze. “I’m the one who will make sure your design, your control, ends. I will rewrite everything. Not as a victim, but as the one who remembers, the one who fights back.”

A flicker crossed his face—surprise, maybe anger—but it vanished quickly, replaced by the cold, cruel mask of superiority I had come to expect from the Chorus.

“You cannot defeat us,” he said simply, as if it was already decided. “We control time. We set the rules. You are nothing but a fleeting thought. A momentary spark in a world of endless shadows. You cannot rewrite the timeline. It is too far beyond you.”

I didn’t falter, even as his words cut through me like a knife. Yes, the truth was harsh. The Chorus held the reins of time, reality, everything. But I wasn’t here to beat them at their own game. I was here to remind them of something they’d forgotten—the power of choice.



“You control time,” I said, meeting his gaze without blinking. “But you don’t control me. You don’t control

the choice I make. And that’s what you’ve forgotten. That’s why you’re afraid.”

# Chapter Eighteen: Echoes of Choice

Then, there was a brief pause. The leader of the Chorus said nothing at first, his eyes unreadable, like deep pools of shadow where no light could reach. Around us, the other members of the Chorus stood still, like statues carved from darkness and silence. Their presence was heavy, pressing down on the space between us, making the tension almost tangible.

“Afraid?” the leader repeated, his voice shifting into something colder, more distant. But beneath that coldness, there was a trace of disbelief. “We are not afraid. We are inevitable. We are the ones who hold the threads of existence in our hands. And yet, here you stand, speaking of choice as though it could mean something.”

I lifted the Codex higher. The familiar weight of it settled in my hands, steady and real, the power inside pulsing stronger with each passing second. “It means everything,” I said, voice clear, ringing with a certainty I didn’t fully feel but forced myself to believe. “Choice is the one thing you can never control. It’s the thing that defines us—not the timelines, not the patterns you weave and break. The choice to keep going. To keep fighting. That’s what I’ve chosen. And it’s a choice you can’t erase.”

For a moment, the leader of the Chorus took a step back, just a small motion, but enough for me to catch a flicker of something unfamiliar in his glowing eyes. Hesitation? Doubt? Whatever it was, it vanished almost instantly. His face hardened into that cold mask of calculation I had come to dread.

“You think you can fight what we are?” His voice dropped low, almost a growl, thick with menace. “You think you can rewrite everything? Reset the balance? You are nothing but a child playing with forces far beyond your understanding.”

The energy in the Codex surged inside me, raw and alive. Deep down, I knew this was the moment everything would change. This wasn't about defeating them with brute force, or outwitting them with clever tricks. This was about reminding them—reminding myself—of something they had lost along the way. The power of choice. The ability to act outside the boundaries of their rigid design. That was something they would never have.

And that's why they feared me.

I took another step forward, the Codex burning hot in my hands. Its energy hummed with every word I spoke.

“You’ve forgotten the most important thing,” I said, voice calm but firm, carrying a quiet power. “You’ve forgotten that choice is stronger than time itself. It’s the force that keeps everything alive. And I choose to remember. I choose to fight. I choose to write my own future.”

For a moment, the leader of the Chorus was silent. My words seemed to hit something deep inside him—something I hadn’t expected. His eyes flickered, the faintest shadow of doubt crossing them. But as quickly as it came, it was gone, replaced again by that cold, rigid posture.

“You are deluded,” he said, voice cold and sharp. “But I will grant you this: For now, you may have

the illusion of choice. But in the end, time will take everything from you. You will forget. You will fade away into nothingness, just like the rest.”

I met his gaze, unflinching, steady. “Maybe,” I said softly. “But maybe I won’t.”

The silence that followed hung heavy in the void, thick and suffocating like the calm before a storm breaks. The leader of the Chorus stood motionless, eyes locked onto mine. The others remained as still as statues, silent sentinels watching the moment unfold. I could almost feel the weight of their judgment, the crushing power they wielded over the flow of time itself. Yet, in that moment, their power didn’t feel overwhelming. Instead, I felt the quiet, steady strength of my own choice—the power I had been clinging to all along.

“Time will not forgive you,” the leader said finally, his voice colder than before, as if the very air around us had frozen. “You are a fleeting spark, Elian V. Arlen. A momentary disruption in the endless flow of existence. You cannot escape your destiny, no matter how hard you try.”

I drew a deep breath, steadying myself against the chill that seemed to seep into my bones. The Codex hummed softly in my hands, its energy pulsing like a living heartbeat. I felt it—every choice that had led me here, every step that had brought me to this place of reckoning. I had already made my choice, and I was no longer afraid of what would come next.

The void around us seemed to pulse with the weight of time itself. The Chorus was not just some distant force; they were the very pattern that shaped existence. Their shadows stretched far beyond what

I could see, beyond what I could imagine. But for the first time, I understood something vital—they were not all-powerful. Not completely.

They feared the one thing they could never hold, never control: choice.

The energy in the Codex was alive, and through it, I could feel the echo of every decision that had been made, and every decision yet to come. The power to choose, to act freely, to break from the chains of fate—it wasn't just some abstract concept. It was real. It was mine.

I wasn't just a shadow cast by their designs. I was the light that refused to be snuffed out.



The leader's cold voice cut through the silence again, warning me of my fate, but I was beyond fear. I had made my choice, and that was enough.

No matter what happened next, I would face it head-on.

The past was not behind me. It was chasing me.

"You don't understand," I said softly, but with a firmness that echoed through the empty halls of that endless void. The silence around us was thick, like the walls themselves were holding their breath, waiting for what I would say next. "I'm not trying to escape anything. I'm not running from destiny or hiding from the future laid out before me. I'm choosing to define it. I'm choosing to take back what you've stolen from me—what you've stolen from all of us."

The leader's eyes narrowed sharply. His gaze was cold, almost cutting through me like a knife. His lips twisted into a thin, cruel line, the kind of expression someone wears when they know they have all the power and look down on the powerless. "You cannot define what you have never known," he said, his voice heavy with a mixture of contempt and pity, like he was speaking to a child who had just tried to challenge the world. "You are nothing more than a fractured reflection, an echo of a world that should never have existed. Your memories are broken, scattered like fragments of a puzzle that can never be whole again. And yet you cling to them, desperately, as if they mean something."

I didn't flinch. Instead, I raised the Codex higher, letting the faint light from its pages spill over the cold emptiness around us, casting strange shadows on the walls. The glow wasn't bright, but it was alive—warm and real, like a small flame fighting

against the endless dark. "My memories are not broken," I said, voice growing stronger with every word I forced out. "They are part of me. They make me who I am, even the pieces you think are lost. I might not have every answer, but I know one thing for sure: I choose who I become. Not you. Not time. Me."

For a heartbeat, I thought I saw something flicker in the leader's glowing eyes. A flash of something I wasn't expecting—maybe doubt, maybe fear. But just as quickly as it came, it was gone. His expression hardened again, sharper than stone, colder than the void itself. "You are a fool," he said, low and menacing, like a shadow falling over me. "You think you have control, but you are nothing but a puppet. The strings are already in place, Elian. You don't see them yet, but when the time comes, you will be just another casualty. Just another forgotten piece in the endless war between choice and fate."

The sting of his words was sharp, but they didn't break me. I had come too far, risked too much, to be swayed by his cruel taunts. The Codex was not just a book of knowledge—it was a weapon, a tool forged to fight back against the darkness. Against the Chorus. Against the cruel idea that time and fate could be controlled by anyone but the one who lived through it.

"You're wrong," I said quietly, voice steady and unwavering. "The strings you speak of—they're not in my hands. They're in the hands of everyone who chooses to act. Everyone who refuses to be a pawn. Everyone who fights for their own future, even if that future is uncertain and scary."

The Chorus leader's mouth opened to reply, to spit out more cold dismissals, but before the words could leave his lips, something shifted in the air—a

subtle pulse, like the earth trembling beneath a quiet storm. It started almost unnoticed, a faint vibration that rippled through the empty space around us, growing stronger with each second. The very walls seemed to hum with it, charged by a force that wasn't just mine, but something much bigger.

I could feel the power of the Codex responding inside me, surging, alive and fierce. It was as if the book itself breathed, pulling in the energy around us and turning it into a force I could barely hold.

For the briefest moment, I caught a glimpse of something in the leader's eyes—something like fear. It was only a flicker, almost hidden, quickly masked by the cold, calculating look he always wore. But it was there. And I knew, even if he wouldn't admit it, that he felt it too.

"You think you have the power to change everything?" he sneered, voice thick with scorn and disbelief. "You cannot rewrite the inevitable. Time is not a plaything for you to twist and bend. You are nothing but a speck, a fleeting moment lost in the vastness of eternity. And when the dust settles, you will be forgotten. Your choices, your actions—everything you've done—will be erased."

His words hung in the air, heavy like a dark cloud threatening to swallow me whole. And yet, somehow, I felt lighter than I ever had before. Because I wasn't just fighting for myself—I was fighting for every fragment, every broken memory, every lost possibility that the Chorus wanted to erase forever.

They wanted to control everything, to shape the flow of time like clay, smoothing out the rough edges and deleting all the chaos. But they forgot one

thing—the power of choice. The chaos of free will.  
The thing no machine, no force, no endless cycle  
could ever fully erase.

I wasn't sure how the fight would end. Maybe I  
would lose. Maybe the Chorus would succeed in  
their terrible plan, and I would be erased just like  
they said. But maybe—just maybe—I wouldn't.

Because as long as I held the Codex, as long as I  
remembered who I was and what I fought for, I  
carried something they could never take.

Hope.

Light.

Choice.

And that was enough.

I stepped forward, the Codex in my hands radiating a warmth I'd never felt before. It was subtle, not burning or blinding like I'd imagined great power might feel, but instead like the gentle heat of sunlight after a long winter. As if the book had come alive. Not just reacting to me—but responding to me. Accepting me. The air around us thickened, the pressure shifting as though the world had leaned in, holding its breath. For the first time in forever, or maybe longer than that, I felt clear. Not completely sure, no, but sure enough. Sure enough to keep walking forward.

"I may be a speck," I said, my voice calm, but louder than I expected. It echoed off the high, cold walls.

"But I am a speck that refuses to be erased. And I will keep choosing. I will choose until my last breath, until the very end. Because it is in the act of choosing that we become who we are meant to be."



There was a pause. A long one. One of those silences that's not really quiet—when you can still feel every eye on you, every thought being measured. The leader of the Chorus didn't move. His face was unreadable, carved from something older than stone, older than time maybe. The other members were like statues behind him, each one watching me, waiting, their pale eyes glowing faintly like stars through fog.

Then finally, he spoke. His voice was lower than before, as if he was talking to himself and me at the same time. "You speak of choice," he said, almost slowly, like the words were heavy and he had to push them out. "But in the end, choice is an illusion. The future is already written. Time is a force that cannot be altered. You may think you are in control, but you are nothing more than a flicker in the great river of time. And when that river flows into the abyss, you will go with it, just like the rest."

The words should have hurt. They had, once. I remembered hearing those exact kinds of things before, maybe not in the same tone, maybe not from a being like him, but the message was the same. That I didn't matter. That none of this did. That the current was too strong and I was too small. But they didn't shake me anymore. Maybe I'd been broken so many times that now I'd come out the other side. Or maybe I'd finally figured out what strength really was.

"I will choose," I said, simple and strong. No shouting, no trembling. Just the truth. "And that is something you can never take from me. You may control time, but you do not control the heart of those who refuse to accept their fate. And I refuse."

His eyes stayed locked with mine, and something shifted there—just for a second. Like a curtain

twitching in a storm. Recognition, maybe. Not agreement, not acceptance. But he saw me now. Not as a mistake. Not as a loose thread. But as something that could pull the whole tapestry apart.

I was not a puppet.

I was the one holding the strings.

The chamber felt smaller suddenly, the walls closer. Not threatening, but focused. The way a storm narrows when it chooses where to strike. The Codex pulsed in my grip, not painfully but with purpose. My words had done something. Stirred the stillness, maybe cracked a little of whatever they were built from. The Chorus leader's face didn't show it, but I could feel it, same way you feel the wind shift just before the rain.

"You misunderstand," he said, his voice quiet but sharp, like a knife sliding into cloth. "The choice you have made, it is not truly yours. You have already chosen, long before this moment. You are just too blind to see it. There is no escaping it. There is no escaping time."

I almost laughed, not because it was funny, but because of how tired that idea had become. The old weight of it didn't hold me anymore. It was like hearing a bedtime story you'd outgrown. "Maybe you're right," I said, steady. "Maybe the path I walk was always meant to be mine. But that doesn't mean I have to accept the terms you've set for me. You don't control me, not anymore."

His smile returned—thin, brittle. The kind that hides something cracking underneath. "You think you've won, don't you?" he said. "But you are only

delaying the inevitable. You will see soon enough. You cannot outrun time, Elian."

I didn't flinch. I felt the Codex respond again, its pulse stronger now, almost like a second heartbeat syncing with mine. It wasn't guiding me anymore. It was walking beside me. I didn't fully understand what I had become—what this power inside me really meant—but I didn't need to. Not yet. All I needed was this moment. This stand.

"You're wrong," I said, voice low but sure. "I'm not trying to outrun anything. I'm choosing to face it. To redefine what it means to be part of time. And I won't do it on your terms. Not anymore."

That was the last crack, I think. His eyes narrowed, not in anger exactly, but something close. Not hatred, but not far from it either. A look reserved

for things that disrupt. For things that survive when they're not supposed to.

"You will see," he said again, whispering now. "You will see what it means to defy us. And you will regret it."

And maybe I would. I didn't know. There was no promise of victory. No prophecy saying I would rise above. There was only the choice I had made and whatever came after it. But that was enough. That had to be enough.

The silence that followed wrapped around the room, deep and final. He didn't speak again, and I didn't wait for him to. I turned, the sound of my footsteps ringing out into the chamber, sharp and real. Each one felt louder than the last. I didn't look back at them—not because I wasn't afraid, but because I was done giving them my fear.

The Codex still hummed with life in my hands, brighter now, warmer, like a sun slowly rising inside me. The chamber faded behind me, the weight of the Chorus falling away as I stepped out. It wasn't that their power was gone—it was that it no longer mattered. They didn't define me. Not anymore.

Outside the chamber, the air was cooler. Real. I could breathe again. The sky above—if you could even call it a sky—stretched wide and pale, vast like the future itself. I didn't know what would happen next. I didn't know what dangers waited, or what losses might come. But I had chosen. That choice was a light that couldn't be extinguished.

I had made my stand.

I had written my line into the story.

And I would keep writing.

Because I understood something they never could.

I didn't need certainty. I just needed to choose.

And I had.

I didn't know what would come next. I didn't know if I was ready for the challenges that lay ahead. But in that moment, I knew something with absolute clarity: I was not afraid.

I had taken control. I had chosen my path.

And no one could take that from me.



# Chapter Nineteen: The Shape of the Unseen

As I moved further away from the chamber, the ground beneath my feet felt more uncertain, like it couldn't decide whether to hold me or let me fall. Every step seemed to echo too loudly, even when there was no sound. I kept walking, though. There wasn't any other direction to go. Not anymore. The past lay behind me, distant but not gone. The future stretched out like a road that hadn't been built yet.

The Codex pulsed in my hands, still warm, still alive. It wasn't just a book—I think I knew that from the moment I touched it. But now I understood in a deeper way. It was old, older than any of us. Not just a record of time, but a force. A bridge between what had happened and what might happen. And

somehow, through everything, it had bound itself to me. Or maybe I had bound myself to it. I couldn't tell anymore.

I stopped, my eyes catching on the strange glow that touched the buildings ahead. The city, what remained of it, looked both ruined and untouched, caught in a half-light that didn't belong to morning or evening. The air was thick with quiet. No wind. No birds. Just stillness. It felt like time was paused, as if the world itself was holding its breath, waiting to see what I would do next.

But under that silence, something else stirred. A whisper. Not a sound exactly, more like a presence brushing against my thoughts. It was soft and fleeting, but real. I couldn't make out words, but I knew what it meant. Change was coming. Not the slow kind. The kind that breaks things. The kind that doesn't ask.

I tightened my grip on the Codex, more from instinct than anything else. I didn't think it could protect me, not in the way a weapon could, but it was mine. A part of me now. The only thing that made sense in this shifting world.

The truth was, I was scared. Not of dying—not really. But of getting lost. Of becoming something I didn't recognize. I'd seen too many versions of myself already. Some I didn't like. Some I barely understood. But now, it was up to me to keep choosing. Keep stepping forward even when nothing felt solid beneath me.

I moved through the city, through alleys that looked both familiar and strange. The streets were cracked but clean. Empty, but not abandoned. Like the people had just stepped away for a moment. I kept

walking, letting my feet guide me. I didn't know where I was going, only that I couldn't stop now.

And then I heard it.

The low murmur of voices. Like wind through leaves, but heavier. I followed the sound without thinking. Turned a corner. And there they were.

A circle of people stood in the open space. Figures in long cloaks and masks, standing perfectly still. Their faces were hidden, but I could feel their eyes on me. Not watching—seeing. Like they already knew who I was. What I had done.

I hesitated. Just for a second. Then stepped forward.

As if on cue, they turned toward me as one. The air thickened. Their presence wasn't violent, but it wasn't welcoming either. It was like standing before a mirror that reflected more than your face. They weren't strangers. Not completely. There was something in the way they stood, the silence between them. Familiar. Unsettling.

One of them stepped forward. Their voice came from behind the mask, soft but clear. "You have made your choice," they said. "And now, the time has come for you to face the consequences."

I opened my mouth, but the words caught. Consequences. I didn't even know what that meant anymore. Every action I'd taken felt like it had spun off a thousand more. The weight of it pressed in, but I didn't look away. I couldn't.

"What do you want from me?" I asked.

Another voice, this one deeper. “We want nothing. Time wants everything.”

That answer chilled me in a way I couldn’t explain. I looked down at the Codex, its pulse still steady. A part of me wanted to hand it over, let someone else carry the burden. But I didn’t move.

“Then why are you here?”

“To witness,” the first figure said. “To see what becomes of you. What becomes of choice when the illusion breaks.”

The circle widened, and I stepped into it. The Codex grew warmer, as if reacting to the tension around me. Every step I took sent ripples through the air,

and it felt like the world was folding in, watching.  
Waiting.

I didn't know what they were expecting. Maybe they thought I would fall to my knees. Maybe they thought I'd beg. But I did neither. I stood my ground.

"I made my choice," I said quietly. "And I'll keep making it."

They didn't respond. Not with words. But I could feel it. Their silence was full of judgment. Or maybe understanding. I couldn't tell the difference anymore.

Minutes passed. Or maybe hours. Time was strange here. The sky didn't move.

Eventually, the circle began to dissolve. One by one, they turned and walked away, disappearing into the shadows of the city. No warnings. No farewells. Just fading shapes in a quiet world.

I stood there alone, the Codex still pulsing.

And then, slowly, I began to move again.

Not because I was sure.

But because I still had choices to make.

I didn't know what would come next. I didn't know if I was ready for the challenges that lay ahead. But in that moment, I knew something with absolute clarity: I was not afraid.



I had taken control. I had chosen my path.

And no one could take that from me.

I nodded, my heart pounding in my chest. I knew what they were talking about. This was the moment I had been waiting for, the moment when everything I had done, every decision I had made, would come to fruition. It was no longer a matter of choice—it was a matter of consequence.

The masked figures stood around me in a quiet circle, still and almost reverent, like sentinels at the edge of something sacred. The air buzzed with a kind of silent tension, like something was waiting to begin. My hands trembled slightly, but I didn't hide it. I had no reason to pretend anymore.

“You have chosen to walk the path of time,” the figure continued, their voice softer now, but still carrying the weight of inevitability. “But every path leads somewhere. And some paths are not meant to be walked alone.”

“I’m not alone,” I replied, my voice steady. I had learned that much, hadn’t I? I had Sophie, the Codex, and my own will. I had everything I needed to face whatever came next.

It wasn’t bravado. It was truth. I thought of Sophie’s voice in the quiet moments, the strength in her gaze when the world seemed too much. I thought of the Codex, how it had revealed pieces of itself to me not as commands, but as invitations. Invitations to choose, to understand, to change.

The figure nodded, as if they had expected my response. “You may have companions along the

way, but in the end, the journey is yours to make. The choices you have made, and the choices you will make, will determine the course of your future.”

The words hung in the air like mist, lingering longer than they should have. They didn't strike like thunder. They soaked in slow. I knew this, on some level. I had felt it with every decision that twisted the road ahead, every moment I hesitated, and every time I chose to move forward anyway. The future was not something waiting to be found. It was something being built, one choice at a time.

The figure stepped forward, their mask tilting slightly as they regarded me. “You have chosen the harder path, Elian. But it is not without its rewards. Time will bend for you, if you know how to ask it.”

The words sent a chill crawling over my skin. Bend time. I wasn't sure what that meant exactly, but it

sounded like power—and danger. If time was a river, I was standing waist-deep in its current, trying not to lose my footing. Trying to swim against something bigger than myself. But maybe that was the point. Maybe bending time didn't mean forcing it. Maybe it meant understanding its current well enough to steer it, gently.

I felt a shiver run down my spine. The idea that I could bend time to my will—it was both terrifying and exhilarating. But I knew that I had to be careful. Time was a powerful force, one that could be manipulated, yes, but one that could just as easily destroy.

“I don't know if I'm ready,” I confessed, my voice quieter now. “I don't know if I'm strong enough to face what's coming.”

There was a stillness after I said it, not empty, but full. Like the pause in a song right before the note you've been waiting for. No one laughed. No one doubted. It was the most honest thing I'd said in a long time.

The figure seemed to consider this for a moment before they spoke again. "Strength is not measured by how much you can endure, but by how much you are willing to sacrifice. The path you walk will require sacrifices, Elian. You must be willing to give up what you hold dear if you are to truly change the course of time."

The words hit me like a blow, but they were also a revelation. I had always thought of strength as something to be fought for, something to be clung to. But now, I understood. Strength was not about holding on—it was about letting go.

I stood there without saying anything. My mouth was shut, but my head was full of thoughts. They had said something big, something that made my heart beat faster. I didn't know what to do. My legs felt heavy like they didn't want to move. It felt like the biggest choice of my life was standing right in front of me. And it was hard. Harder than any exam, harder than anything I had ever done.

But even when I felt like I was carrying a mountain on my back, something small started to grow inside me. Like a tiny light in a dark room. I don't know what it was. Maybe it was hope. Maybe courage. Maybe it was just me deciding that this was my path, and I will walk it. Even if it was scary. Even if I didn't know where it will go. I was not going to run away. I was the one who made the choice. So I will follow it.

The people in masks were standing there, quiet. They didn't move. Not even a little. They looked like statues, like people in pictures who don't blink or breathe. It felt like they were waiting. But waiting for what? I didn't know. Maybe they were waiting for me to understand. The air around us felt weird. Like something big was about to happen. But no one said anything. Only the silence was there. And the silence was loud. Very loud. It felt like the silence could talk too.

Then one person in the mask talked again. The same one as before. "You are still not ready, Elian," they said. But this time their voice was not sharp. It was soft, like they felt bad for me. They said I had knowledge from many timelines. That I knew many things. But to understand how big those choices were, I must first know what sacrifice is.

Sacrifice.

That word rang in my ears like a bell. I had heard that word before in stories. Like in stories of kings and heroes who give up something big for others. I thought I knew what it meant. But now, here, I started to feel it for real. It wasn't just about giving up a toy or saying sorry. It was bigger. Much bigger. It was about giving away something from inside. Something that hurts to lose.

I looked at them and asked, "Why must it be this way? Why is there always a price? Like, why do we always have to lose something just to learn or get stronger or to go through time?"

They didn't answer fast. They just stood there again like a rock. Then finally, they said, "Everything that is important has a cost. Knowledge is not free. It's like a heavy bag. You have to carry it. You chose the Codex. And because of that, you carry time now."



I touched the copper tube that held the Codex. It was warm. Like it had a fire inside. That heat went through my hand and into me. It didn't feel nice. It felt like it was burning. Like it was reminding me all the time that I had made a big deal with it. And now, I couldn't take it back.

They kept talking. "You are part of something much bigger than you. Like a small thread in a big cloth. Every time you make a choice, it shakes the timeline. It can change the people who lived long ago, and also the people who will be born later."

That scared me. I never thought I was that important. I thought I was just a boy trying to do what was right. But now they were saying that even my small actions could change many lives. That I could hurt or help people I will never meet. That was a big thing to understand. I didn't know how to feel.

The words they said felt very heavy. It was like someone had put a big blanket made of stones on me. Before, I only worried about myself. Now, I had to think about everybody. People from the past. People from the future. It made me feel very small.

The weight of those words settled on me like a cloak of heavy stone. It was no longer just my own life I was concerned with—it was the lives of everyone who had ever lived, and everyone who would ever live. The realization struck me like a wave, drowning me in its intensity.

# CHAPTER Twenty :

## Where All Time Touches

The figure came closer, and suddenly, the air felt colder. Not too cold like winter, but a little chilly. Like when you open the fridge and stand near it. I could feel the cold on my arms. It was small, but I knew it was there. Their eyes looked different now. Not angry or strict. They looked soft, like they were feeling sorry for me. Like something big was happening, and they were watching it quietly.

“Do you really understand what you're holding now?” the person asked me. “The Codex doesn’t just tell you what will happen. It changes it. And when you change the future, you also change the past. Can you live with that?”

That question was big. Like, really big. My throat felt tight. I wanted to answer, but I couldn't speak at first. Could I really live with the results of what I did? Could I carry that big problem with me?

"I..." I tried to talk, but the words didn't come easy. I didn't know how to say how I felt. Inside my heart, there were too many feelings. I was scared. I was also kind of excited. But most of all, I was not sure. I didn't know what was right or wrong. I didn't even know if I was strong enough.

The figure must have seen my face because they spoke again. This time, their voice was soft and calm. Like when someone older tells you a story at night.

"It's not easy," they said. "But good things are never easy. The road in front of you will have problems. You'll feel scared sometimes. You'll feel like giving

up. But you must trust yourself. Believe in the choices you make. Because in the end, the story won't be about how you changed the timeline. It will be about how you made each choice."

Those words went deep inside me. Like they were planting seeds in my mind. I started thinking, maybe the journey matters more than just the big result. Maybe it's about each small step I take. Maybe that's what really counts. I didn't know how the future would look. But maybe if I keep going, keep trying, that will be enough.

All the people with masks were still looking at me. They didn't talk. They didn't move. But I didn't feel alone. It was strange. Their silence was kind of comforting, even though it also made me nervous. I could feel something around us, like time was thick in the air. Like something invisible was pressing on us. I knew, deep in my heart, that my time with

them was ending. I had learned all I could here.  
Now I had to move on.

“I understand,” I said. My voice didn’t shake. But inside, my heart was beating really fast. “I will face what’s coming. I will pay the price.”

The main figure nodded. Slowly. Like they knew this was a big deal. “Then go, Elian. Walk on the path you picked. It won’t be easy. But remember—you are never alone.”

After that, they stepped back. And just like that, they started fading. Like mist. Like morning fog going away when the sun comes. I blinked, and they were gone. The world around me started changing again. It was like time was pushing on me, all heavy and strong.

I took a big breath. The air was cold but fresh. The world felt huge, like a never-ending sky. I didn't know what would come next. But I was ready.

I had made my choice.

Now I had to see where that choice would take me.

The world around me blurred and twisted. It felt like I was being pulled between many layers. Like when you flip pages too fast in a book. Everything was shaking. My heartbeat slowed down and sped up at the same time. Time felt like it was stretching and squashing together. I could feel something huge all around me. Like the whole universe was buzzing. The sound was in my skin, in my bones, deep in my heart.

I stood at the crossroads again. This time, no masked people. No one to guide me. Only me and my thoughts. Only the choices I made and the path ahead. I also remembered the things I left behind.

The Codex was still close to me, pressed to my chest. It felt so real. So heavy. The copper tube was warm. It was like it was alive. It was waiting for something. But I didn't know what. Was it trying to teach me something? Maybe it was about the price of knowing too much. Or maybe... there was something more inside the Codex that I didn't understand yet.

Then I remembered Sophie. She told me about the life she never lived. The version of her that stayed, had children, grew old, and made memories. I didn't meet that Sophie, but somehow I knew her. Like we were both stuck between two versions of ourselves. Two paths, going two ways. Both were



real. But which one was really her? The one who left or the one who stayed?

I looked around me. The place I stood in was strange. Not fully real. Not fake either. It felt like a place between now and later. Between before and after. I could see the past mixing with the future.

But even with all this, something didn't feel right. I felt a little scared again. Was I really on the right path? Or was something else pulling me here? Was I even ready for this? Did I really know what I was doing?

The Codex felt warmer now. Like it could feel my worry. It pressed harder against me, like it wanted me to open it and look inside. Maybe it had answers. Maybe it could help.

But I hesitated.

In my head, I started thinking of the people I left behind. I saw Oxford again. I saw my friends. I saw all the people I met before, who told me their stories, who were kind to me, who helped me in small ways. I remembered their faces. Some were smiling. Some were sad. Some I only met once. But I remembered all of them. It felt like we were all part of one big net, like threads in a spider web. I was just one small thread. A tiny part. And I thought, what if I changed the past? What if I changed what already happened? Would I erase their stories? Would I take away their choices and replace them with mine?

That thought made me scared. It made my chest feel heavy, like I was carrying a big stone. I didn't want to hurt anyone. I didn't want to break anything. But I also knew that I couldn't go back

now. I had walked too far. I had come too close to the truth. It was like the road had already started moving, and I was just walking on it. Maybe I didn't understand everything. Maybe I never would. But I was inside the game now. I couldn't run away. I had to keep walking.

I closed my eyes and took a big deep breath. The air was very still. No sound. No birds. No wind. It felt like the world was holding its breath too, like it was waiting for me to do something next.

Then I moved my hand and touched the Codex again. It was inside the copper tube. When my fingers touched it, I felt a shock. Not like electricity, but like a strong feeling. My heart jumped. The world around me began to shake. Not like an earthquake—but like a dream that was changing.

Everything started to move fast. Like pictures flipping in a book too quickly. Trees, skies, mountains, people—all moving like a fast movie. Then suddenly, it all stopped.

And I was standing in a new place.

It was a huge open field. No buildings. Just soft green ground under my feet. The soil felt cool and nice. The wind was gentle on my face. The sky above was not blue—it was purple, a deep and beautiful purple. Stars were shining in the sky, so many of them, like small bright dots. Each one felt like it was calling me. Like each one was saying, “Look! I’m a choice you can make.”

I smelled something sweet. Like jasmine flowers. It was a smell I knew from home. My mother used to wear jasmine in her hair sometimes. But this

jasmine smell felt like it had come from far away.  
Like it had traveled through time to find me.

Then I saw someone.

Far away, standing in the middle of the field, there was a person. A woman. I looked closely. I knew her face.

It was Sophie.

But she looked different. Older. Her hair was not dark anymore—it was silver. It flowed down her back like a shiny river. Her face had lines on it, soft lines that told stories of many years. But her eyes—they were still the same. Big. Full of wonder. Full of magic. Full of questions.

My heart beat faster.

“Sophie,” I said. My voice was shaking.

She turned and looked at me. Her eyes met mine. We didn’t say anything. Just looked at each other. All the time between us—the days, the choices, the changes—it was all floating in the air. It was heavy, but also soft. It didn’t feel bad. It just felt real.

Then, without saying anything, Sophie started walking toward me.

Every step she took made my heart beat louder. It felt like something big was happening. Like the world was watching us. The ground under me felt like it was moving, not too much, just a little, like it was alive. Time was not normal anymore. It was

doing something strange, like going fast and slow at the same time. I didn't understand it, but I felt it.

She walked slowly. Her eyes never left mine. She was still Sophie. But different too. Older. Her hair was silver now. Her face had small lines, like stories written by time. But her eyes, oh her eyes, were still full of that spark. The same spark I remembered. Like stars. Bright, but also soft.

She stopped when she reached me. We both didn't say anything for some time. There were many words in my head but none of them came out. It was like all the things we wanted to say were stuck in the air between us. They were heavy. But they were also full of feelings. Some were sad. Some were full of love. Some were both.

Then, finally, she spoke. Her voice was low. Like she was afraid to say it too loud. “I’ve missed you,” she said.

Just three words. But they were big words. Strong words. I felt something break inside me and also heal at the same time. Like her words were magic.

I looked at her and nodded. I wanted to say “I missed you too,” but my voice didn’t work. I just nodded again. She understood. I think she always did.

And then, in that very quiet moment, I knew something. A truth. A big one.

I had gone so far, walked through so many places, met strange people, done things I never thought I could do. I had looked for answers everywhere. I



thought the Codex would give me everything. I thought knowing the future, or understanding time, would make everything better.

But that was not the real thing I needed.

The real thing was this. Right here. Sophie and me. This meeting. This moment. It was not about answers. It was about us. About the people in our lives. About who walks beside us.

All the big things—choices, fights, dreams, fears—they were not as big as this one small truth.

That we are made by our choices, yes. But also by the people we walk with.

I had tried to carry everything alone. All the time problems. All the fear. All the weight. But now, with Sophie here, I felt light. Like the world was not sitting on my back anymore.

I looked at her and smiled. A small smile. She smiled too.

Suddenly, the sky looked more beautiful. The stars were dancing, I think. They were bright and moving like they were happy. The air felt nicer. Like it was hugging us. The jasmine smell came again, soft and sweet. Everything around us felt quiet but alive. Like time was smiling too.

It was strange. But in a good way.

We stood like that, just being there together. No big talks. No big plans. Just two people who had missed each other. And found each other again.

And I understood something more.

I was not alone in this journey. I never was. I thought I had to do everything myself. Be brave all alone. But I didn't. I had people. I had Sophie.

The choices, the hard ones, the heavy ones—they were not only mine. We could share them. That made them easier.

And it made me stronger.

We didn't talk a lot. But we didn't need to. The feeling was enough. The feeling said everything.

Around us, it was quiet. But it was not empty. It was full of all the things we had felt. Full of our steps, our breaths, our memories. And it felt right. Like everything in the world had waited for this one moment.

The stars above seemed to be beating like a heart. And my chest felt the same beat. Maybe it was the universe talking to us. Maybe it was just how life works.

But it was perfect.

I looked at her and she looked at me. And I felt ready. Not scared anymore. Not lost.

Everything I had gone through made sense now. All the confusion, the questions, the sadness. It had brought me here. To her. To this truth.

And then I thought—there's still more. More things to see. More to learn. More to feel.

The journey wasn't over. It was just starting again. But not alone this time.

We would walk it together.

And the stars above us would keep watching.

But there was still so much left to understand, so much more to be discovered.

Sophie looked at me very slowly. Her eyes were soft, like they were remembering something old. She moved her hand up and touched my cheek. It was very gentle. I didn't move. Her fingers felt warm and a little cold at the same time. It felt like she had done this before. I didn't know when or where, but something inside me remembered it. Maybe it was from a dream or a memory I forgot. But it felt real now, very real. Like this was the place we were always meant to be in.

“You’ve come far,” Sophie said in a soft voice. Her voice was like a wind that had been traveling for a long time. It felt heavy and light at the same time. “But there is more to you than you know. More to your story.”

I looked at her. I wanted to ask so many things. What did she mean? I felt confused. “I don’t understand,” I said. My voice sounded small, like I

was talking in a big, empty room. “How can there be more? I’ve seen the paths. I saw everything that brought me here. What else is there?”

Sophie gave a tiny smile. Her eyes looked a little sad. “You’ve seen what your choices have made you,” she said slowly. “But you have not yet seen who you truly are. Not fully.”

I didn’t speak. Her words were big. They sat in my chest like stones. I didn’t know what to say. I felt something twist inside me, like I was scared but also curious.

I looked at the ground, then looked back at Sophie. “Who am I, really?” I asked. “Am I just the things I did? The people I met? Or is there something more?”

I remembered the mirror from before. The strange one that showed me different versions of myself. One was the boy from Oxford, the one who liked books and thinking. One was a writer from a very old place called Alexandria. One walked across time itself. All those people felt like me. But not just me. Only small pieces. Little puzzle parts. But what was the whole puzzle?

I felt the Codex beside me. It was still there, like always. Its copper shape was cold and warm at the same time. It didn't make a sound, but I could feel it saying something. It wanted me to open it. It was waiting. Waiting to tell me the truth.

But I was scared. I looked at Sophie and said, "I don't know if I can handle it." My voice cracked a little. "What if I'm not ready for the truth?"



Sophie looked at me kindly. “None of us are ever truly ready,” she said. “But we must face it, all the same. The truth is not something we control. It is something we must allow to unfold, piece by piece.”

I thought about her words. They felt like a song. Not the kind you sing loud. The kind you hear inside your heart. Like a soft drum that beats when you’re all alone.

All my life, I had wanted to know the truth. I chased it like it was a bird. I thought if I caught it, everything would make sense. I thought the Codex would give me answers like a book in a library. Fast and clear.

But maybe the truth wasn’t like that. Maybe it didn’t come all at once. Maybe it came slowly, like raindrops. One drop. Then another. Then more. And only after time, you start to feel the whole rain.

Maybe Sophie was right. Maybe I had to be patient. Maybe I had to stop trying to pull the truth out like a secret. Maybe I had to let it come to me, little by little, like petals falling from a tree.

I looked up at the stars. They were shining bright and still. Like they were watching us.

I felt Sophie's hand hold mine. It was warm. "You are more than your memories," she said softly. "More than the people you've been. More than your fears."

I didn't know what to say, but I nodded.

The Codex hummed softly. Not out loud. But inside my heart. It wasn't just a book. It was part of my story. And my story was not done yet.

"I think I'm scared," I said.

"It's okay to be scared," Sophie said. "But don't let fear stop you. Let it teach you."

I stood very still. I listened to the night. I felt the wind on my face. I thought about everything I had seen. Everything I had lost. Everything I had learned.

Maybe the Codex didn't hold all the answers. Maybe some answers were inside me. Maybe I just had to grow to see them.

The journey was not over. Not yet. There was still more to understand. More pieces of the puzzle to find. But I was not alone. Sophie was here. And maybe others too. Maybe people I hadn't even met yet.

I held her hand a little tighter. And she didn't let go.

I looked at the Codex again. One day, I would open it. When the time was right. When I was ready. But for now, I just had to keep going. One step. Then another. Then more.

And maybe, just maybe, the truth would come.

Her words resonated with me, like the final chord of a song that had been building for far too long. I had spent so much time running from the truth, trying

to understand the mystery of time, of identity, of the

choices that shaped me. But perhaps, as Sophie said, the truth wasn't something I could force. It wasn't something that could be unraveled in an instant. It was something that had to unfold naturally, over time, as I allowed myself to grow.

I took a deep breath. It felt like something big was going to happen. My chest felt heavy, like a big stone was sitting inside it. The sky above me was still full of stars, but they looked like they were waiting too. Waiting for me to do something. The air was very quiet, and even the wind had stopped. It was like the whole world was holding its breath, just like me.

I looked at Sophie. She was standing next to me, smiling a little. Her eyes looked like she knew something I didn't. But it didn't feel scary. It felt...

warm. Like when your grandma tells you a story at night, and you know it's going to be okay, even if you don't understand it fully.

“What now?” I asked her. My voice was small but strong. I didn't feel scared anymore. I just wanted to know what to do next.

Sophie's smile became bigger. Her eyes were shining like the stars. She said, “Now, you remember.”

I blinked. “Remember what?” I wanted to ask. But before I could speak, the ground under my feet started to move. Not in a scary way like an earthquake, but in a soft, slow way. Like the floor was turning into clouds. The stars in the sky started to spin very fast, and they turned into lines of light. It looked like the whole sky was dancing.

I didn't feel dizzy or lost. Instead, I felt like I was part of everything. I was not just standing and watching. I was inside the story now. The story was not happening to me. I was part of it, and I was helping it move forward.

I looked at Sophie again. She was still there. She didn't say anything more. But she didn't need to. I knew now that I had never walked this road alone. All along, people had been with me. Even when they were far away, they were still with me. In my heart. In my thoughts. In my choices.

I smiled a little. I felt something strong inside me. Not like muscles strong, but brave strong. I looked down and saw the Codex in my hands. It was still in the copper tube, and I could feel it pulsing. Like it was alive. Like it was breathing too, just like me.

I slowly opened the tube. It felt heavy, but not in a bad way. It felt like it was full of truth. Full of magic. Full of answers.

As I opened it, the pages inside began to move. Not by wind, but like they had a life of their own. The letters on the pages started to shine. Then they became tiny shapes. Symbols. Like the kind I had seen in dreams. The symbols started to dance on the paper, like they were trying to tell me something.

Then something strange happened. The world around me started to grow big. Very big. I could see things I had never seen before. I could see time! Yes, time! I could see the past, the now, and the future all at the same time. It was like I had eyes that could look in every direction—front, back, up, and inside.



I saw my life. Every part. Every smile, every tear, every choice I made. I also saw the lives of people I met—Sophie, the friends at Oxford, the ones who helped me, and even the ones who didn't. All of them were connected like threads in a big spiderweb. The web was glowing and stretching across everything.

It was so much to see. My eyes were wide open, and my heart was too. I felt scared a little, but also happy. It was like watching fireworks, but the fireworks were inside my soul.

Then I understood something.

The Codex didn't just give answers. It gave the path. It showed the road I had walked, but it also helped me learn who I was. Not just in my head. But in my heart. The Codex had helped me find me.

I was never just the boy who studied in Oxford. I was never just the traveler who went across time. I was not only the person who made big choices. I was more. I was someone who loved, who cared, who tried, who cried. I was someone who learned how to grow.

And that was the real answer.

I didn't need to know everything at once. I didn't need to be perfect. I just needed to walk. To try. To keep going. Bit by bit. Step by step.

I turned and looked at Sophie one more time. Her eyes were kind. Like she was proud. Not proud like a teacher with a prize student, but proud like a mother seeing her child become brave.

I felt tears in my eyes, but they were not sad tears. They were happy tears. Warm tears. I wiped them away and looked back at the Codex.

It was glowing softly now. It was calm. Like it knew its job was done for today. I held it close to me. I would carry it with care. Not because it was powerful, but because it had brought me to the truth.

I stepped forward. Not backward. Not standing still. Forward.

The stars above were moving slowly again. The sky was soft and dark and beautiful. The air was not heavy now. It felt light and full of dreams.

I didn't know what was waiting ahead. But I wasn't scared anymore. I was ready to see. Ready to learn. Ready to walk with the people I love.

And I knew, deep inside, this was not the finish line.

Because...

“The end of this journey was simply the start of a new one”

# Chapter Twenty One: The Clockmaker's Paradox

I don't know how many days went by. Maybe it was one. Maybe ten. Or maybe none at all.

It felt strange. Time didn't feel normal anymore. It was like time forgot how to be time. Usually, we count time in hours or minutes or seconds. But now, I couldn't feel it like that. I felt it in my head. I felt it in my chest. Time was like a song that was slowing down. The ticks of clocks were not really ticking. They were more like small bumps or tiny heartbeats. Slow. Tired.

Even the sun looked confused. It still came up, but slower, like it didn't know if it was doing the right

thing. The moon too—it came out late and seemed scared to shine. The stars blinked like they were not sure if they should stay on or go off.

Everything was still there, but it also felt like it was disappearing.

People didn't notice. They were walking on the road, drinking tea or coffee, looking at their phones. Laughing. Talking. Doing normal things. But I could feel something wrong under everything. Like a rope was coming loose. Like a wall had a crack. Time was breaking. The world was quiet, but not peaceful. It was like the world was holding its breath and waiting for something.

I knew I had to go back.

So I went to the place under Rue de Seine. The secret room. The mirror was still there. It was buzzing. Not loud, but enough to make my skin feel funny. The air in the room was thick, like it was full of something I couldn't see. The walls looked old. Not dusty-old. Memory-old. Like they remembered more than I did.

Everything looked different but also the same.

The room was cleaner than I remembered. Last time, things were messy. But now, it looked neat. Like someone had cleaned it up. Like someone was still taking care of it. Or maybe time had moved backward here. Maybe the room remembered what it looked like before.

I saw a coat on a chair. I knew that coat. It was Émile's. He used to wear it all the time. It was brown and long, with buttons that looked like coins.

It looked clean and soft, like he just took it off and went for a walk. But I knew he was gone. Or maybe not gone—just somewhere else. Somewhere out of reach.

On the table near the coat, there was a book. It was open. A journal. The pages were turning slowly, like someone invisible was reading it. But there was no wind. No fan. Just the air in the room, heavy and full of waiting.

I walked closer to the journal. My fingers shook a little. I touched the paper. It felt warm, like it had been held by someone not long ago. I looked at the words. They were in Émile's handwriting. I remembered it from before. Neat, with little loops and big letters that sometimes danced off the line.

The page said something like this:



“If time is a river, then memory is the boat. We cannot stop the water, but we can choose how we sail.”

I didn't fully understand what it meant. But I felt it in my heart. Maybe Émile was trying to say that even if we cannot stop time from moving, we can still choose what to remember. Or maybe it meant something bigger, something I would only understand later.

I sat down on the chair. It didn't feel cold. It felt like it knew me.

The mirror in the room was still glowing. Not bright like a lightbulb, but like a sleeping animal that could wake up any second. I looked into it. I didn't see my face. I saw different places. I saw different

times. A boy in Egypt holding a scroll. A girl in Rome painting stars on a ceiling. A man in London holding a book tight to his chest. They were all me. Or parts of me. I don't know how, but I knew it was true.

I wanted to speak to Émile. I wanted to ask him, "Why did you leave? Why is time falling apart? What do I do now?" But I knew he couldn't answer. Not in words. Maybe in signs. Maybe through the Codex.

I turned my head and saw the Codex on a small wooden stand. It was still closed, but I could feel it calling me. Not with noise. With feeling. Like a quiet knock on a door in my heart.

I stood up. Walked to it. My hands were shaking again, but I didn't stop.

I reached out and touched the copper tube. It was warm too, like it had been waiting. It didn't feel like metal. It felt like a living thing. Like a heartbeat.

I held it close.

Behind me, I heard a sound. Just one step. I turned, but no one was there. But I knew who it was. I didn't see him. But I felt Émile. Maybe he was still watching. Maybe he was still helping. Even from far away.

I looked back at the mirror. My reflection came back. But it wasn't just me. It was everyone I had been. Everyone I might be.

Time was breaking. But maybe, just maybe, it was not ending. Maybe it was changing.

I didn't know what would happen next. But I knew one thing.

The workshop was cleaner than I remembered. Tidier. As though it had been tended to by invisible hands. As if it had reassembled itself from a time when Émile still lived. I noticed a familiar coat hanging on the back of the chair—his coat, worn but well-kept. On the table beside it, a journal lay open. The pages fluttered slightly, though there was no wind.

I looked at the workbench and saw something that made my whole body stop. It was shiny, but not like a toy. It looked like a watch, but very different. It had metal and shiny glass on top. It was shaped like a pocket watch, but it didn't have numbers like a

normal one. It had twelve small hands, but they were pointing to tiny words, not to numbers at all.

I bent closer and read the small engravings around the edge. They were names of places and years, like in my history book, but more strange.

“Alexandria, 391 — The Burning.”

“Geneva, 2190 — The Extraction.”

“Paris, 1942 — The Choice.”

“Carthage, 146 BC — The Memory.”

Then I saw one that made my heart beat faster.

“Munich, 1938 — The Decision.”

I don't know why, but when I read that one, my chest became tight. I felt like I had seen those words before. Maybe in a dream. Or maybe in a memory I didn't know I had.

I picked up the watch. It was heavy in my hand, like it was filled with something more than metal. It felt warm, like it had been waiting for me. Then it started ticking. But the tick-tick sound was not like other clocks. It felt like it was inside my chest, like a second heartbeat.

I turned it over and saw some words written very small on the back. The letters were sharp and neat:

“To Elian — For when memory fails.

— E.V.”

Émile. It was from Émile. My old friend. My teacher. The man who disappeared. Maybe my only real family.

Did he make this for me before he went away? Or did he know I would come here today? It was so strange. Time didn't feel like a straight line anymore. Maybe past and future were mixed like colors in water.

I turned the knob on the side and wound it slowly. The hands on the watch started to move quickly. They spun like crazy and then suddenly stopped. One hand pointed to:

“November 11th, 2044 — The Collapse.”

Another pointed to just one word:

“You.”

Only that. “You.”

The ticking got louder. Then it got softer again. Then it stopped completely. And then, I heard something else. A sound that felt like it was coming from a very deep place. It was not like a machine sound. It was like pages turning in a book. A book that didn't exist yet. A book that was waiting to be written.

Then I heard a voice.

It was a voice I knew very well.

It was my voice.



“Hello, Elian,” the voice said.

I turned around, and I saw someone standing at the door.

It was me.

But not me now. It was me from some other time. He looked like me. He stood like me. He even had the same eyes and the same thoughts. But he looked older—not old like a grandpa, but old like someone who had carried many secrets.

I just stared. My brain couldn’t understand. My legs felt stuck.

“You’re...” I tried to say something, but the words didn’t come out.

“I’m the one who never stepped through the mirror,” he said calmly.

The mirror behind us made a slow, soft glow, like it was breathing with us. I looked at him again. I understood something, very slow, very heavy. He was me. But not this me. He was a version of me who had made a different choice. A version that stayed behind and didn’t follow the dream.

“I waited,” he said. “I kept everything the same. I didn’t listen to the mirror. I buried the shard.”

He put his hand in his coat and took out something. It was a small black rock—sharp, shiny, and familiar. Just like the shard I once held. But this

one looked dead. It had no glow. It was like it was sleeping forever.

“You buried it?” I asked him.

He nodded. “And I built a life.”

I felt my knees shake, so I sat down on the old wooden stool that Émile always used. The clock started ticking again, very soft, like it was deep under my skin.

“I was scared,” the other me said. “Not scared of what I might find. But scared of what I might lose.”

I didn’t know what to say. I was looking at myself. But this version of me didn’t feel strong. He looked

tired. Not angry. Not mad. Just sad. A sad that felt like it had been sitting in the dark for too long.

“What did you lose?” I asked him, in a very small voice.

He sat down across from me. His hands were shaking a little. His eyes looked darker, like they had seen too many hard things.

“You,” he said.

We both became very quiet.

We sat in silence for a long time. But it didn’t feel empty. It felt full, like there were so many things in the air that we couldn’t see but could feel. Like

stories. Like tears. Like things we never said but always knew.

Then, the other me slowly took something out of his coat pocket. It was a small paper, folded many times. He gave it to me.

I opened it carefully.

It was a photograph.

I gasped a little when I saw it. It was Sophie. She was standing on the edge of a big cliff, her hair flying in the wind. The ocean was behind her, so wide and endless. She was smiling, but not just a normal smile. It was the kind of smile that made you feel like she knew everything and still smiled anyway.

“She found me,” he said, his voice very quiet. “In that version of the world.”

I looked up at him.

“But I wasn’t ready,” he said. “I told her it was crazy. That it wasn’t real. I was scared.”

He laughed a little, but it didn’t sound happy. It sounded like when you remember something you wish you didn’t do.

“She left the next morning,” he said. “She didn’t say goodbye. She just left the mirror open behind her.”

I held the photo close. Sophie’s face looked like home.

I looked back at him. His face looked like mine, but with pain. Not pain from getting hurt, but the kind that stays for a long time in your heart.

“I tried to forget,” he said. “I worked a job. I got married. I had a child. But even then, something always stayed. Like an echo that didn’t stop.”

He looked at the floor.

“Every time I passed a mirror,” he said, “I hoped I would see something. Something more.”

I asked him softly, “What did you see?”

He looked at me. His eyes were wet.

“You.”

Then we were both quiet again.

It was like we were two pages in a book, side by side, telling the same story in different ways. We had both made choices. But they led to very different lives.

“I need your help,” I said to him after some time.

He looked surprised. “Why?”

“Because the Collapse is coming,” I told him. “And I don’t think I can do it alone.”



He looked at the strange watch on the table. Then he looked at the glowing mirror.

He didn't speak for a moment. Then he said, "I buried the shard because I wanted peace. I thought if I stayed away from the Codex, I could just live a quiet life."

He looked down again.

"But peace never came," he said. "Not when you know it wasn't really yours. It was borrowed."

Then he stood up. He looked stronger now, like a decision was growing inside him.

"I'll come with you," he said. "But... I don't know which one of us is real anymore."

I smiled, a little sad and a little proud.

“Maybe we both are,” I said.

Then, something changed.

The mirror behind us pulsed again. The light became brighter, like it was pulling everything in. The glow bent and twisted, like glass was melting. I felt it in my chest, like the beginning of something very big.

Then I heard a sound. Tick. Tick. Tick.

It was Émile’s old clock.

It had been silent for a long time.

But now, it had started ticking again.

Only—it wasn't ticking forward.

It was ticking backwards.

Like time was going in the wrong direction.

Or maybe... a new one.

The paradox had begun.

# Chapter Twenty Two: The Hourless Paradox

The mirror flickered like it was hurt, like a big open cut on a person's skin. But it wasn't red or bloody. It was not glass anymore. It was soft, like cloth shaking in the wind during a storm. I looked at it, but I didn't see myself. I didn't see anything normal. Instead, I saw many different times all mixed up. Like threads of stories tangled together and moving fast. The world looked like a big messy blur of things that might have happened, things that almost happened, and things that never happened but could have.

Next to me, the other Elian—my other self—stood very still. His hands were tight into fists. He was

seeing all this for the first time. I already knew it a little bit. I had made peace with it, or maybe just a quiet agreement that this strangeness was real and I had to live with it. The Codex was in my bag, and it was glowing softly, like it could feel the strange magic around us getting bigger and bigger.

“What will happen if we both go inside?” he asked me. His voice was slow and serious, like he was thinking about something very important.

I looked again at the mirror, then at him. “Maybe it breaks everything. Maybe it fixes everything.”

“Or maybe it makes us disappear,” he said quietly.

I nodded my head. “That can happen too.”

Even though we were scared, we both stepped closer.

When our hands touched the mirror's edge, something amazing happened. The mirror didn't break like glass. It didn't crack. Instead, it split cleanly, as if some secret math was telling it where to cut. It was like the mirror knew about many different possibilities and was choosing two paths for us to follow.

We didn't just walk through. It was more like we disappeared into thin air and then appeared somewhere new. Our feet landed on marble. But this marble was not from our world. It shined with strange symbols that I didn't understand. The marble looked old, but it also sparkled like it had magic inside.

We were in a new place.

The sky above us was violet. Not the bright purple color of sunset, but a soft, quiet violet like when you're just about to fall asleep and your thoughts start to float away. The world was very silent. No wind blowing, no birds singing. Only the sound of us breathing and a quiet ticking sound. It felt like time itself was beating slowly beneath our feet.

We were standing in a big courtyard. Around it were many statues of people we had never seen before. But strangely, every face made us feel like we knew them. Like when you see someone for the first time, but it feels like you've met them before, maybe in a dream or in another life.

Suddenly, a voice came. It was not from one place, but from all around us. It wasn't speaking words, but it felt like it was telling us something very important deep inside our bones.

“Welcome, Elian.”

The voice continued. “You are not one, but two. You are a paradox. That means you are something that doesn’t fit normal rules. You are two things that don’t make sense together, but you are both real.”

The other Elian asked, “Who are you?”

Then the air around us shimmered like a heat wave on a hot day. From it appeared a figure wearing a robe made of white light and dark shadows at the same time. Its face was always changing—sometimes young, sometimes old; sometimes boy, sometimes girl; sometimes smooth skin, sometimes wrinkled. It was like it was all people and no people at once. It was a being not stuck in one time but floating in many times.



“I am the Keeper of the Hourless,” the figure said. “I guard moments in time that should never happen.”

My heart was beating very fast. I was both scared and curious. “Why are we here?” I asked.

“You have broken the timeline,” the Keeper said.  
“You split yourselves across many different paths. Time is starting to fall apart. The Collapse has already begun.”

I thought hard and asked, “Then why did you show us this? Why don’t you just let everything end?”

The Keeper’s voice was calm but serious.

“Because time is not just one straight line,” it said.  
“It is many lines woven together. When those lines break, the whole thing can fall apart. You and your other self are part of those lines. You have a choice now. You can help fix the lines, or you can let them break.”

The other Elian looked at me. His face was tired and sad. “What if we can’t fix it?”

“Then everything will collapse,” I said softly.

The Keeper nodded. “That is why you are here. To decide what will happen next.”

We looked around the violet sky. It was so quiet. I wished Sophie was with us. I wished I could hold her hand. But I knew this was something I had to do alone. Or maybe with myself.

The other Elian said, “I buried the shard because I wanted to forget. I wanted a life without all this. But forgetting did not make the fear go away.”

I understood him. I felt the same fear sometimes. The fear that everything I knew was just a lie or a borrowed dream.

“We need to go back,” I said. “We need to find the shard. We need to stop the Collapse.”

The Keeper looked at us. “It will not be easy. Time is like water slipping through your fingers. But you carry something powerful. The Codex. It holds the secrets, but only if you believe in the journey.”

I touched my satchel where the Codex was.

“Do you believe?” the Keeper asked.

I took a deep breath.

“Yes,” I said. “Because even if it’s hard, even if it is scary, I have to try.”

The other Elian nodded. “So do I.”

The Keeper’s form began to fade slowly.

“Remember,” it said, “you are both part of the same story. And in stories, the hardest parts can lead to the greatest changes.”

The violet sky started to dim. The statues around the courtyard seemed to whisper goodbye.

I looked at my other self. “Are you ready?”

He smiled faintly, “Maybe. But I am glad I’m not alone.”

Together, we walked back to the mirror. The surface was smooth again, like a calm lake. We stepped through, feeling the pull of time trying to pull us back.

The world changed once more.

And then I woke up.

But this was not sleep. It was knowing.

I was ready to face whatever came next.

The end of this journey was simply the start of a new one.

The figure slowly stepped closer to us. I looked into its eyes, and it was like looking into many different versions of me — some were good, some were sad, some were even scary. It was like the eyes held all the stories of me, from many different places and times.

The figure spoke with a quiet, serious voice,  
“Because one of you must choose.”

I blinked. “Choose what?” I asked, feeling a little scared inside.

The figure said, “Who continues.”

My tummy felt heavy. What did that mean?

The other Elian, the one who looked like me but was different, stepped forward quickly. “No! That’s not fair!” he said, his voice shaking.

But the figure, called the Keeper, just looked at us calmly and said, “Fairness is not the concern of time. Equilibrium is.”

There was a big silence. The kind of silence that feels like the air is thick and heavy, like something very important is about to happen.

I asked quietly, “What if neither of us chooses?”

The Keeper’s voice was very clear. “Then both of you will perish. And with you, the last chance to fix the fracture will be lost.”

I looked at the other Elian. The silence between us was heavy, but it wasn't angry or mean. It felt like we both understood something deep — about Sophie, about Émile, about mirrors, and about the things we had both given up.

“I have the Codex,” I said slowly. “But you have the life I left behind.”

He looked down, his eyes sad. “I lived it, yes. But it never felt complete.”

The Keeper stayed quiet, like the moon watching everything without moving.

Then my other self slowly took something from his coat. It was a small piece of paper, old and worn out. On it, Sophie's handwriting was clear.



“You were always meant to choose,” the note said.

He gave it to me. “I think this was meant for you.”

I looked at the paper, then back at him. “You knew this moment would come.”

He gave a small smile, but it was not a happy one.  
“Not until I saw you. But when I did... I remembered.”

Suddenly, the wind started blowing softly, but the sky stayed still. The statues around us began to disappear, turning into little grains of sand that floated away.

“Time is ending,” the Keeper said quietly. “Decide.”

Before I could think, my other self stepped forward. He stood in front of the Keeper and put his hand on its chest.

“I choose him,” he said clearly.

I shouted, “No!” But it was too late.

The world around us folded inwards like paper being crumpled. Light broke apart into many pieces. I was screaming, but no sound came out. The Codex was burning against my back, feeling hot and real.

And then —

Everything was quiet.

I was alone.

Back in the chamber again. The mirror was whole and still. The device Émile gave me was lying broken on the floor. My other self was gone. Not dead, just... unmade.

Then I heard a voice, soft and far away, but clear — it was Émile's voice, echoing like from nowhere.

“Some versions of ourselves are not meant to last. But their sacrifice gives the others a future.”

I sat down on the cold floor. My hands were shaking.

The Collapse hadn't stopped. It was only delayed.

In the middle of the room, a new thing appeared. It was glowing and shimmering — a shard of time itself, raw and unfinished.

I walked slowly towards it and touched it.

Suddenly, a flood of memories came crashing into me.

But they weren't mine.

They belonged to someone else.

To her.

Sophie.

The memories hit me like big waves — strong, never-ending, and full of sadness.

But they were not mine.

They were Sophie's.

# Chapter Twenty Three:

## The Memories We Leave Behind

I fell down on the ground. My head felt heavy with many pictures. These pictures were not real, but they were clear in my mind. They showed Sophie's past. It was like a story playing again and again in my head.

I saw burnt papers that had writing on them. The papers were all black and broken, like someone threw them into fire. Then I saw broken mirrors. The mirrors were shattered and silent. No sound came from them. It was like the mirrors could not talk anymore.

I saw many names. Sophie had said those names once, but now they were gone from her memory, like someone erased them. I saw children who had grown up without Sophie. They got older and older but never saw her.

And then, I saw a version of me. Not me here, but a different me, in another time. He was holding Sophie's hand when she was about to take her last breath. It was sad but peaceful. It was a moment that happened somewhere else, somewhere far away from here.

Then my mind showed me a garden. It was quiet, and I could hear children laughing. Their laughter was soft and happy. I saw a library too, but it was very strange. The library did not have books at all. Instead, there were many clocks hanging, frozen in something like amber. They did not tick or move. They were stuck in time.

Every memory I saw showed Sophie choosing something different. She had made many choices in many worlds. But in all those worlds, she kept her pain inside her heart. She never said anything about it. She was always silent, carrying the sadness all alone.

I felt so much grief inside me that I couldn't hold it. I shouted silently, not because I was hurt, but because I was so sad. I was sad not only for the things we lost, but for the things that never got a chance to happen.

When the pictures stopped, I was lying curled up on the cold floor of the workshop. The dust was falling slowly around me. It was like time had stopped, and everything was waiting quietly.



Then, I heard footsteps.

They were soft, and I knew them well.

I looked up.

There she was.

Sophie.

But this Sophie was not the same as before. She looked younger, sharper, like an old photo that was made bright again by memories.

She came closer and kneeled beside me.

“You saw them, didn’t you?” she asked softly.

I tried to speak, but my voice was small and weak.

“All of them,” I said.

She reached for the Codex lying next to me. Her fingers moved gently over it.

“I left pieces of myself in every world,” she said. “I did not know it would hurt so much to bring them back.”

“You knew?” I asked, surprised.

“I thought so,” she whispered. “The Codex is not just a map. It is like a mirror. Every time we used it, we made new reflections of ourselves. But we never

thought about what happened to the ones we left behind.”

My throat felt dry and tight. “They lived without us.”

“Yes,” Sophie said softly. “And sometimes... they did better.”

There was no anger or hate in her voice. Just a sad truth that was hard to say.

I slowly sat up. The room felt like it was moving, but nothing was changing for real.

“The Codex is alive,” I said. “It remembers.”

Sophie nodded quietly.

“And now,” she said, “it remembers us both.”

We were very quiet for a long time. It was not because there was nothing to say. No. It was because what we saw was so heavy in our minds that it was hard to find any words. The weight of it was too big. It pressed on my chest and made it hard to breathe. I looked at Sophie and she looked back. We both felt the same thing, but nobody said anything.

After a while, Sophie stood up. She looked serious. “There is someone else here,” she said quietly.

She turned around and from the dark corner of the room, a man walked out slowly.

It was Émile.

He looked whole. Like he had never been broken.

He was alive.

And the strangest thing was, he looked exactly the same as before. Nothing had changed in him.

“How—?” I tried to say, but my voice was very soft, almost a whisper.

Émile smiled. It was that crooked smile I knew well. The smile that used to make sad things feel a little less bad. “Not all versions of me were lost,” he said. “Some... waited.”

I was confused. “You are not from this timeline,” I said carefully.

“No,” he replied. “But I remember yours.”

Sophie blinked like she was surprised. “You remember both of us?”

Émile nodded slowly. “The Codex stored more than just events. It kept impressions. You two left deeper marks than most people do.”

He held up a small device in his hand. It looked like the one I found earlier, but this one was alive. It was humming softly. It pulsed with a faint blue light, like a tiny heart beating inside it.

“This,” he said, “is a stabilizer. I have been working on it from the other side. Trying to keep the broken parts together.”

Sophie stepped closer and looked carefully at the device. “You made it by splicing timelines?”

“Yes,” Émile said. “It works on convergences—moments when all versions of us make the same choice.”

I asked, “And how many of those moments are left?”

Émile’s face turned serious and dark. “Very few. Most choices are different now. They do not come together.”

“But that means—” I started to say.

“—we are running out of ourselves,” Sophie finished quietly.

Émile put the device down on the workbench. “That is why I came back. The Collapse is moving faster. We don’t have much time.”

I looked between Sophie and Émile. “So, what do we do now?”

Émile pointed at the Codex lying on the table. “It must be finished.”

Sophie looked shocked. “It is incomplete?”



“Of course,” he said simply. “It has only mapped your two perspectives so far. It needs the third one.”

“Yours,” I said slowly.

Émile nodded. “Three anchors. Three points of view. One Codex.”

I felt a knot in my stomach. “But if we join three timelines—”

“—one will have to be erased,” Émile said clearly.

This silence was not soft or calm. It was full of waiting and fear.

Sophie crossed her arms tightly. “So we have to choose again?”

Émile shook his head slowly. “Not this time. The Codex will choose for us.”

My heart stopped. “Based on what?”

“Based on balance,” he said. “Which timeline keeps the most going... with the smallest loss.”

I looked at him, scared. “And what if it chooses to erase mine?”

Émile looked at me with kindness. “Then you will remember. Until you don’t.”

The three of us stood there, pieces of a broken world all in one room. Machines around us looked strange and impossible. Memories filled the air and made it heavy.

Sophie reached out to touch the Codex. “Then let’s start.”

Her fingers pressed the first glowing symbol. The whole room started to glow softly. Émile put his hand on the Codex too. I followed and put my hand there.

The Codex pulsed once. Then twice.

And then it opened.

Pages turned by themselves. The air swirled like wind but no windows were open. Bright symbols floated in the air, glowing with light. They made shadows that looked like futures we had not seen yet.

Then, from inside the Codex came a voice. It was cold and mechanical. It did not sound like a person. It sounded like a machine.

“Convergence begins. Three timelines detected. Integrity assessed. Probability collapse at ninety-three percent. Executing filtration.”

Sophie gasped. Her body started to flicker, like a hologram losing power.

“No—!” I shouted and reached for her. But she smiled, even though it was sad.

“Don’t be afraid,” she said softly. “Maybe this time, we get it right.”

And then she disappeared.

The light in the room got dimmer.

Émile’s image stayed for a moment longer. He looked at me.

“This was always going to happen,” he said quietly. “We were just too stubborn to believe it.”

Then he too faded away, leaving behind only the stabilizer device. It was now dull and still, like it had no life.

I was alone again.

But the Codex's light still shone around me in a circle.

It spoke again.

“Timeline selected: Primary. Subject: Elian. Memories merged. Continuity preserved. Loss accepted.”

Then, with a quiet sound, the Codex closed.

The mirror was gone.

The chamber was whole.

Time was... quiet.

I stumbled back. My head was spinning and my heart was making echoes like a big empty room. It felt like every single moment I had ever lived was shouting inside me. I saw Sophie in a garden. I saw

Émile standing high up in a clocktower. And then I saw myself—no, not just one me, but thousands of me—all walking. Walking into light, walking into fire, walking into rooms just like this one, always looking for something.

And in all of these moments, one thing was true:

We were never meant to win against time.

Only to carry it.

I didn't sleep for many days.

Not because I was unable to sleep, but because I was scared. I was scared I would forget.

The Codex was sitting quiet now on the workbench. It was not glowing anymore. It was not whispering like before. But I knew its silence was not just being still. It was remembering. And I had learned that memory never really stops.

Outside, the world kept moving. People did not know what had happened down here, in the small hidden room beneath Rue de Seine. To them, time was still normal. Clocks ticked like always. Shadows fell the right way. Morning came on time, like it always did.

But not for me.

I had everything now. I had Sophie's choices, Émile's sacrifices, and even all my own mistakes. It was all mixed inside me like invisible scars that hurt but no one else could see.



I walked through Paris without any place to go. The city looked the same. The Seine river flowed quietly. Lovers walked holding hands. Waiters at cafés shouted and laughed and wrote things on their small papers. But every person I passed shimmered a little. Like they were a version of someone I had known in a different life.

One day, I walked past a bookstore and stopped. In the window was a book with a face I knew. Sophie's face. The title was *Echoes of Alexandria*. It said it was a novel. Fiction.

I went inside the shop.

The shopkeeper was a woman. She had soft hands and dark eyes that looked kind. She smiled at me. "This is our best-selling book this month," she said.

“It’s mysterious, poetic, and sad. People say it feels too real.”

I turned the book over. The author was just named S. Moreau.

Without saying a word, I bought the book.

Back at the haven, I opened the book very carefully. It felt like it might fall apart if I touched it too hard. The story was different, but the bones were the same. It told about a woman torn between different timelines. A man who forgot her. And a city that never grew old. The names were changed, and the places were a little different, but under all the words, I could hear Sophie’s voice.

She had written it.

Some version of Sophie had lived long enough to put everything into a story. Now, in this mix of timelines, her memory had spread into the real world like ink leaking from a broken pen.

That night, I had a dream.

In the dream, I was standing in a long corridor with mirrors all along the walls—hundreds, maybe thousands of mirrors. They stretched forever. Each mirror showed a different version of me. In some, I was old. In others, I was mean. And in a few mirrors, I was not there at all.

At the end of the hallway, one mirror was empty.

I walked toward it.

The mirror's surface moved like water.

I reached out my hand.

From the other side, a hand touched mine.

It was my own hand.

When I woke up, I was not alone anymore.

There was a knock at the door of the haven.

I opened it slowly.

A girl was standing there. She looked no older than sixteen. She was very pale with freckles on her face, and her hair was a mess of curly auburn strands. She looked up at me with eyes that seemed too old for someone her age.

“Elian?” she said.

I nodded slowly. “Who are you?”

“I don’t know,” she said quietly. “But I think you might.”

Her voice sounded familiar. Like I had heard it before, deep inside me.

I stepped aside and let her come in.

She walked straight to the workbench and put a small, sealed envelope on the Codex.

I picked up the envelope and turned it over. On the back, in Sophie's handwriting, were the words:  
When the last paradox arrives.

My breath caught in my throat.

"Where did you get this?" I asked.

The girl shrugged. "I woke up two days ago in a library that does not exist anymore. The note was in my pocket. It had your name on it."

"You don't remember anything?"

She paused. “Only bits and pieces. Clocks. Water. A man with broken glasses. And a woman—her voice in the dark. She kept saying, ‘Choose him. Always choose him.’”

My hands started to shake.

Sophie had left behind more than memories.

She had left behind life.

“I think,” I said, sitting down slowly, “you are not from here.”

She nodded. “I don’t think I’m from anywhere.”

The Codex started to hum again.

Soft. Low.

The girl stepped back. “What is happening?”

“It is reacting to you,” I said.

“Why?”

I opened the envelope carefully. Inside was one sentence, written by hand in faded ink:

“She is the last anchor. Protect her.”

I looked at the girl again. She stared at the Codex with wide eyes, full of wonder—and fear.



“You are not just from another timeline,” I  
whispered.

“You are what is left of all of them.”

We named her Mira.

Not because it meant anything—but because she  
deserved a name, and somehow it felt right.

# Chapter Twenty Four: The Girl Who Was More Than Memory

Over the next many weeks, Mira stayed with me in the haven. The haven was quiet, safe place under the city where I kept the Codex and other strange things. It was our little world. Every day, I tried to teach her things, little by little. I showed her some languages. I told her stories from history. I played music on an old dusty piano I found. She learned very fast. It was strange because she didn't seem like she was learning for the first time. It was like she was remembering things she already knew.

When I looked at her, sometimes she seemed like a ghost, but other times she seemed very alive. One

day, I found her sitting quietly in front of the big mirror behind the workbench. She wasn't looking at herself. She was looking through the glass, as if she was waiting for someone to come back from the other side.

The mirror was not an ordinary mirror. It was old, cracked in places, with strange symbols carved into the wood frame. It used to show things from other times and places, or sometimes from other timelines. But now, it was quiet. It didn't glow or whisper anymore. But Mira looked at it as if it was a door that could open again.

She didn't speak for a long time. Then, suddenly, she asked me a question.

"Do you think I'm a person?" she said softly.

The question stopped me. It felt like someone put a cold hand on my heart. I didn't know what to say at first.

I crouched down beside her, so I could look into her eyes. They were deep and a little sad.

"What do you mean?" I asked carefully.

"I don't feel... solid," she said slowly, choosing her words like they were hard to find. "Like I'm made from other people's memories. Like I'm a collage. Not a real person."

I wanted to tell her that she was wrong. I wanted to say, "You are real. You are just like me. You have a heart. You breathe. You laugh and cry. That makes you a person." But I could not lie.

I had seen what the Codex could do. I had seen timelines fold like paper. I had seen memories bend and twist. I knew that Mira was not like other people. She was different. She was made from many things that were not supposed to be together.

“I think,” I said very slowly, “you’re more real than most people I’ve known. Because you carry the weight of so many truths.”

She didn’t smile. She didn’t cry. She simply nodded, as if the answer had confirmed something she’d suspected all along.

After that day, things changed a little between us. We were no longer just teacher and student. We were something like two lost souls trying to find their way. Sometimes Mira would tell me things—

fragments of memories that did not belong to her but that she could remember like they were hers.

She talked about a garden she had never been to, but it smelled like jasmine and wet earth. She spoke about a man with broken glasses who told her to choose someone, always choose him. She whispered about clocks that ticked backward and rivers that flowed through time instead of space.

I listened to everything and tried to piece together the puzzle. But the more she remembered, the more confused I became. I wanted to protect her. I wanted to tell her she was safe here, in the haven. But the truth was, no place was really safe for someone like Mira.

One afternoon, I found her sitting on the floor, tracing her fingers over the old pages of the Codex. The book was open, but her eyes were far away.

“Do you ever wish you knew who you really are?” I asked quietly.

She looked at me then. Her eyes were filled with questions.

“I don’t know if I am anyone,” she said. “I don’t know if I ever was.”

I sat beside her. “Maybe who you are is not just one person. Maybe you are all the people you remember. And maybe that is what makes you special.”

Mira smiled faintly. It was a small, tired smile, but it was there.

“I wish I could remember more,” she said. “I want to be whole.”

Days passed like that. We spent hours talking, learning, and sometimes sitting in silence. I showed her old maps of Paris and the world. We played simple songs on the piano, and sometimes we tried to write stories together.

She liked stories.

She said stories were like timelines, with many paths and many endings. “Maybe,” she said one day, “I am a story that has not yet finished.”

I wanted to believe that. I wanted to believe that Mira’s story was not over.



One night, I woke up to a strange sound. It was a low hum coming from the workbench. The Codex was glowing faintly again. I went to see, and Mira was standing there, looking at the book.

“It’s happening again,” she whispered.

I came closer. The symbols on the Codex were lighting up like they wanted to say something.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “But I think it’s trying to tell me something.”

We waited, watching the light move across the pages. The room felt full of quiet energy, like the air was charged with electricity.

Suddenly, a soft voice spoke from the Codex. It was not a real voice, more like the sound of wind in the trees or the whisper of old paper turning.

“She is the last anchor. Protect her.”

We looked at each other. The meaning was clear. Mira was the last anchor. The last piece holding everything together.

I knew then that I could not keep her safe here forever. The world outside was still moving, still dangerous. But inside the haven, she had a chance to find herself. To be more than memory.

She was not just a collage of other lives. She was real.

More real than I could explain.

And so, we kept going. Day by day. Learning, remembering, hoping.

Mira stayed with me. I taught her what little I could. Languages, history, music. She picked up everything frighteningly fast, like she wasn't learning for the first time, just remembering.

Sometimes, I'd find her staring into the mirror behind the workbench. Not at herself, but through it. As if waiting for someone else to look back.

Once, she asked me, "Do you think I'm a person?"

The question stopped me cold.

I crouched beside her. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t feel... solid. Like I’m made from other people’s memories. Like I’m a collage.”

I wanted to deny it. To tell her she was wrong. That she was real.

But I had seen what the Codex could do.

“I think,” I said carefully, “you’re more real than most people I’ve known. Because you carry the weight of so many truths.”

She didn’t smile. She didn’t cry. She simply nodded, as if the answer had confirmed something she’d suspected all along.

And then, the fractures began again.

At first, it was very small things.

A clock in Montmartre, the place with many artists and a big church on the hill, spun backward. It went back for seven whole hours. People who saw it didn't know what to think. The clock just ticked the wrong way like it forgot how to move forward.

Then, something strange happened on the Seine river. There was a small boat sailing slowly. Suddenly, it vanished. Nobody saw where it went. But after a while, it reappeared. Not where it started, but five blocks away, upside down. And the crew—no one was on the boat. It was empty. People whispered and pointed, but no one could explain it.

Books started changing on their own. They rewrote themselves. Pages moved and changed words, as if someone invisible was editing the story inside. A story that was supposed to be true suddenly became something else. Some pages were blank, some had new sentences. It was like the books were alive.

Mira began to dream in languages she never learned. She told me strange words in her sleep. Sometimes she muttered sounds that I couldn't understand, from faraway places and times. It was like her mind was visiting places her body never went. I was worried about her, but she didn't seem afraid. She said the dreams made her feel like she belonged somewhere.

The Codex, that strange old book that was quiet for so long, started ticking again. It was like a clock itself, but its ticking was soft and low, like a heartbeat. It was alive again.

On the surface of the Codex, a new glyph appeared. A glyph is like a strange symbol or a sign. I had never seen this one before. It glowed with a deep red light. The light pulsed slowly, like it was breathing.

I reached out and touched the glyph with my finger. It was warm, and the light moved under my skin. And in that moment, everything changed.

The workshop shimmered. The walls looked like they were made of water. The world blinked, like someone closed their eyes and opened them fast.

And suddenly, I stood alone.

There was no haven around me. No safe room under the city. No Mira.

Only the Codex, floating in the air in front of me.

And a voice.

It was not Sophie's voice. Not Émile's. It was mine.

Or maybe... another me.

The voice said, "You've come far. But the paradox remains."

I turned slowly.



In front of me stood a man in black clothes. He looked exactly like me. Every part was the same—right down to the scar on my hand and the little tilt of my jaw.

“Who are you?” I asked, my voice shaking a little.

“I’m the version that chose power over people,” he said. “The one who stopped looking back.”

“What do you want?” I asked, trying to keep calm.

“I want what’s mine,” he said. “The Codex. The anchor. The story.”

I shook my head.

“She’s not a tool,” I said firmly.

He snapped, “She’s the only thing keeping reality from tearing apart. You think I don’t mourn them too? Sophie. Émile. All of them. But mourning doesn’t restore order. Sacrifice does.”

“You’d use her,” I said.

He looked at me with cold eyes. “I’d save her. In my world, she’s already lost.”

I stepped forward. “Then maybe your world doesn’t deserve to survive.”

He smiled. It was a cold smile, the kind that meant he was ready for anything.

“Then we’ll see which of us time chooses.”

The ticking of the Codex grew louder. It filled the whole chamber like a drum beating inside my chest. Suddenly, I felt a strange clarity wash over me. Time was not just a line. It was not just a cycle that kept going round and round. It was a pulse—a heartbeat.

This heartbeat was in every choice I had made. Every decision I might have made. Every reflection of myself.

I looked at the man before me. He was my mirror image, but not exactly me. The years, the lives I still had to live, pressed down on me like a heavy weight.

Then I realized something very important. This moment, this fight, was not a mistake. It was supposed to happen. It was inevitable.

The figure spoke again. His voice was soft, like an echo of my own thoughts.

“You are not the sum of your choices, Elian,” he said. “You are the reflection of every path that could have been.”

I nodded slowly. The truth sank into my bones.

I was both the man I had become and the man I could have been. There was no one path. No single truth.

Every version of me was part of a bigger whole.

The ticking stopped.

And in that silence, the mirror shimmered one last time.

The figure—my other self—began to fade. He dissolved into the air like smoke.

It was time to move forward.

To choose once more.

I stood there alone with the Codex floating in front of me. The room felt very quiet, but inside me, my heart was loud and fast.

I looked at the strange red glyph glowing softly. It was like it wanted me to do something. Like it was waiting.

I didn't know what to do next.

The room felt strange, like it was moving, but nothing around me changed. I thought about the other me who just disappeared. What he said was true. I wasn't just one person. I was many. Every choice I made made a new me. And maybe all those mes were part of something bigger.

I took a deep breath and touched the Codex again. The red light glowed brighter. The ticking started again, steady like a heartbeat.

Suddenly, the air around me started to ripple. It felt like water. The walls of the workshop looked like they were made of glass. Everything shimmered.

Then, out of the shimmering air, I saw something. A shadow. A figure.

It was Mira.

She looked scared but brave. Her eyes were wide and curious.

She walked slowly toward me.

“Elian,” she said softly.

“I’m here,” I said, my voice shaking a little.

She came closer and touched the Codex with her hand. The red glyph pulsed and the ticking got louder.

“I don’t understand,” she said. “What is happening?”

I looked at her and smiled a little.

“We’re at a turning point,” I said. “The fractures are coming back. Time is breaking.”

She nodded, but I could see she was scared.

“I don’t want to lose anyone else,” she whispered.



“Neither do I,” I said. “That’s why I have to choose carefully.”

The Codex started to glow even more. The light was warm and bright.

I thought about Sophie, Émile, all the people who had come before us. Their memories, their stories, their sacrifices.

I realized that I had a choice.

Not just one choice.

Many

Each choice would make a different future.

But I had to pick one.

I closed my eyes and thought about what the other  
me said. About power and people.

I wanted to be the one who chose people.

I wanted to protect Mira.

To protect all the stories and memories that made  
us who we were.

The Codex pulsed in my hands.

The ticking slowed down.

The red light faded.

The room stopped shimmering.

I opened my eyes.

The Codex was still floating, but it was calm.

Mira looked at me and smiled.

“We’re not finished,” I said.

“No,” she said. “But we’re ready.”

Together, we turned away from the Codex.

And stepped forward into the unknown.

# CHAPTER TWENTY

## FIVE: The Choice of Two Souls

“Hello, Elian.”

I heard the voice and my whole body became still. It sounded like me. Like I was talking to myself. But the voice felt strange too. It was heavier, deeper, and a little sad. It was like hearing an old song that I had forgotten.

I looked around the room. Everything was quiet. It felt like time had stopped. Even my heart felt slow. I could feel the air holding its breath.

“Who are you?” I asked. My voice was soft and shaking a little. I didn’t understand what was happening.

Then I saw him.

He was standing in the doorway. He had my face. My eyes. My scar on the hand. Even the way he stood was like me. But he was not me. He smiled, but it was not a happy smile. It was like a mirror that showed a different truth.

“I am the man who stayed,” he said. His voice was calm. It didn’t rush. “The one who never lost himself to time. I am the version of you who never stepped through the mirror.”

His words made me feel heavy inside. I felt like something big was sitting on my chest. It was not

just surprise. It was like everything I believed was changing.

I didn't know what to say. I just kept staring at him. He looked like me, but he also looked older—not in years, but in feeling. Like someone who had seen too much and stopped caring.

His eyes were dark. Not because of color, but because they looked tired. Not the kind of tired that comes from no sleep, but the tired that comes from giving up. There was no shine in his eyes. No wonder. No curiosity. Just... emptiness.

And then I knew. I could never be him. I would never want to be him.

“I don’t understand,” I said. My voice was shaky. “I am you. I’m the one who stepped through the mirror. I’m the one who chose to seek.”

He shook his head slowly. Not angry. More like he was sad for me.

“No,” he said quietly. “You are the version of me that couldn’t bear the weight of eternity. The one who stepped outside of time to see it, to understand it. But in doing so, you gave up everything. You lost everything.”

His words hit me hard. I felt cold. Like I was falling. I thought I had made my own choices. I thought my path was mine. But now... I didn’t know. Was I wrong all this time?

Had I really lost everything?

“So you are me, and I am you?” I asked. My voice felt smaller now. “Which one of us is real?”

He looked at me and didn’t blink. He just stared, like he was looking deep inside my head.

“I am the one who was never lost,” he said. “The one who walked through life with certainty, with purpose. I never questioned. I never sought. I simply lived.”

That sounded nice. A life without big questions. Without pain. Without running. I could see a picture in my mind: me in a warm home, books on the table, soft music playing. A quiet life.

But it was not my life.



His voice changed. It became soft, like how someone talks to a child who is sad. Like he was trying to be kind.

“But you...” he said, “you are the man who seeks. Who follows the cracks in the world to understand it, even at the cost of himself.”

I looked at him. He looked like me, but also not like me. His eyes were calm, like a lake that never moved. My eyes never felt that way. My eyes were always moving, always looking, always scared.

He stood there with his hand out, like he was waiting for me to take it. It looked like such a simple thing. Just hold his hand, and maybe everything would be okay. Maybe I would stop feeling lost.

But inside me, something felt strange. Like my heart was trying to speak, but the words were stuck in my chest.

“I’m tired,” I said slowly, looking down at the floor. My shoes were dirty. My hands were shaking a little. “I don’t know what I’m looking for anymore. I just keep going, and I don’t even know where I’m going.”

He nodded, like he already knew that. “I know,” he said. “That’s why I’m here.”

I wanted to cry. I didn’t know why. Maybe because I missed something I never had. Or maybe because I was scared I would never find it.

“I miss Mira,” I said softly. “I miss Sophie. I miss Émile. I keep walking, but I never go home.”

He didn’t say anything at first. Then he said, “They are memories now, Elian. You hold them in your heart. But you cannot live in the past forever.”

“But what if that’s all I have?” I asked. “What if I don’t know how to live without looking back?”

“You don’t have to look back anymore,” he said.

“You can stay. You can choose peace.”

The way he said it made it sound so easy. Like peace was a blanket you could wrap around yourself and sleep forever. Like you didn’t need to ask questions anymore. Like you didn’t need to wonder.

“But if I stop looking,” I said, “won’t I forget them?”

He shook his head. “You won’t forget. You’ll just stop hurting.”

I sat down on the floor. My legs felt too heavy. My chest felt too tight. I looked at him, standing there like a shadow of who I could have been. A version of me that never left, never wandered, never broke apart.

“Sometimes I think I made a mistake,” I said.

“Sometimes I think I should have stayed too.”

“I know,” he said. “But you didn’t. And now you have a choice.”

I looked around the room. It was quiet. Too quiet.  
The kind of quiet that made you feel small. The kind  
of quiet that made you feel like you were standing at  
the edge of something very big and very dark.

“You said the mirror showed a question,” I said.  
“But I don’t understand the question.”

“The question is simple,” he said. “Do you want to  
be me?”

That was the question. So small, and yet so big. Did  
I want to be the version of myself that never broke?  
The version that stayed safe, who didn’t run  
through time chasing cracks and dreams?

Did I want to be him?

I looked at his face. It was calm. It was steady. It was sure.

My face had never been like that. My face was full of mistakes. Full of wondering. Full of things I could not name.

“I don’t know,” I said, tears coming into my eyes now. “I don’t know who I am anymore.”

“You’re the one who ran,” he said. “The one who searched. The one who asked why.”

“And you never asked why?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “I just lived.”

It sounded so easy. Just live. Just stay. Just be.

But I had never known how to do that. I had always been afraid of not knowing. I had always wanted to find the reason for everything.

I wiped my eyes with my sleeve. I looked at his hand again. It was still there, still waiting. Still offering peace.

“I’m tired of being alone,” I said. “I’m tired of losing things.”

“You don’t have to lose anything anymore,” he said. “Just choose me. Choose to stop. Choose to stay.”

“But what if stopping means I lose myself?” I asked.

He didn't answer right away. Then he said, "Then maybe you were never meant to be found."

That made me go quiet. That made something hurt deep in my stomach.

I looked at the floor. I looked at the shadows on the wall. I looked at my hands. They were shaking again.

And then I looked at him.

"I want to believe you," I said.

"You can," he replied.

"But I'm afraid."

He nodded. "So was I. Before I became this."

That made it worse somehow.



“Will I still be Elian?” I asked. “If I stop being the seeker?”

“You’ll be something new,” he said.

I didn’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

The silence came back, thicker than before. My heart was beating so loud now I thought it would break through my chest.

“I don’t know what to do,” I whispered.

“You have to choose,” he said. “No one can choose for you.”

I looked up at him again.

He looked just like me.

But he felt so far away.

And I didn't know if I wanted to become someone I didn't know.

“What happens if I choose you?” I whispered, my voice barely audible, though I feared the answer would tear me apart.

He looked at me with eyes full of sadness. I did not understand why he looked like that. It felt like he had seen something very big and very heavy. Then he said, in a soft voice, “You’ll forget.” His words were slow and serious. “The mirror will erase everything. The wanderer. The traveler. The one

who followed time's song. You'll live a simple life. A complete life. You will not question. You will not know the pain of knowing too much."

I stood very still. My heart was beating fast. I could hear it thumping in my chest. I thought about what he said. If I chose him, I would forget everything? All the things I had seen? All the places I had gone? The people I met? Would all of it just go away?

I closed my eyes for a second. His words felt like wind blowing through me. Not strong wind. Soft wind. But it made me feel cold. It made me feel small.

It was like standing between two roads. One road was quiet and straight. Nothing scary, nothing strange. Just simple and calm. The other road was broken and full of turns. It had sharp stones and big

hills. But sometimes, it had flowers too. And stars.  
And things I had never seen before.

That other road was mine. The hard one.

I had always been walking on that road, even when  
I didn't know where it was going. I followed sounds.  
I followed shadows. I followed time. I wanted to  
know why things were the way they were. I wanted  
to know who I really was.

Now I stood in this strange room, with a version of  
me who had never walked that road. He had stayed  
behind. He had lived a quiet life. A full life. A happy  
one, maybe. But I didn't know if it was my life.

I looked down. I saw the floor, but it didn't feel like  
a floor anymore. It was like I was floating in the

middle of nowhere. I saw my own shadow, but it looked strange, like it didn't fit me.

"I don't know," I said. My voice was shaking. "I don't know if I can make that choice."

He didn't look angry. He didn't look surprised. He looked... kind. Like he understood. Like he had waited a long time to hear me say that.

"I don't know if I want to," I said again, more quietly.

He nodded very slowly. His eyes looked soft now, like they were saying sorry. "Then you are truly lost, Elian," he said. His voice was gentle, but it hurt a little. Not in a bad way, but in a way that made me feel something inside. "And that is the greatest of all human experiences. To seek a place where answers

do not exist. To wander, even when the road offers no end.”

I didn’t speak. I didn’t move. I just listened. The words were small, but they felt very big inside my chest.

I closed my eyes again. Everything was quiet. It was not scary quiet. It was the kind of quiet where your heart talks to you.

What had I become? A seeker of truths? A boy running after time? A boy who broke the rules of the world just to find out why they were there?

Or was I just someone who was afraid to stop?

Maybe I was all of those things. Maybe I was none.

And then, like a soft light in the dark, a small idea came to me. Maybe it was not about finding the answer. Maybe there was no answer. Maybe the answer was not a place, but a journey. Maybe just walking, just wondering, just looking at the world with wide eyes was enough.

Maybe that was the truth.

I opened my eyes. The man—my other self—was still there. Still holding out his hand. Still offering me the quiet road. But my feet did not move.

In my pocket, the small device ticked. I felt it. Just one small sound. But it meant a lot. It reminded me of the path I had chosen. The cracks in the world I had followed. The stars I had touched. The dreams I had stepped into.

I looked at him one last time. I felt sad, but also brave. Because I knew what I had to do, even if it hurt.

And somewhere, far away, maybe in a world where I was someone else, another me had already made his choice.

The device in my pocket ticked again. And somewhere, across time, another version of me made a choice.



# Chapter Twenty Six : The Return to Year Zero

The night was very dark. It felt like it was never going to end. Everything around me was so quiet. But inside my head, it was not quiet at all. My thoughts were shouting. I was thinking too much. So many questions were spinning in my mind like a top. I didn't know what to do. I had to choose between two lives. One life where everything was calm, simple. And one where I kept searching, never stopping. I didn't know which one was right. I didn't even know if choosing was something I really could do, or if it was already chosen for me.

I was sitting on the floor, near the edge of the room. My fingers were touching the pages of the Codex. It was an old book, very heavy. I felt like it was full of secrets from a long, long time ago. I didn't understand the words inside it. The signs on the

pages looked like pictures from a dream. But still, they felt important. Like they were trying to tell me something, something very big. Like the Codex was trying to help me. But I didn't know how to listen.

Every second, the small device in my pocket made a ticking sound. Tick. Tick. Tick. It was the only sound in the room. It made me feel like time was still moving, even though everything else was standing still. That device had been with me for so long, it felt like a part of me. But now, it felt heavy. Like it was reminding me of all the hard things I had done, and all the things I still didn't understand.

Just then, Sophie walked into the room. She looked at me kindly, like she knew what I was feeling.

"I think it's time," she said.

Her voice was soft, but serious.

I looked up at her. “Time for what?” I asked. My voice sounded strange, like I had not spoken in many days.

She looked at me without blinking. “To return,” she said. “To the beginning. To Year Zero.”

Those words made my heart beat very fast. I stared at her, not sure if I heard her right. “What do you mean?” I asked.

She walked closer to me. Her face looked calm, but also a little sad. “The mirror,” she said, “is not just a way to go to the past or the future. It’s more than that. Much more. It’s a hole in time. It is a door to

the start of everything. You have reached the beginning of time itself. You have reached Year Zero.”

I couldn’t breathe for a second. Year Zero? A place where time had not even started? I didn’t know what to think. I had always wanted to understand time. I had chased it, jumped through it, tried to catch it like a butterfly. But now, I was told there was a place where time didn’t even exist. A place where it had not been born yet. That scared me a little. And it also made me curious.

Then I felt something strange. It was like the air was moving, buzzing, shaking, even though nothing was touching me. The ground felt weird, like it was soft and hard at the same time. It was like the room was not real anymore, like I was floating in a dream. The mirror in the room started to shine. Not

too bright, just a soft light. It looked like it was alive. Like it was calling me.

I walked slowly to the mirror. I couldn't stop myself. I was scared, but I also felt something pulling me, like a magnet. I looked at the frame of the mirror. There were words on it. Before, I could never read them. They looked like broken letters. But now, they were glowing. They started to change. And then I could read them.

The words were in a different language. But somehow, I understood what they meant.

“Tempus non est linea, sed abysso.”

I said the words out loud, very quietly. I didn't know what language it was, but I knew what it meant.

Time is not a line, but an abyss.

When I heard the words, they stayed in my head like a song that doesn't stop. It didn't feel like someone just said them—it felt like the words were alive, like they were floating in the air all around me. They made my chest feel tight, and my heart beat faster. I didn't understand everything, but I felt like something very big was happening. Like I was standing at the edge of something I could not see but could feel deep inside me.

Sophie walked slowly to the mirror. Her hand came up and touched the glass. But the mirror didn't feel like a mirror anymore. It moved. It rippled like water when you throw a stone in it. Her face in the mirror started to change and shake. And then, for just one small second, I saw something very strange.

I saw another Sophie. She was not the same. She looked different, like maybe she lived in a different time. Maybe she had made different choices. Maybe she had a whole other life. That made my head spin. How many Sophies were there? And if there were many Sophies... were there many Elians too?

I looked at the mirror and felt scared. What if there were hundreds of me? What if each one of them had taken a different path? What if I had done something different—just one thing—and my whole life changed? I wanted to ask Sophie, but I already knew. We had been walking through time. Time was not a straight line. It was full of turns and jumps and doors. Some doors we opened. Some doors we never even saw.

Sophie turned around and looked at me. Her eyes were deep, and she looked very serious, like she was holding something heavy in her heart.

“This is the only way, Elian,” she said. Her voice was quiet, but I could hear it clearly. “To understand time is to become it. Not just to look at it, but to be inside it. To be part of it. But if you do that, you must forget. Forget everything.”

The word "forget" hit me hard. My hands started to shake. I looked at her. “Forget everything?” I asked, my voice small and scared.

She nodded slowly. “Yes. Everything.”

I didn't move. I just stood there. I felt like crying. I thought about all the people I had met. All the moments I had lived. All the things I had learned. I



thought about the way the stars looked when we were on the hill. I thought about the way the Codex felt in my hands. Would I really forget all of that?

I didn't want to lose those memories. But I also knew... I had come so far. I had followed time. I had jumped from place to place, from moment to moment. And now I was here. At the end of the path. Or maybe it was the beginning.

I looked at Sophie again. She looked calm. But her eyes were sad. Like she already knew I would choose to go. Maybe she had already done it before. Maybe this was how it always ended.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. The mirror was glowing. It was waiting for me. I didn't know what would happen when I touched it. But I felt like I was supposed to do it.

Slowly, I reached out my hand. My fingers were shaking. I moved closer. The mirror was cold. I felt the chill move up my arm. It was like touching something very old and very powerful.

Sophie said softly, “Time is waiting for you, Elian. Will you step through?”

I opened my eyes and looked at the mirror. I wasn’t scared anymore. I felt ready. I didn’t need to wait. I had already made my choice in my heart. I didn’t know if it was the right one, but I knew it was mine.

I took one step. Then another. And then I stepped into the mirror.

Everything changed.

It didn't feel like walking into another room. It didn't even feel like flying. It felt like... like falling into nothing. But also everything. It was quiet. So quiet. There was no sound. No wind. No ticking clock. Not even the device in my pocket made a noise anymore.

It felt like I was floating in a big, empty place. I couldn't see anything. Not even my hands or feet. There was no up or down. Just space. Just silence.

I tried to think, but even my thoughts felt quiet. I didn't know if I was dreaming or awake. I didn't know where I was. But I felt something. I felt like I was part of everything now. Like I had become time itself.

There were no days or nights here. No past or future. Just now. Just this. I didn't feel like Elian anymore. I didn't feel like a boy, or a traveler, or a seeker. I just felt... like something old and forever.

And then I understood something. Maybe time isn't a road we walk on. Maybe it's not something we go through. Maybe it's a place we become.

The very concept of time seemed to fold in on itself, crumbling like dust in the wind.

I stood all alone in this strange place. Or maybe I was not really standing. I didn't know. There was nothing under my feet, nothing around me, nothing above me. It was just empty. Like floating in the air, but also not flying. I didn't even know if I had a body anymore. It was like I was just... there. Not moving, not falling. Just there.

It was quiet. So quiet that even my thoughts sounded loud. I looked around, but there was nothing to look at. No sky, no ground, no people, no walls, no stars. Not even darkness. It was like I was standing in a place that had no beginning and no end. Just forever and ever.

And then, I understood something. Time was not like a straight line. It was not like walking on a road from one place to another. It was not like past, present, and future standing in a row. No. Time was like a big hole. A huge black hole that had no bottom and no top. Like a space that never ended. Like a dream where you fall and fall and never land.

This place was that hole. That space. That abyss.

But it was not empty. No. I could feel it. I could feel something moving around me. It was not wind. It was not light. It was not sound. It was just... something. A kind of power. A kind of buzzing. Like everything around me was full of a magic that no one could see or touch. It made my skin feel like it was shaking, even though I didn't know if I had skin anymore.

This was not a place in the world. It was outside the world. Outside time. There were no days or nights here. No clocks. No ticking. No memories. No birthdays. It was something much bigger. Bigger than everything.

But still... I felt nothing. No pain. No joy. No fear. No hope. I didn't even feel like Elian anymore. That name felt far away now. Like it belonged to someone else. I didn't remember who Elian was. I knew the name, but I didn't feel it in my heart.

I was not a boy. I was not a person. I was not anyone. I was just a small part of something very big. Like a tiny drop in a big big ocean. Like a speck of dust floating in the sky. Sophie, the mirror, the Codex... they were like dreams I once had. Like drawings on a paper that got washed away in the rain. I couldn't feel them anymore. They were gone.

The light in this place was strange. It didn't come from the sun. It didn't come from a lamp or bulb. It was not yellow or white. It was soft. It was calm. It was like a quiet song that didn't need sound. It felt like it had been there before the world was born. Before people. Before time.

I tried to say something. I opened my mouth—but no sound came out. Nothing. Not even a whisper. I tried again, but still nothing. Then I tried to think of words in my head. But even my thoughts felt slow

and quiet. Like they were getting eaten by the air. It was like this place didn't want words. It didn't want talking. It didn't want names.

I didn't know how to feel anymore. I was not scared. I was not happy. I was just floating in the middle of everything and nothing. I closed my eyes, but it didn't make a difference. It all looked the same. Open eyes, closed eyes—it was all the same.

Then I felt something. Not pulling like a hand, not like a rope. It was a feeling. A soft pull inside my chest. Like something was calling me—not with a voice, but with a feeling. Like it wanted me to understand something. Like it wanted me to know the truth.

But what truth?



I waited.

And then... slowly... I began to see it. Not with my eyes. But in my heart.

Time was not what I thought it was. It was not a story with a start and an end. It was not a straight path. It was not a clock ticking. Time was not going forward or backward. It was moving in every way. It was a big round loop. Like a circle that keeps turning. Like a wheel. Like a song that never ends and never begins.

Time was a mystery. It was a puzzle with no pieces. It was not a bad thing. Not a good thing. It was just there. Always there. But never really seen.

And I... I was not just a boy anymore. Not just Elian. I was not a name. Not a face. Not even a

story. I was part of time now. Just a small note in a big song. A little sound in a big sea of noise. A little light in a big sky full of stars.

I didn't have to be anything. I didn't have to go anywhere. I didn't have to choose anything. I was already inside everything. I was not trapped in time. I was time.

And then I knew something else. Something that made my heart feel heavy and light at the same time. In becoming time, I had lost everything. I had lost Elian. I had lost my story. I had lost my past and my future. I had lost all the memories of who I was.

I couldn't remember the people I loved. I couldn't remember the things I had done. I couldn't remember why I even came here. I had become

something new. Something that could not be called  
by a name.

And still... I didn't feel sad. I felt something else.  
Something strange.

I felt free.

I didn't have to look for answers anymore. I didn't  
have to chase anything. I didn't have to wonder who  
I was. I didn't have to be scared of the future. I  
didn't have to fight time. I didn't have to  
understand it.

Because now I was part of it.

Now I was the space between two heartbeats. The  
quiet between two words. The breath before  
someone speaks.

I had no name.

I had no home.

But I was not lost.

I was free.

I was part of something bigger than everything.

I was part of the beginning.

I was part of the end.

I was part of the space between everything.

I was part of the silence.

And in the silence of Year Zero, I felt a strange sense of freedom. I no longer needed to seek. I no longer needed to chase after answers that could never be fully grasped. I was part of something greater, something that existed beyond the confines of time and space. I was free from the constraints of identity, free from the struggle for understanding.

The mirror was gone now. It used to be so important, like a magic door between two places. I had once looked into it, seen different versions of myself, used it to travel to strange worlds. But now, it was not special anymore. It had no light, no power, no meaning. It was just like a shadow, far away, slowly disappearing into the dark. It didn't call to me anymore. It didn't shine. It was just a small memory, fading away.

The Codex was gone too. I remembered holding it, reading its pages full of strange marks and signs. I thought it had all the answers. I thought it could tell me who I was and why I had come here. But now, those pages were gone. Like dry leaves blown by the wind, they had floated away into the big, endless space around me. They were lost in time, like dust. I didn't need them anymore.

And Sophie... Sophie was gone too.

She had been with me through everything. She had helped me when I was scared. She had shown me the way when I didn't know where to go. I used to feel strong when she was near. But now, even she had faded. I couldn't hear her voice. I couldn't feel her hand in mine. She was not with me anymore. And it was okay. She had become part of this place, part of time. She had done what she had to do, and now she was gone.

But I was not sad.

I looked around, but there was nothing to see. No trees, no sky, no stars. But still, I felt like I was part of something very big. Something I could not name. Like a big sea, and I was just one tiny drop in it. But that tiny drop was enough. I didn't need to be more. I didn't need a name. I didn't need a story.

I closed my eyes. I didn't feel small anymore. I felt big and quiet. I felt like I was part of everything. I was the start. I was the middle. I was the end. I didn't need to ask questions anymore.

And in that eternal silence, I understood: I was free.

# Chapter Twenty Seven:

## The First Fracture

I stepped into the mirror with Sophie holding my hand. The place around us was not normal. It was full of light. So much light! The light moved like water but also like fire. I did not understand it, but it felt like magic. It was not a road, not a room, not even a sky. It was like walking inside a dream.

Everything was twisting and turning. The walls of light were like soft paper folding again and again, like when I try to make a paper crane but mess up. The colors were so pretty—blue, purple, golden—mixing like rangoli at Diwali. But it was also scary. We were not walking on land. We were floating, I think. Or falling. I don't know. It felt like we were going inside time itself.



Then—BOOM.

Everything broke. Like glass. All the light became too bright, like lightning in my eyes. And then, just like that, it was all gone. Quiet. Still.

When I opened my eyes, I got really scared. This place was not like anything I ever saw. It was not my home, not school, not even the City of Memories. It was... empty. So empty that even my thoughts felt lost. There was nothing. No birds, no sky, no sun. No wind. Not even the sound of my own breath.

I wanted to cry, but Sophie was beside me. She looked calm, like she knew this place already. Her calmness helped me, but just a little. I still felt like a very small dot in a huge blank paper.

I looked up. There were no stars. No moon. No sound. Just nothing everywhere.

"This is... Year Zero," I whispered. My voice was so quiet, like a soft feather falling. I didn't even know if she heard me.

"Yes," Sophie said, very gently. Her voice didn't echo, but it still filled the space. "This is the beginning. The first pulse."

I didn't know what she meant. "The beginning?" I asked. "But there's nothing here! How can this be the start of anything?"

She waited for a bit before speaking. "In this place," she said, "you don't need to understand. Just be. This is the now. The before. The first pulse of everything."

I didn't understand. I looked around. Nothing made sense. No time. No clocks. Just forever silence.

I put my hand out to touch the air, but it felt like nothing. Not warm. Not cold. My fingers passed through like they were touching a ghost. It made my stomach feel weird. If this place had no time, no anything, then who were we?

Sophie looked at me kindly. "No right or wrong here. No past or future. Just now. This is where it all began, Elian. Before time was even born."

I didn't get it. I asked her, "But how can we be here if nothing exists? How can we feel anything if time hasn't started?"

She didn't look surprised. She just said, "We are here because we are the question. The question that made time begin. The question inside all moments: 'What is time?'"

I blinked. That was a big idea. My brain hurt trying to think about it. I always thought time was just ticking, like in school bell or wall clock. But now it felt bigger. Much bigger.

"Time is not what you think," Sophie said. "It's not a thing you hold. Time is made of choices."

I thought about that. Choices? Like choosing which chocolate to eat? Or which game to play? I didn't know, but slowly I started to see something. Like a big net, a web, a drawing of many paths. So many lines, all going different ways. Maybe every choice was making new lines. Time was not just moving

forward. It was moving every way. In and out. All at once.

Sophie looked at me. I knew she understood already. She always knew more than me.

“This place,” she said, “is where time began. It is where the first fracture occurred. The first divergence. The moment when the question of ‘What is time?’ split reality into infinite possibilities.”

I stood still. My heart was beating fast. But I wasn’t scared anymore. I was thinking. Really thinking. Maybe this was what I was searching for all this time. Maybe this was the question I always had but never knew how to ask.

What is time?

Now, maybe, I was starting to see.

Everything around us started to feel different. The silence was still there, but something underneath it was moving. Not sound, but something else. The nothing-place was starting to change. The air felt heavier. Not bad, just fuller. Like something was waking up.

I thought for a second—was this place alive? Was the void waiting for something to begin? Maybe it was sleeping all this time, and now it was getting ready.

It made me shiver a bit. But I pushed the thought away. I had other questions in my heart.

There were more pressing questions, questions that tugged at the very core of my being.

I turned back to Sophie, who was still calm like nothing big was happening, even though I was feeling very confused and small inside. I said slowly, “So, the fracture... the first fracture,” my voice was shaky and soft because it was hard to understand everything. “It’s not just a break in time. It’s the moment when time became... what it is now?”

Sophie nodded her head, her eyes looked like she knew a lot, more than words could say. “Yes,” she said quietly, “The fracture is the moment when the question about time was asked. The moment when the world itself started to get shape. Before the fracture, there was only maybe—only things that could be but weren’t real yet. After the fracture,

there were results—things that happened because of choices.”

It was a little thing, but it was big. Before the fracture, everything was like an empty page with many pictures possible. After the fracture, everything got decided by choices. All the different paths started to get made, like many threads making a big cloth. Each thread was a choice, a decision, a moment that could never go back or change.

I said the words again, like if I said them many times I could understand better. “The first fracture,” I said slowly, “That’s when the whole universe started to... move? To open up?”

Sophie’s eyes got soft and gentle, like she was looking at a very hard question that was very important. “Yes,” she said, “It’s the time when the



dance started—the dance of everything. When choice became real. When everything became more than just maybe. The first fracture is when time was born. It's when everything that could be was split into paths, and each path went into its own world.”

I felt like her words were heavy on me, like a big wave pushing me. Time was a dance. Time was all about choices. It was not just something that happens by itself. It was what happened because of all the little and big decisions, making a world that was always changing.

It made me feel dizzy, like my head was spinning with so many ideas. I stepped back a little, my brain trying very hard to think about all this. If time was a dance of choices, then everything I knew was just many decisions all connected, each one making a wave that changed the world in ways I could not

see. It was like I was living in a story but didn't know who wrote it or why it was going that way.

Sophie stood next to me like a rock that doesn't move, but I felt lost like a small leaf in a big wind. I asked, "But if all of this—everything—is just choices... then what happens if we make a bad choice? If we choose wrong?"

Sophie did not answer right away. She thought very carefully, like she was counting something very big. When she finally spoke, her voice was soft but strong, and her words went deep inside me. "There is no wrong choice," she said softly. "There is only choice. Every choice goes somewhere, but none are wrong. Every path is part of the dance."

The idea that there was no wrong choice was strange and hard to believe. My whole life I was told to pick the right thing, to make decisions that lead

to good endings. But here, Sophie was telling me that all choices were okay. There was no one “right” way. There was only reality moving forward, always changing by decisions.

I tried to calm my thoughts. “So... what happens if we don’t choose? If we stay still and don’t make any choices?”

Sophie smiled a little bit, like I had asked a very smart question. “Even not choosing is a choice, Elian. Staying still is a kind of decision too. It’s a path like any other. You can’t stop the dance because the dance is life itself.”

I looked around the empty place again. The silence felt like it was listening to me. I thought about what Sophie said. If not choosing was still a choice, then there was no way to stop the dance of time and

choices. That made me feel a little scared and a little brave.

“But if every choice makes a new path,” I asked,  
“then how do we know which way to go? How do we  
find the right path in all the many paths?”

Sophie looked at me like she wanted to say  
something big, but she was careful with her words.  
“There is no single right path. The right path is the  
one you make by choosing. The right path is yours,  
because you walked it. You are part of the dance,  
and the dance is always moving, always changing.”

I felt my heart beat faster, and my mind tried to  
catch all her words. It was like she was telling me  
that being lost was part of being alive. That making  
mistakes was part of dancing. That there was no  
map, only steps.

I thought about all the times I felt scared to choose, afraid to make a mistake. Maybe it was okay. Maybe the fear was part of the dance too.

I looked at Sophie again. “But what if someone else chooses for me? What if I don’t get to choose at all?”

Her eyes looked soft but serious. “Then their choice becomes part of your dance too. Life is not just your steps. It’s all the steps together. The dance includes everyone’s moves, and every move changes the whole.”

I tried to understand that. It felt like we were not alone in the dance. Everyone was moving, even if we didn’t see it. Every person, every thing, was part of the big dance of time and choice.

“Does that mean I can’t run away from my choices?” I asked, a little scared.

“No,” Sophie said gently. “You can’t run away because the dance follows you. But you can learn the steps. You can learn to move with the music, not against it.”

I looked down at my feet, imagining a dance I never knew I was part of. It was scary but also a little exciting. Maybe I could learn the dance, even if I stumbled sometimes.

The silence around us felt less heavy now, like it was waiting for something new. The empty space was not empty anymore. It was full of possibilities, full of dances waiting to happen.

I took a deep breath, feeling the space around me like it was alive, breathing with me. Sophie stood next to me, steady and calm, like a light in the dark.

“This place,” she said quietly, “is where time began. It is where the first fracture happened. The first split. The moment when the question ‘What is time?’ broke reality into many paths.”

I looked at her, my heart full of questions and a little hope.

I was standing at the edge of something big. Something I always wanted to know but never could.

The question that stayed with me forever: what is time?

And here, in the silence and space, I was starting to understand.

As Sophie's words stayed in my mind, the big quiet place seemed to change. The stillness that felt so empty now felt like it was moving inside, like a secret was waking up.

The air felt thick, but still quiet, and I could feel something alive deep inside the nothingness. It was like time was waking up from a very long sleep.

For a moment, I wondered if this empty place was alive. If it was waiting for something to start it. Was this place like an egg, waiting for time to be born?

That thought made me feel scared, but I put it away for now. There were bigger questions that pulled at my heart.



Sophie's eyes sparkled with a faint glimmer of amusement. "To not choose is still a choice," she said, her voice teasing but filled with meaning. "Even in stillness, there is movement. Even in inaction, there is a consequence. The universe does not wait for you to choose—it unfolds with or without you."

Her words struck a chord deep within me. I had always thought of inaction as a form of avoiding responsibility, of shying away from the inevitable consequences of decisions. But Sophie was showing me something different. To not choose was not to remain unaffected, but to let the flow of time continue on its course, regardless of my participation. It was an absence of influence, a non-choice that still shaped the course of things.

# Chapter Twenty Eight:

## The Dance of Time

For a long time, I just stood there. I was trying hard to think about what Sophie told me. My brain was full of many small thoughts, like pieces of a big puzzle. Some pieces fit, but many did not. I kept thinking about “inaction,” “choice,” and “the dance of time.” It felt very big and heavy on my head.

Even though it was hard to understand, I felt a little bit free too. Sophie’s words made me feel like I was not stuck on one way only. Every choice I make can make ripples, like when I throw a stone in a pond and the water moves everywhere. The future was not something already fixed, like a line I had to follow. It was more like a big open field where many things can happen, and I could make it change by my choices.

Sophie saw me thinking and said, “You are starting to understand. This is the gift—and also the hard part—of time. Time is not a thing that pushes you forward like a river. It is not something that happens to you like rain falling. Time is many small moments put together, a dance of choices. You are not just watching. You are part of the dance.”

I looked at her, still confused inside but trying to be calm. “But what about you, Sophie? How do you fit in this? How do you know so much about time and the fracture?”

Sophie smiled, but it was a little far away, like she was thinking of things far away. “I have seen many threads, Elian. I have watched the dance many times. I have walked many paths of time, making choices and being chosen by time too. And after all

this, I know there is no one answer. There is only the dance.”

Her words sounded like a soft song that stayed in my head. But I could hear a little sadness too. It felt like she had seen many things, maybe hard things, that made her understand the world in a way I could not yet know.

I wanted to ask her more questions, but something inside said, “Not yet, Elian. Not now.” There was more to time, more to the fracture, and more to Sophie than I could understand yet. So, I kept quiet and let my questions sleep inside me for later.

The silence between us was long, but it was not heavy or scary anymore. It felt alive, like it had tiny buzzing sounds of many things waiting to happen, many choices waiting to be made.

I looked out into the empty space, where nothing and everything lived together. The first fracture had happened here, but it was only the start. The start of what? I did not know. But one thing was sure—everything was moving, changing all the time.

And I was part of it.

“Where do we go now?” I asked her, my voice a little strong even though I was still scared inside.

Sophie smiled, and her eyes shined with something old and wise. “We go where the dance takes us, Elian. There is no place we must reach. Only the steps, the choices, and the moving forward.”

I nodded slowly. Her words felt heavy in my heart.  
No fixed place. Only the dance.

And I was learning to dance.

Sophie's words stayed in the air between us, like a song echoing in a big empty room. I felt their weight inside my bones. It was like I had known these words all my life but never understood them before. There was no fixed end, only the dance—a rhythm of choices and what happens after. The path ahead was like a road with no maps. It was both freeing and scary.

“How do we choose, Sophie?” I asked quietly, like I was afraid the question was too big. “How do we move in this big sea of possibilities?”

Sophie turned to me, and her eyes were soft but deep, like she could see inside me, inside my very heart.

“It’s not about how you choose, Elian. It is about why you choose.”

Her words were like a key opening a hidden door in my head. It was not just about picking one thing or another. It was about the reason behind the choice, the feeling or thought that made you pick one path. Why we choose was as important as what we choose. In this big world of possibilities, the why was like the thread that connects everything, the compass that helps us find our way in a maze.

“But what if I don’t know why?” I asked, my voice small and worried. “What if I choose without knowing why?”

Sophie smiled, soft and kind. “Then you will learn. The dance will teach you, just like every step changes the rhythm. Even if you choose without seeing, it still has meaning. Even mistakes have meaning. Time does not say you are bad or good. It just moves forward.”

I let her words sit in my mind. “So, there is no ‘wrong’ choice? No matter what I pick, I am part of the dance?”

“Yes,” she said and nodded. “Every choice is one step in the dance. Some steps are slow, some are fast. Some steps are pretty and smooth, some are clumsy and rough. But all steps make the pattern, make the story of life. The question is not if you are right or wrong. The question is if you are dancing.”

Her words hit me hard. I had spent so many years scared to make the wrong choice. I did not see



before that life is not about perfect choices. It is about making choices and moving forward, about dancing through time and space.

Sophie looked at me kindly. “Do not be scared, Elian. The dance is always going on, whether you know it or not. But when you start to see it, when you feel the rhythm, that is when you understand. Time is not something you can control. It is not something to win or lose. But you can learn to move with it.”

I looked at Sophie. I felt a calm feeling come into my heart. Before, my chest was tight like a big stone. I was scared because I didn’t know what was next. But now, the scared feeling slowly went away. I thought, maybe time is not something to fight with or beat. Maybe time is something to feel, something to live inside. When I thought this, I felt something very big inside me—like I was free.

"But how do we learn to move with it?" I asked. My voice was a little bit fast now because I wanted to know more. "How do we start?"

Sophie smiled big. Her eyes looked like she knew many many things, but I didn't understand all of it yet. "By choosing," she said simply. "Every choice is like one step. When you take many steps, you learn the dance. There is no book or map to tell you how. You must feel the rhythm with your whole body."

Her words felt like she was giving me a game to play, or a secret to keep. I thought hard. This is what I was always looking for—not answers, not knowing everything—but the freedom to choose, to dance, to feel time moving without being afraid.

I looked around. The place was empty, like forever empty. "How long do we stay here?" I asked. I looked at the big empty space that never ended. It was not scary now, but it was still big and made me feel small. "Is this where the trip stops?"

Sophie's face became soft. "The trip never stops, Elian. This is not the end place. This is the start place."

"But start of what?" I asked again. "What comes after?"

Sophie looked far away, like she was looking to a place I could not see. "That," she said soft, "is for you to find out."

I took a big breath. My head was full of questions, but I did not say them. I just stood there, in that

place between all things and no things, between what happened and what will happen, between the many choices waiting. I was not trying to find the right answer now. I wasn't looking for the end place. I was starting to feel the rhythm, to hear the music of everything.

So, I took one step.

When my foot left the ground, something changed. The empty space around us felt like a heartbeat, pulsing. The empty place, which looked still before, now moved with a new power. I felt it deep inside me—the dance had started.

Sophie's voice came again, breaking the quiet. "The first step is the hardest," she said soft but strong. "But after you take it, the rest will come. You must trust the rhythm."

I looked at her. Something woke up inside me.

"What if I get lost?"

"You will find your way again," Sophie said steady, never changing. "The rhythm never leaves you. It will always bring you back to the dance."

Her words touched a part of me I didn't know was there. The fear, the not knowing, the need to control everything—they all melted away because of her calm trust, because of the never-ending dance happening around us.

I took another step, then another. Each step felt like I was making something new, like I was painting a picture that was not done yet. The way in front of me was not clear, but that did not matter. I did not

need to know where it would go. I just needed to keep moving, keep choosing, keep dancing.

Sophie looked at me with soft eyes that said she was happy. "That's how it is, Elian. Keep choosing. Keep dancing."

And so I did. With each step, the world around me seemed to change and grow into new chances. The rhythm of time, the dance of everything, had started. And I was a part of it.

With every step, the rhythm of time became clearer. The world, even though it was empty and big, was alive with the power of what could be. There was a quiet sound, like a soft humming, of making new things. The beat of everything, always changing and never ending, was all around me, telling me how to move, showing me how to choose.

Sophie walked beside me. She was like a steady tree that does not move even when the wind is strong. She was more than a friend now. She was like a teacher, a helper in this strange new world. Every move she made showed the flow of time, every step was like the way the world was opening up, one choice at a time.

As we walked, I started to see the strange truth of where we were. Here, in Year Zero, there was no before or after. Time was not like a straight line. It was like a big cloth, with many threads all mixed together. Each thread was a chance, a path that could take me to a new place, a new story. But it was not all messy and mixed up. There was a secret order, a beat, a pulse that tied it all close.

Sophie broke the silence. "Do you feel it, Elian? The rhythm of the universe?"

I nodded. I didn't know if I could explain what I was feeling. It was not a thing I could say with words. It was a feeling, a deep knowing that moved inside my bones and heart. "Yes," I whispered. I was a little scared to say it loud because maybe it would break the delicate balance of this place. "I feel it. It's like... like everything is connected, but not in the way I thought it would be. It's not about cause and effect. It's about the flow."

The rhythm was not a story of one thing causing the next. It was not like a row of dominos falling one after another. It was more like a river flowing—sometimes fast, sometimes slow, sometimes calm, sometimes wild. Everything moved together, connected by the rhythm that was always there, even when I couldn't see it.



Sophie's eyes shined. "Yes, Elian. The flow is the truth. The river of time never stops. It moves around rocks, it makes new paths, but it never stops flowing."

I looked down at my feet. Each step I took was like stepping on stones in the river. Sometimes the stones were smooth and easy. Sometimes they were rough and shaky. But with every step, I moved forward in the dance of time.

"I was scared before," I told Sophie. "I thought if I made a wrong step, I would fall. But now I see—there is no falling. There is only moving."

Sophie smiled. "That's right. Every step counts. Even the ones you think are mistakes. They are part of the dance too."

I thought about this. I thought about all the times I had been scared to choose, scared to move. I thought about how I always waited for someone else to tell me what to do. But now I was beginning to understand—it was not about being right or wrong. It was about moving, about dancing with the rhythm.

The emptiness around us no longer felt empty. It was full of music, full of steps waiting to be taken. The dance was endless, and I was learning the steps.

Sophie looked at me with a soft smile. "You are learning well, Elian. Remember, the dance never ends. It changes, it grows, it surprises. But it never stops."

I nodded. My heart felt lighter. I was no longer scared of what would happen next. I was ready to move, to choose, to live in the dance of time.

And so, with Sophie by my side, I kept stepping forward.

The dance had begun.

"I nodded, though I wasn't sure I could fully articulate what I was feeling. It was not something I could explain in words. It was a sensation, a deep knowing that vibrated through my bones, through the very core of my being. 'Yes,' I whispered, almost afraid to speak too loudly in case I disrupted the delicate balance of this place. 'I feel it. It's like... like everything is connected, but not in the way I thought it would be. It's not about cause and effect. It's about the flow.'"

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Sophie's eyes shined. "Yes, Elian. The flow is the truth. The river of time never stops. It moves around rocks, it makes new paths, but it never stops flowing."

I looked down at my feet. Each step I took was like stepping on stones in the river. Sometimes the stones were smooth and easy. Sometimes they were rough and shaky. But with every step, I moved forward in the dance of time.

"I was scared before," I told Sophie. "I thought if I made a wrong step, I would fall. But now I see—there is no falling. There is only moving."

Sophie smiled. "That's right. Every step counts. Even the ones you think are mistakes. They are part of the dance too."

I thought about this. I thought about all the times I had been scared to choose, scared to move. I thought about how I always waited for someone else to tell me what to do. But now I was beginning to understand—it was not about being right or wrong. It was about moving, about dancing with the rhythm.

The emptiness around us no longer felt empty. It was full of music, full of steps waiting to be taken. The dance was endless, and I was learning the steps.

Sophie looked at me with a soft smile. "You are learning well, Elian. Remember, the dance never

ends. It changes, it grows, it surprises. But it never stops."

I nodded. My heart felt lighter. I was no longer scared of what would happen next. I was ready to move, to choose, to live in the dance of time.

And so, with Sophie by my side, I kept stepping forward.

The dance had begun.

"I nodded, though I wasn't sure I could fully articulate what I was feeling. It was not something I could explain in words. It was a sensation, a deep knowing that vibrated through my bones, through the very core of my being. 'Yes,' I whispered, almost afraid to speak too loudly in case I disrupted the delicate balance of this place. 'I feel it. It's like... like everything is connected, but not in the way I

thought it would be. It's not about cause and effect. It's about the flow."

Sophie smiled at me. Her eyes were shiny like she was happy and proud. "You are starting to understand," she said. "The flow is not something you can control or guess. It is not a straight line. It moves like ripples in water. They go out and come back, cross each other, and mix together."

I looked at her and said, "But how do we know where we are going? How do we pick the right way?"

Sophie's voice was soft but strong. "There is no right way," she said. "There is only the dance. The way is not fixed before you start. You make the way by your choices and your heart. You are not stuck by fate. You can go any way you want, choose any step, and change how it moves."

Her words went deep inside me. I thought for a long time that there was one path, one place I must find. I thought there was one right answer waiting for me at the end. But now I felt different. The journey itself was the answer. There was no end place. There was only time moving, and choices happening one after the other.

We kept walking, and I saw the space around us was changing. The air looked like water with tiny waves from a small stone drop. The empty place was not empty anymore. It was moving and alive like it was waking up. It felt like time was making shapes and filling the space we were in, making it real.

The ground under our feet was not soft and formless now. It was getting texture and shape like clay in a potter's hands. As we walked, the world

around us moved and changed because of us. It was like our steps were making the world new and different.

Sophie looked at me with eyes that knew a lot. "The dance is not just about moving, Elian. It is about making things. Every step you take, every choice you make, changes the world around you. You are not just walking in time. You are making time."

Her words were heavy like a big stone falling into quiet water. I was not just watching time go by. I was part of making it. Each choice, each move, was like painting on a blank paper.

"But how do we know what to make?" I asked. I was still confused because what Sophie said was big and hard to understand.



Sophie's eyes got soft. I saw something old and wise in them for a moment. "Making things is not about knowing everything, Elian. It is about trusting the flow. The rhythm knows what it needs. You do not have to understand all. You just have to move with it."

I nodded slowly. A quiet peace came inside me. I did not need all answers. I did not have to know every step of the dance. I only had to trust the rhythm and let the flow guide me. The universe was big and strange, but it would open up as it should.

We kept walking. The world got more real. The empty space was now full of shapes. At first, they were strange and unclear, but they slowly became real things. Buildings grew from the ground like old statues. Their shapes twisted and moved as we walked. Trees stood tall with rough trunks and long branches waving in a wind we could not see. The air

smelled like earth and growing things. The ground was warm and alive under our feet.

It felt like we were walking inside making of a world. The place was not still. It was always changing like a dream that would not stop moving.

Sophie spoke again in the quiet. "This is the first crack," she said softly. "The moment when time breaks, when endless chances start to take shape."

I looked around, my heart beating fast with how big this moment was. The world was being made right now because of what we did and chose. We were not just watching. We were part of this moment. We were making the world real.

Sophie went on, calm and steady. "The first crack is when all starts, but it is also when all splits. Every

choice you make will make a new way, a new chance. Time breaks, and each crack makes a different world. That is how the dance works."

I tried to hold all this in my head. The thought of endless chances, many worlds coming from each choice, was big and scary. How could I walk through such a huge, mixed-up place?

Sophie looked at me like she saw I was confused. "You will learn, Elian. The dance is not something you can hold tight. It is something you have to feel, something you have to live."

We stood quietly for a while. The world kept moving and changing. The shapes around us were getting clearer now. The first cracks in the world's skin were filling in and getting hard. The ground under our feet was not soft anymore. It was strong and firm. The world was making itself real, and

with it came the knowing that our choices, our moves, would make its future.

I took a big breath. It felt like I was carrying a big heavy bag on my back. So many things had happened to bring me here. I came here to find answers, but now I knew something different. There were no answers waiting for me. There were only choices. And by choosing, time would move, and the big dance of everything would keep going.

Sophie smiled softly. Her face looked calm and happy inside. "The rhythm is yours to follow, Elian," she said. "Now, the question is not what will happen next. The question is—how will you choose?"

I took one small step forward. When I moved, I could feel the world around me changing a little bit. Like the ground and air were listening to me. The

rhythm of time was beating inside me, like a small drum in my heart and veins. At that moment, I knew I was not alone. I was part of something really big and important. I was part of the dance.

The dance was not just a game or something to watch. It was alive, moving, and breathing with me. The dance was just starting, and I was inside it, ready to play my part.

I felt a little scared but also happy. Because now I was not waiting for answers to come to me. I was the one who would make the choices. The dance was not finished. It was only beginning.

The rhythm was in me. The dance was in me. And the dance was just beginning.

# Chapter Twenty Nine:

## The Final Choice

Siddharth Rai: The silence between us was not empty. It was full and heavy, like something important was there but not said. I looked at the person next to me. He looked like me, but also not like me. His body moved like mine, but he made the air feel different, like a small wave in a quiet pond.

His eyes were like my eyes, but deeper — very, very deep. They did not just look at me; they looked inside me, into all the times I didn't choose, into the days I never lived. He was a version of me who never knew about the crack in time, never fell into the mirror, never got lost in the maze of many me's. But he looked very tired.

“So,” I asked softly, my voice not sure, “which me are you?”

It was a hard question. How can someone say? But he did not wait to answer.

He smiled, but it was not my smile. It was small and sharp, like it came from old memories, not from real feeling. “Neither,” he said quietly. “I am the copy of your soul, the sound of your mind. I am what you would be... if you had not taken the path you took.”

I felt a cold feeling, not scared but like I knew him. He was not strange to me. It felt like I was standing before a choice I never made. Like hearing a song I knew before the world changed.

“Then I must choose,” I said.

“You must,” he said.

“But I can’t,” I whispered. The words came out fast, like secrets that want to be told. “I can’t choose between two me’s. Between the life I could have and the life I live.”

“You already did,” he said.

His voice was calm, not angry. It was like a clock that knows time well. “The moment you knew about the crack—when time started to break—that was the choice.”

After that, everything was very quiet. In that quiet, I saw many moments: each one going different ways, like small roads under skin you can see through.



The night I saw the mirror first. The time I held Sophie's hand in the broken place. The time I asked who I really am. Every step took me farther from being sure—and closer to many choices.

I looked at Sophie.

She stood a little away, her hands together. She was not scared—just calm, like she waited for this moment. Her eyes met mine, and I felt the answer in her look before she said anything.

“You understand now, don't you?”

I nodded. Not because I found an easy answer, but because I stopped fighting inside.

I thought all this time that I was looking for one true thing—one final shape of me, one perfect life. But trying to find that changed me. I broke into many timelines, flickered between mirrors, chased shadows of who I am. And now I stood at the edge of a choice, and I knew...

: There was no one Elia. No fixed self to find again. Only paths. Only journeys.

The question was never which me to be. It was if I could accept the journey of becoming.

Sophie came next to me and put her hand on my shoulder. It was light but strong—like she knew when to talk and when to stay quiet.

The person in front of me—the echo of me—watched but did not come close. He wasn't there to

stop me. He was just a mirror of a chance, shown now so I could see.

“I was meant to choose the journey,” I said loud. The words felt like letting go. Like dropping a heavy stone I thought was home.

Then something changed.

Not outside, but inside me. A quiet click. Like a gear, stuck for a long time, started to turn again.

The copy of me nodded slow. “Then you have chosen.”

“I am both,” I said. “And neither. I am all the me’s I carry. And none of them all. I am becoming. That’s all I was.”

He smiled—real smile this time. And he looked like me. Not a shadow. Not an echo. Just another face of the same soul.

“You have chosen well,” he said.

Then, like smoke in sunlight, he went away. Not loud, not fast—just went. Like he always lived in the space between heartbeats.

Sophie looked at me, her eyes bright and calm. “The journey never ends, Elian. But now, you know how to walk it.”

We stood at the edge of the mirror door. The hall of time behind us, the unsure road ahead. The glass did not show broken pieces or strange me’s. It

showed something else—something deep. A  
horizon. Open. Endless.

I turned to it.

To her.

To myself.

And I stepped forward.

The glass behind us shined like a curtain of light,  
bending and folding the space where I used to see  
only reflections. Now, it felt like a door—no longer a  
cage of broken me's but a window opened wide.

We stepped away from it.

Sophie walked beside me quietly, and I did not ask  
if she saw too. Her eyes were far away, thinking—

quiet and still. Somewhere far, the sky broke open with a soft hum, like dawn before the sun comes.

As we moved forward, I saw the world changed a little. The hall we walked in had been full of mirrors—walls of shiny glass, doors to other me's. But now, the mirrors were not doors. They had only soft shapes, like old dreams fading away. They lost their power. Or maybe... I grew past them.

We came to a big room I never saw before.

It was round—like inside a clock. The ceiling was very high, lost in soft mist, and under our feet was glass floor. Beneath it, a spiral of gears moved slow and steady, each tick loud like the heart of time.

In the middle stood one person.

She wore white, her face shadowed, hands holding a thin golden stick that shone softly—like a pendulum stopped in the middle. Rings of light spun around her, with symbols I knew but could not say. My breath stopped. I knew we were before the heart of the mirror. The center of all breaks.

She was the keeper.

“You have come far, Elian,” she said calm and soft, like a childhood song. “You walked through layers of yourself, saw maps in memory and choice.”

“Who are you?” I asked, not scared but full of respect.

“I am the keeper of coming together,” she said. “I keep the threads between times from breaking too much. Every soul who sees the break must come here in time. To face the echo. To accept—or refuse—the self.”

I looked at Sophie. Her hand found mine. Her touch made me steady. I looked back at the keeper and asked, “Is this the end of the journey?”

She tilted her head a little. “No. This is the moment you know there was never a journey.”

The room pulsed softly.

“You never walked between worlds, Elian. You walked inside them. Each break was a memory. A chance. A fear. A want. This was never about the



outside world—it was about the shape of the world inside you.”

Her words opened something old and tight inside me. I remembered how the mirror first came—not as a thing but as a feeling. A want. A hunger for truth. The mirror was never something I found.

It was always inside me.

“You are ready,” she said, lowering the golden stick and stepping aside. Behind her, a door I never saw in the glass floor slowly rose up.

“Ready for what?” I asked.

“To walk forward,” she said, “without needing to look back.”

The thought made me very still. Hadn't looking back been everything? All the times I looked at reflections, trying to understand. All the times I searched through time, trying to find answers that were like shadows and tricks. All the times I thought about what might have happened, or what could have been different. I had made my whole idea of myself from this broken place inside me. The fracture.

Could I really leave it behind?

I felt Sophie squeeze my hand. It was soft but sure. She seemed to know what I was thinking, like she could hear my mind. She said, "It's not about leaving it behind." She smiled a little. "It's about carrying what matters. And letting go of what doesn't matter anymore."

The keeper smiled too. Her smile was very small but calm. The rings of light around her moved slower and slower. Then they stopped, like they were sleeping.

I took a deep breath. Then I stepped forward toward the open door.

The passage was not dark. It was bright with soft light, warm and gentle. It was like morning fog moving over a field full of golden grass. I looked at Sophie. “Are you coming with me?”

She smiled at me. “Always.”

We walked through the door together.

The corridor after that was not made of mirrors. It was not made of light or shadow either. It was made of memory.

Every step I took showed me scenes from my life. Not broken pieces. Not the same thing again and again. But whole, clear moments.

I saw myself as a small child. I was holding a broken compass. The needle was spinning fast. I pretended it pointed to my destiny, to a place I was meant to go.

I saw my mother's hands. They were helping me hold a pen. I was trying hard to write my name for the very first time. My fingers were small and shaking.

I saw Sophie when she was sixteen. She stood by a river. The wind blew her hair. She laughed, like she did not know what sadness was yet.

These pictures did not hurt me. They did not call me to come back or feel bad. They just were. Like they were there to remind me. To show me.

Each moment was a small thread in a big cloth. A cloth that was my life.

We kept walking until we came to a very big hall at the end of the corridor.

The walls were empty. Blank. Nothing was on them.

I looked at Sophie, confused. “What is this place?” I asked.

Sophie stepped forward. She lifted her hand and touched the wall. Her fingers brushed the surface. The wall started to shine and shimmer.

Pictures came out. Not of the past, but of what could happen in the future.

For the first time, I saw a future that was not tangled in broken pieces. Not stuck in mirrors.

I saw a version of me teaching children, writing stories, taking care of forgotten things.

I saw Sophie beside me. Not as someone who had answers, but as someone who was also searching.

I saw quiet moments. Moments full of laughter.  
Moments full of sadness and healing.

A life.

A real life.

I stood next to Sophie. I raised my hand and  
touched the wall too. The wall listened and showed  
me more.

The pictures were not still. They moved and  
changed. Not because they were unsure, but  
because they were alive. They were not fate. They  
were chance. Not destiny. But direction.

I whispered softly, "This is the choice."

Sophie nodded. “To step forward. To live not in a mirror, but in the real now.”

We stood there a long time. Then I turned back to the middle of the hall.

The keeper was there again. I did not see when she came.

“You are ready,” she said.

I breathed out slowly. “What happens now?”

“You wake.”

I opened my eyes.

The world around me was very quiet.

A field spread out all around. The grass was golden and warm under a wide, endless sky.



No mirrors.

No broken pieces.

Just light. And the soft sound of wind in the tall grass.

Sophie sat next to me.

We did not speak at first. We just breathed.

Then I looked at her and said, “I remember everything.”

She smiled.

“So do I.”

And that, somehow, was enough.

We stood up. Hand in hand.

We started to walk.

Not toward anything special.

Just forward.

There was no map.

No final version of me waiting at the end of a  
corridor.

Just the now.

And it was more than enough.

# Chapter Thirty: The End of Time

When I woke up, I was back in the bookshop.

Sunlight came through the broken windowpanes. It made golden shapes on the wooden floor. Tiny dust bits floated in the light beams. They moved slowly, like little stars in the sky. They did not hurry. They just moved softly and peacefully.

The quiet sound was familiar. It was soft, like a lullaby my mother used to sing when I was small. The smell of old paper, worn leather, and faraway rain was in the air. It was like a special perfume made from memories. Everything was still. Everything was real.

The world had come back to how it usually was. The clock on the wall ticked again, slowly and steadily. It sounded like it had never stopped at all. It just kept going, second by second, like clocks always do.

I sat up slowly. My hand touched the wooden floor beneath me. The floor felt hard and steady. It felt safe.

Had it all been a dream?

I looked all around the room.

The mirror was gone.

Sophie was gone.

The bronze Codex, the broken maps, the ticking world that lived between seconds—all of that was gone too.

The bookshelves stood quiet and still. They held books that once told secrets in whispers.

The chair where Sophie had sat reading by the lamp was empty now.

The shop was quiet and untouched. But I was not the same.

I closed my eyes.

It was not a dream. Not like dreams that vanish like mist in the morning.

No, what I saw and lived had really happened.

Maybe not in the way clocks and calendars count time. But it happened in a way that lasts longer.

It happened inside me.

And I had come back.

But I was different.

I stood up. I felt the silence around me. It was not empty. It was not hollow.

It was a special kind of silence. A quiet that holds everything inside.

It held questions and answers. It held beginnings and endings.

I walked slowly to the counter.

There was a small pile of unread books there. Their covers were still stiff and new. Their titles waited quietly to be discovered.

Before, I might have picked one up. Thinking maybe inside its pages was another door to go through.

But now, I only ran my hand gently across the covers. I felt thankful and calm. I did not need answers from other people's stories anymore.

I reached into my coat pocket.

My fingers found something smooth and warm.

It was the obsidian shard.

It pulsed softly in my hand, like a quiet memory.

I held it up in the light.

It shined like the night sky—dark, quiet, and whole.

It did not talk.

It did not shine with many colors or move.

It just was.

And now, that was enough.

I stepped outside.

The world had not waited for me.

When I looked around, everything was the same  
and different all at once.

The sky stretched out wide and blue.

The trees swayed gently in the warm wind.

The birds sang their songs as if they never stopped.

The streets were quiet, but full of life.

People walked by, busy with their own days.

The sun was high in the sky, bright and strong.

The air smelled fresh and clean.



The sounds of the city mixed with soft whispers of nature.

I stood still and breathed it all in.

I felt the warmth of the sun on my face.

I heard the soft rustling of leaves.

I saw children playing far away.

The world was alive and moving.

But I was calm inside.

I was no longer chasing broken things.

I was no longer lost in reflections.

I was here.

I was present.

I started to walk down the street.

My steps were slow but sure.

I did not have a plan.

I did not know where I was going.

But I did not need to know.

I just walked forward.

With the obsidian shard safe in my pocket, I felt strong.

It was a small piece of the journey I had made.

It was a quiet reminder of what I had learned.

That not all pieces fit back together.

But some pieces make us whole in a new way.

The shard was not broken.

It was whole.

And so was I.

As I walked, I thought about Sophie.

About the things she said.

About the hand she squeezed in mine.

About the way she helped me understand.

She was part of me now.

Not just a memory.

But a part of my heart.

I smiled to myself.

The bookshop, the corridor, the hall—they were all  
part of a story I had lived.

A story that had changed me.

Now, I was ready to write a new story.

One that was mine.

One with real moments.

With laughter and tears.

With quiet and noise.

With beginnings and endings.

With living.

I walked on.

The city around me was busy and bright.

People moved in their own ways.

Some stopped and looked at me.

I smiled back.

I felt like I belonged.

Like I was part of everything.

Not lost in time.

Not stuck in the past.

Not waiting for the future.

Just here.

Just now.

The sun began to lower in the sky.

The golden light spread soft shadows on the streets.

I felt a calm in my chest.

A quiet happiness.

A deep peace.

I knew this was not the end.

But a new beginning.

And it was enough.

I kept walking.

Step by step.

Breath by breath.

The world did not wait for me.

I looked up at the sky one last time before the sun  
disappeared.

The stars started to blink.

The night was coming.

But I was not afraid.

Because I had found something more important  
than fear.

I had found myself.

Whole, Ready.

And at peace.

The future was open.

Like the sky.

Like the road ahead.

Like my heart.

I could choose.

I could live.

I could be.

And that was a gift.

I smiled again.

Softly.

I took a deep breath.

And walked into the night.

The world had not waited for me.

Children ran past me, their schoolbags bouncing on their backs. Their laughter filled the air. A lady walked by with red gloves. She was holding a dog's leash. The dog wagged its tail happily. They walked under a tree full of bright flowers. The lady hummed a soft song to herself.

Across the road, the café door stood open. The smell of fresh coffee mixed with the cool spring air. People sat inside drinking tea and chatting. Life went on like it always did.

But something was different.

Not the world.

Me.

I saw things now I didn't see before.



Small echoes of time hidden in the normal world.

I saw a shadow, like Sophie's, just ahead. It disappeared quickly around a corner.

I saw a reflection in a puddle. It shimmered with memories.

I smelled a soft scent, like something half-forgotten.

I heard a word, barely spoken, but it felt like it belonged to me.

I saw a glance from a stranger. Their eyes looked like they recognized me.

They were not ghosts.

They were not tricks.

They were real.

They were truths.

They were reminders.

Pieces of my journey that still walked beside me.

Time did not feel like a straight road I had to follow  
anymore.

It felt like a river.

Wide and winding.

With currents that met and parted.

Currents that came back again.

I was not fighting the river.

I was moving with it.

Letting it carry me.

Trusting it.

I walked.

Not far.

Just a little.

Past shops I knew well.

Past corners I had turned many times.

Past the past.

Past the need to look for answers.

I came to a small park.

The trees there bent gently in the soft wind.

The benches looked like they still held stories.

I sat on one bench under a tall elm tree.

That tree had been there longer than I could  
remember.

Leaves rustled quietly overhead.

Birds sang a simple, beautiful song.

Far away, a child's laughter floated in the air.

It sounded like a ribbon of light.

And I just sat.

I did not move.

I breathed.

There was no hurry inside me now.

No hunger to fix time

No pain to understand everything.

I did not need the mirror anymore.

I did not need the Codex, or the archives, or the  
echoes of other lives.

Because I remembered them.

Because I had lived them.

Because I had come back.

Not to forget.

But to start.

Again.

This time, not as someone lost.

But as someone who had wandered far enough to  
know this:

Home is not a place.

Home is a moment

And I was in that moment.

For a long time, I had chased something.

Myself, Clarity, Meaning.

I thought there was one final truth waiting for me at  
the end of the road.

But I learned the truth is not a place.

It is a way to walk

I was not looking for the end of time anymore.

I had reached it.

And it was not a big explosion.

Not an answer.

Not a locked gate.

It was this:

A morning in the park.

A small piece of obsidian in my pocket.

A soft wind moving through trees that had seen  
everything but said nothing.

Time, I learned, is not something to solve.

It is something to hold.

Gently.

With open hands.

Somewhere, in some place between worlds, Sophie  
might still be walking through a mirror.

Somewhere, I might still be standing in the streets  
of Alexandria.

Or sitting in a small café in Prague.

Somewhere, there might be reflections of me  
looking back through glass.

But I do not need to follow them anymore.

I carry them with me.

All of them.

Because I finally understand:

The self is not one single flame.

It is a constellation.

We are not just one version of ourselves.

We are all our moments.

All our choices.

All our regrets.

All our love.

And the mirror was never made to divide us.

It was made to show us.



To reflect us.

I looked down at the obsidian shard one more time.

It did not pulse now.

It just rested in my hand like a memory that had  
done its work.

I smiled and closed my fingers around it.

Then I put it back in my pocket.

Not as a tool.

Not as a key.

But as a keepsake.

A reminder.

A small piece of the journey I had taken.

And the many selves I had met on the way.

The mirror was gone.

But I was here.

And I was enough.

I watched the clouds float overhead.

Their shadows danced on the green grass.

Nearby, someone softly strummed a guitar.

The notes were slow, unsure, but true.

The wind carried the smell of earth, leaves, and new beginnings.

And for the first time in what felt like many, many years,

I felt no heavy weight in my chest.

Just stillness.

Just peace.

The kind of peace that comes not from knowing all  
the answers,

But from no longer needing them.

The kind of peace that softly whispers:

You made it.

And I had.

Not to the end of the world.

But to the beginning of myself.

Time, I realized, does not end.

It simply... changes shape.

And now, so would I.

Not to run away, Not to forget

But to live

Fully

Gently

Truly.

Not as the man who chased the mirror.

But as the man who stepped beyond it.

And never looked back

~ The End

## Epilogue

The ticking stopped. Not in silence, but in surrender—like a song reaching its final note and choosing, finally, to rest. The mirror, once alive with echoes and possibility, now stood still, its breath held. There was no fanfare, no grand revelation, only the quiet aftermath of truth—raw, unfinished, and endlessly human.

Elia had returned. Not unchanged, but unshattered. What he carried back was not the memory of time, but the weight of choices made in its absence. The rooms he walked into now felt warmer, not because the world had changed—but because he had learned how to feel its pulse again. Not every question had found its answer. Not every door had opened. But some part of him knew: that was never the point.

We do not escape time. We do not conquer it. We live beside it, brushing fingertips across its ever-shifting face. We remember not because memory is

perfect, but because it is ours—fragile, flawed, and real. In the spaces between the seconds, in the quiet places where clocks forget to tick, we find something truer than logic, more lasting than proof.

We find love. We find loss. We find ourselves—again and again.

And if one day, you hear a faint ticking in a quiet room... perhaps you, too, are being remembered.



## About the Author

Hello, I am Siddharth Rai, a student of class 12th with a deep passion for writing. From a young age, I found myself drawn to the beauty of words and the way they can capture feelings, moments, and dreams. My journey as a writer began with poetry — short verses that allowed me to express emotions I couldn't say aloud. Poetry opened the door to a world where imagination and reality meet, and that door has only grown wider since.

As I continued to explore writing, I realized that stories have a unique power to connect people, to reveal truths, and to inspire change. This realization motivated me to move beyond poetry and craft longer narratives — stories that invite readers to step into different worlds, to feel deeply, and to think beyond the surface.

Being a student and a writer is a balancing act, but it is one I embrace wholeheartedly. Every page I write is a step forward in my journey of growth,

understanding, and creativity. Through this novel, I have sought to explore themes that are close to my heart: the passage of time, the choices we make, and the courage it takes to face our own past.

I am grateful to share this work with you, and I hope it resonates with your own experiences and reflections. Writing is a lifelong journey, and I look forward to continuing this path, learning, and creating stories that matter.

Thank you for reading.



## ✧ A Note to the Reader

If you've reached this page, I want to thank you—not just for reading, but for listening. For staying. For feeling.

This story was never about time machines or philosophy lectures. It was always about us—about the way we carry our pasts like folded letters in our pockets. About the versions of ourselves we've had to bury. About the ones we're still becoming.

Maybe there's no such thing as “moving on.” Maybe there's only learning to walk beside the things that once broke us. Maybe time doesn't heal, but it teaches us how to live despite the ache. And maybe—just maybe—the mirror does remember.

You were part of this journey now. You have carried this world in your hands. And for that, I'm endlessly grateful.

If you ever feel lost in the noise, find a quiet room. Listen for the ticking. It might not be a clock. It

might be your soul, reminding you that you're still  
here.

And that you are not alone.

— *Siddharth Rai*