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ACROSS  
THE  
MIRROR

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ORIGINAL TITLE

Across the Mirror

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First Edition • July 2025

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*To Celeste,  
from the other side  
of the mirror*



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# CHAPTER 1

# THE MIRROR



**H**itting the snooze button three times in a row isn't the greatest idea, especially if you don't want to be late for work. Not that I would ever do that... definitely not. My alarm had gone off three times already. I'd only heard the last one—barely. This morning, my bedside clock read 6:35 AM, even though I was supposed to be up by 6 AM. I got up as quickly as I could to use the last ten minutes, I had left to get ready to go out, and I have to admit, I was never as fast as that day. I packed up my things and went out the door, only to find my neighbor, Ms. Lopez, sweeping the floor outside her apartment.

— Hola, Ethan! Late for work again? — she said, smiling sarcastically.

— Haha, unfortunately, Ms. Lopez. I have to go, though, sorry!

And so I did, rushing down two sets of not-so-safe-looking stairs, trying my best to keep everything inside my bag and not slip. The sun was already shining bright despite it being so early,

the skies blue with some fluffy clouds drifting away with the sweet aroma in the air of freshly baked bread from the bakery up ahead. The streets were bustling with people heading to work, children running around, and cars hustling by honking at each other for no apparent reason.

Stumbling my way through the passers-by, I could finally see it. The gigantic QuantumVision building. It had this very modern look to it, mostly dark glass on the outside with some slight blue details throughout its entirety. Positioned next to a park and some houses, it looked even taller than it actually was. Up the stairs from the sidewalk leading to the lobby, there was a nice fountain and some hedges, with some benches to sit on. I couldn't complain, it was a lovely place to be at. The lobby had a similar aesthetic, but with fancy science gadgets like holograms, some humanoid robots, and a beautiful fluid clock.

— Good morning, Ethan! — Livia worked there as a receptionist for years now, and I grew used to seeing her there behind that enormous desk, facing the entrance every day. Her long blonde hair reminded me of Rapunzel, even though it wasn't that long, and her dark blue eyes were so stunning, almost otherworldly. — Oh, you're presenting today huh? If you ever find something weird you better tell me first! Haha.

— I will! Don't worry at all, you know I'd tell you anything.

— Yeah, sure. — she let out soft small giggle. — Good luck in there Mr. prodigy.

— Thank you, Liv. I need all the luck I can get!

She smiled and gave a small nod, but her fingers paused briefly over the keyboard, as if caught in a thought. Then she looked up again, returning to her usual warmth.

Going through the small crowd that was at the tech exhibition, I got to the elevator at the back of the room, almost completely hidden in the white walls of the reception lobby. Just as the doors were closing, a guy I had never seen before came running, so I kept them open for him. He looked like someone who didn't work there; I didn't know how Livia let him pass—maybe the crowd was too big. When we were almost on the 9th floor, where I usually worked, he said something out of the blue:

— This is gonna be your day. — his voice felt like it was floating with calmness; it was a feeling hard to describe. — I know for sure. I just hope you make the right choices.

I didn't have any words at that moment; it was so sudden. I tried to think of something to say but couldn't, so I simply nodded and faked a smile. With a funky tone, the elevator had gotten to my floor. I stepped out and looked back, only to see that the man wasn't there anymore. Wrapping my head around what happened was difficult, but I didn't have time to think about anything else for one reason:

— Carter, you're late again.

I felt shivers down my spine hearing that voice just as I arrived. His very distinguishable and somewhat panic-inducing tone.

— I'm sorry, Mr. Blaze, it won't happen again, — my voice crackled halfway through. I didn't dare to meet his eyes.

— It better not. — he said in a harsh tone. — This company runs only when people come to work, you know? I don't pay you to stay home.

He didn't continue yelling at me because someone else caught his attention. I took the opportunity to slip out of his view and into the presentation room ahead. I had trained for weeks and felt completely ready.

The presentation room was already filled with colleagues and higher-ups, all eyes turning on me as I entered. The place had enough seats for at least thirty people, with a big white screen for projections and a big desk at the front with two plant pots on each side. I set up my laptop, grabbed the prototype, and took a deep breath. This was it, my chance to convince the whole company that levitation was possible.

As I started, it all seemed to be going smoothly, explaining all the intricacies of the project with confidence. So, I picked up the gadget from the table in front of me and turned it on to show everyone how it worked. But then, disaster struck, something inside it might have misaligned and wasn't working properly. I tried using it like that, but it wouldn't cooperate.

— Uh, give me a moment.

The room was suddenly filled with uncomfortable murmurs and the sound of people shifting in their seats while I desperately tried to fix the issue. Mr. Blaze's piercing gaze felt like it could burn a hole through me.

— This better be good, Carter — his voice was dripping with impatience.

After what felt like an eternity, I managed to get it working partially, but by then, all the momentum was lost. The device was just acting like a magnet close to the same pole of another magnet; it wasn't proper levitation like I had tested and confirmed back home. I stumbled through the rest of the presentation with my confidence shattered. When I finally finished, the silence was deafening.

Blaze didn't raise this voice. He didn't need to. The way he leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, eyes narrowed like he was watching a slow-motion car crash—that said enough.

— That's it? — he said, voice flat. — You brought us here for this?

I stood frozen. The floor might as well have opened beneath me.

— I—I'm sorry Mr. Blaze, I tested it a thousand times before; I don't know what happened now.

— Should've tested a thousand more. Go home.

He stood up and promptly left the room followed by the others and now left only with the echoey sound of that faulty machine. I was stunned and couldn't believe that all the work I had put into that project had gone to waste. I stood there, numb. The silence pressed in like a vacuum. Even the hum of the projector felt too loud, like I was lost in a never-ending maze. I didn't know what to do next; that was all I had. Defeated, I packed up my things.

Livia was standing by the door when I turned. She held out a cup of coffee, her expression neutral.

— Tough crowd. — her voice light and welcoming, with a soft smile on her face — but hey, not everyone gets it right the first time.

— Thanks. — I muttered, not sure what else to say.

She gave a small nod, then glanced at the empty room behind me. Her eyes lingered on the prototype for a moment—just long enough for me to notice—before she turned back toward the hallway.

— You'll figure it out, — she said, gently putting her hand on my shoulder. — you always do.

We stayed in the moment for a second, almost like catching our breath back

— I gotta go now though, the reception doesn't wait. I just came to see how things were going,

— Thank you for passing by. It means a lot.

Then she walked away, her footsteps fading into the corridor, leaving me alone with the hum of the lights and taste of failure.

Wandering through the hallways finding the way back, I spotted that guy from the elevator standing by a window. He didn't turn, but I could tell he noticed my muffled footsteps on the dark grey carpet.

— Difficult day? — he asked, still gazing outside.

— You could say that. — I muttered.

— The day isn't over, you know? — he said — You still have choices to make.

I stared at the floor trying to find meaning in his words, unsure what to respond. Before I could answer, he turned to my face.

— Remember Ethan, the right choice isn't always the obvious one. But you'll see how magical life can be.

And just like that, he walked away, whistling softly as he disappeared down the corridor down the way I came.

I blinked.

*How does he even know my name?*

I thought to myself. I had never seen him before, and I wasn't nearly famous enough for people to just know about me—and what I needed to hear.

I shook the thought away. My head was already filled with too many thoughts.

As I got to the lobby, everyone who was at the exhibition had already gone, all you could hear was the honking cars outside and the echoey sound of Livia's keyboard. As I was passing by her, I waved her goodbye and headed to the exit.

The wind had picked up. The bakery smell was gone, replaced by the sharp tang of exhaust. Even the sky looked like it had given up. I was walking slowly on the residential side of the city, thinking of what I would do now that my best project had been turned down, when a charismatic-looking girl approached me.

— Hey! Can I talk to you for a second?

— Sure, what's up?

— See... I'm doing this garage sale. I'm selling the most random things ever for ten dollars each! Would you be interested?

— Her voice vibrated with a certain tone of enthusiasm that she seemed to be holding back.

I thought.

*Why not?*

I had nothing to lose after all, besides 10 bucks I suppose...

— Sure, why not. — I said, bringing a spark to her face.

I followed her to her house. The driveway was full of boxes, tables, dressers, and other big furniture. She pushed some boxes around, clearing the path for us, whispering something to herself at the same time. The garage was dimly lit, filled with boxes of books, trinkets, jewelry, and various knick-knacks. As I looked around, intrigued by the sheer variety of mysterious old items at that place, she popped up in front of me, holding three medium-sized boxes.

— C'mon, c'mon, you can choose one of these. These were all my grandma's, but she gave them all to me when she left the country. — she said, excited to have me there.

She grabbed a rather small table and laid the boxes on it. They were seemingly identical in size and appearance.

— Welcome to the mystery boxes! — she exclaimed as if she was a TV show host — Go ahead, pick one!

I analyzed the boxes carefully, trying to sense any difference or clue that could hint at their contents.

— Any hints? — I said, half-joking.

— That would ruin the fun, wouldn't it? — she replied, giggling.

Something about the box on the right pulled me to it, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

— That one. — I said, pointing to the box to my right.

— Nice! Let's see what you got. — she handed me the box with a smile and a little happy dance.

I carefully took the tape out with my hands and opened the box. Inside, digging through some old newspaper clippings and old packaging foam, there was a large, ornate, oval-shaped mirror.

— Oh! — she exclaimed, bursting with enthusiasm. — My grandma had this one hanging on the wall for quite a long time. I always thought it looked beautiful.

I delicately lifted the mirror, feeling its weight and its somewhat cold temperature on my hands. Its frame shimmered a faint blue color, nearly silvery, and intricately carved with swirling patterns almost seeming to breathe. I felt a strange pull in my chest—like the mirror was watching me back.

The reflection seemed to lag, like it was thinking before it responded. And for a second, I wasn't sure it was reflecting me at all. I tilted the mirror slightly, trying to see if there was anything behind it or anything else. I glanced over my shoulder to comment on it to the girl, but she was busy stacking boxes.

Turning back to the mirror, I leaned in closer, examining the elaborate carvings. It was then that I noticed something even stranger. The reflection of the girl behind me was blurred, almost ghost-like, and the more I focused on her image, the fainter it became until it disappeared.

— Hey, this mirror is weird. Have you noticed anything odd about it before? — the sound of silence was deafening. — Hello? Lady?

There was no response. I turned around to see where she was, hoping to catch a glimpse of her, but to my shock, she was gone. The garage was silent—too silent. Even the hum of the lights seemed to fade, like the world had paused to hold its breath.

My heart started to race. A chill crept up my spine.

— Hello? Girl, are you there? — I called out, my voice echoing too clearly in the stillness.

That's when I noticed it—the mirror. The soft glow it had before was now stronger, casting faint ripples of bluish light across the walls. A low hum vibrated through the air, subtle but constant, as if the mirror itself was breathing.

Then, without warning—

— Did you call Mr.? — she said, her voice casual, cheerful—like she'd never vanished at all.

I froze, staring at her. She looked at me with a puzzled expression as if nothing had happened. As if I hadn't just been alone in the garage that felt like it had slipped out of time.

I hesitated, then I repeated the question I'd asked before, my voice quieter now.

— Oh, in all these years I haven't noticed anything wrong with it! Why, though? — he tilted her head

— Ah, no—nothing. I just thought I saw something weird...

I decided not to comment anything about it. There was no way to explain what I'd seen—especially when I wasn't sure myself.

Still feeling uneasy, I decided it was time to go. I thanked her for the mirror, gave a quick wave, and carefully placed it back in the box.

As I walked slowly back home through the neighborhood, with the box tucked under my arm, my thoughts kept going back to that garage.

Something about it all felt... wrong. Like I'd stepped into a scene that wasn't meant for me.

## CHAPTER 2

# REFLECTIONS

❖ ❖

The wind was picking up, it was getting colder. Fortunately, I was already very close to being back home. I lived in this apartment building quite like Peter Parker had in the first Spider-Man movies. It was a very skinny building, and not that well maintained. My apartment was marginally better, but it was what I called home.

I got up the stairs silently. It was kind of hard to find my keys since the lightbulb in front of my door had burnt out some weeks prior, but I managed to find them. My house was a mess at that point, months of work on that project made it be that way. I already had gone through such a stressful day that I wouldn't go clean everything right then and there. I glanced at the clock; it was almost 8 PM, and stopping to relax felt like an excellent idea, the day had gone by so quickly, filled with unexpected and stressful events. Sitting down and sipping some tea, I couldn't help but stare at the mirror, its intricate patterns held my attention. I decided to hang it on an empty wall in my living room, thinking

it'd make for some nice decoration. I lifted and secured it on a nail on the wall and stepped back, the reflection was normal and showed everything normally thankfully.

The hours went by quickly, and I used them to watch something on the TV and eat some popcorn since it was an effortless food to cook. The moon was already high up in the sky, shining down faintly, illuminating that dark chilly night. It was all silent besides the sound of occasional cars passing by. However, coming from the room next to the one I was in, I heard a strange noise. At first, I didn't put much thought into it; it was a normal thing after all, until I heard an object falling from a shelf in another room, and again from another. I started to think that someone had gotten inside my house or something, but no, there was nothing. I checked everywhere and couldn't find a trace of anything that could've been causing these objects to move randomly short distances. But then I saw... The mirror on the wall had absolutely no reflection.

The mirror no longer reflected anything—not the room, not me. Just a smooth, gray sheen, like fogged glass left out in the cold. I stepped closer, holding my heart in my hand. It didn't feel like a surface anymore.

I hovered my hand near it, half-expecting it to ripple or pull me in. Nothing. Just that dull, lifeless glow. My mind scrambled for logic—maybe a material defect, maybe some weird coating reacting to the light. But deep down, something colder whispered: this wasn't normal. Not even close.

I have to admit, it's hard to sleep knowing you have something with unknown powers inside your house. Instead of going to

sleep, staying up to research felt much more attractive. I kept glancing at the mirror, half-expecting it to move. The silence in the room felt deafening. But no matter how much I tried to find something that could replicate this behavior, it always seemed like I would never find it. No number of papers, articles, or even Google searches could give me a spark of what it could be. Each minute without answers led me down a spiral of self-doubt, with anxiety rising up my spine, slightly fogging my vision and ideas.

*What is this thing?*

It didn't make sense to my brain to exist such a thing. Then an idea popped into my brain:

*I could take this mirror to the lab and use the equipment there.*

I thought. But despite my idea, it was still late at night, it would be completely impossible to go there at that hour.

I glanced at the round gray clock on the wall to see it was almost 3:00 AM already, although the hands seemed to tick a bit slower than usual, or was it just my imagination? I shook my head, trying to clear my foggy mind and focus. Exhaustion finally got the better of me. Realizing I wouldn't solve anything in my current state, I decided to get some rest. As I lay in bed, my mind kept drifting back to the mirror. My bedside clock ticking sounded loud inside my head, so much so that it felt off-putting. Despite the unease constantly with me, sleep eventually overtook my body.

The sound of water still woke me, but it was different.

No crashing waves. Just the soft ripple of a stream over stone—steady, almost soothing. I opened my eyes to find that I was already standing, barefoot in a shallow pool that stretched into

the mist. The air was warm. Quiet. Somewhere above, light filtered down like dawn through moving clouds.

I turned slowly. Every direction looked the same, thick with fog, still water, and a faint glow drifting through the distance like fireflies' asleep midair in deep silence.

And then I saw her.

Just beyond the mist, across a narrow stretch of water, stood a girl I've never met—yet something in me *remembered* her. Her silhouette was sharp against the haze. Her hair shifted with the same breeze brushing my skin, but floated as if it was underwater.

She tilted her head, studying me like she was unsure I was real too.

I took one step closer. The water rippled around me. My heart races with adrenaline.

She didn't speak. Neither did I. But we weren't strangers there. Not exactly.

Her hand lifted—slow, careful. She touched her collarbone, then stretched her arm forward, palm open.

My breath caught.

I crossed to meet her. Step by step, the fog thinned, and our reflections appeared beneath us—distorted but side by side. Her eyes locked on mine. They were beautiful like a starry night. Deep like space.

I reached out. Our fingers brushed.

It was like touching a chord that had been waiting to vibrate.

The world started to faintly shift around me. A shimmer spread outward in the water. Her expression shifted—surprise, then something like recognition.

But just as quickly, the world started to unravel complete. The fog thickened. Light bended. Her hand slipped from mine, and I gradually sunk into the water.

She mouthed a word I couldn't hear.

I whispered

— Wait.

But she was already fading into the mist.

I awoke startled, with my heart pounding, almost in panic. The clock on my bedside table showed that only a few hours had passed, but it felt like an eternity. The mirror's influence lingered in me, but I couldn't let my mind trick me. I had to do something about it.

I bolted out of bed, eager to get to the lab as fast as possible. My living room was even messier than it was before, the mirror must have been doing its thing for these few hours non-stop. I needed to, somehow, find my keys in the middle of this mess, but as I was looking for them, I saw something yellow in the mirror's glass. A note was left there, with two pairs of numbers. Feeling my heart suddenly rush, it quickly went away. My thoughts tangled. None of this made sense. But at that point, I didn't even doubt that it wasn't a dream. Stuffing the note in one of my pockets, I took the mirror from the wall, gently lifting it from the nail it was resting on. After some more searching, the keys became very visible to me, right in my bag. I couldn't afford to waste any more time.

With the mirror inside my backpack, I quickly got out of my apartment and headed towards the lab. The streets were eerily quiet and cold as the sun hadn't come out yet, the only sounds

being my footsteps and the distant hum of streetlights or very few cars passing by. My mind was racing, filled with a mixture of fear and curiosity about the mirror and its intriguing behavior.

Upon arriving at QuantumVision, as it was still very early in the morning, I decided to use my keycard and take the back entrance to avoid contact with any security personnel who might have questioned what I was doing there so early. The building had some lights on, but it was still bright in the corridors.

Inside the lab, the beeping machines and the sound of computer fans working non-stop brought me some comfort. I placed the mirror over some sheets of paper on one of the big grays and very modernly detailed workbenches and turned the main light on. I connected the mirror to some of the devices, trying to gather any data or find any traces of what the reason for this behavior could be. Despite all the tests, nothing was out of order, it was just a normal mirror, made out of glass and metal, even though what I saw was anything but normal.

Then, I had an idea that it was risky but still worth a shot. The company had developed this instrument called “Quantum Entangled State Scanner”, or QUES for short. It was designed to detect anomalies in quantum states that we couldn’t notice in any other way. As I switched the Scanner on, its light blue lights began to shine while it was humming back into life. Due to its still quite unstable behavior, I carefully maneuvered it over the mirror for a closer inspection. I went to one of the computers hooked up to the whole lab to start the procedures. My heart raced, I had never used that machine before and I was aware that using a prototype like that was dangerous, but I had to. So, I wrote the

values in and clicked the big red button. Nothing happened at first, I even thought I had done something wrong. The scanner started buzzing loudly, its lights pulsed, as if it was charging. It didn't seem like it would stop soon, going brighter and louder, only for it to start beeping uncontrollably, shining a red light. Smoke started coming off of it, and some sparks flew over my head. With a loud bang, it stopped, slowing gearing down.

Hiding behind another workbench, I waited until it seemed safe to go print the analysis report, hoping it worked since I didn't have another chance. As I got back up, I felt this terrible smell, and like my lungs weren't getting enough oxygen, so I rushed to the window to open it. Driven by my curiosity, and still coughing, I printed the report paper, and to my surprise, the readings were off the charts, the mirror seemed to be emitting some quantum fluctuations. I knew that was just an unbalanced prototype, but it was clear that something was off about it.

— What in the world are you? — I whispered to the mirror, feeling both intrigued and anxious.

My hands trembled as I took the mirror from under the destroyed scanner. I slid my fingers through the glass and its frame, trying to feel something different. It felt normal, nothing was out of order. Impatience started to grow inside me, so I left that inexplicable thing on the table and went back to the window to think with a clearer mind. Trying to come up with something to give proper results to what was this thing's secret was very difficult, I was running out of ideas. Watching the sun rise above the horizon from the 10th floor was a great sight I didn't see quite often, but that moment didn't last that long. The lights started

blinking, gradually faster. Anxiety came back with this deep feeling inside my chest as I faced the now glowing mirror. Emitting a faint blue light, the mirror stood there, not showing any reflections, but rather random images from lots of different things and places. Puzzled, I remained still, trying to piece together what I was seeing. My heart felt like it was going to jump out at any moment.

Abruptly, the lights fully turned off, as if the whole building had lost power, and the mirror now radiated a bright purplish-blue light with something I had never seen before reflected on its surface. Slowly stepping towards it, the image hadn't changed, it seemed like a white room with some paintings and a pot with a neon blue plant-like thing. Sunlight seemed to be coming inside the room through an opening that I couldn't see from there. Some purple sparks moved right to left as if they were floating in the air. The mirror emitted some sort of humming sound, mixed with bursts of what I would call sparkly sounds. The room seemed otherworldly. Unlike anything I had seen. For a moment I thought that my dream could be right, it was pulling me closer. I felt an inexplicable urge to reach out and touch the glass. Taking a deep breath, I extended my hand. As soon as my fingers brushed against the surface, I felt it cold, but solid. I hesitated, with its light pulsating bright once. My heartbeat quickened with the combination of curiosity and fear settling within me. The humming sound grew louder, like an eerie symphony in my ears.

Just as I was about to touch its surface again, the door in the mirror suddenly opened. Through it came a majestic-looking woman. The same one from my dream. She had long, wavy, flowing red hair that shimmered with hints of gold under the light,

and fell gently around her shoulders, delicately moving, and her pale, porcelain skin contrasted beautifully with her vibrant hair. Her expressive brown eyes were deep and soulful, profound like the cosmos, radiating a mixture of surprise and fear as they locked onto mine. Freckles danced across her sun-kissed cheeks, and she wore a simple, light-colored dress made of soft, ethereal fabric that seemed to move with the breeze. She raised her hand, mirroring my gesture. Paralysis seized me. It felt our fingers almost touch through the glass for a moment.

Regaining my senses, fear settled inside my body as I gasped and retreated my hand in unison with her. The lady's expression shifted to one of alarm, her eyes widening in panic. She stepped back, and in an instant, the mirror's surface began to crack and shimmer violently. I stumbled backwards scared; my heart pounded on my chest. The mirror pulsed with a blinding light, then abruptly returned to its normal reflective state. The room fell back into silence, the only sound being my heavy breathing.

I stood there for a moment, trying to process what had happened. My mind raced with thoughts, questions, and a sense of fear. I couldn't keep this to myself, I needed answers and there was only one person who could help now, Livia. So, I quickly packed up the mirror and the rest of my things and promptly left the lab in a rush. The corridors were still mostly empty, only with some janitors cleaning the floors before all the other workers' shifts started. They all turned to me while I ran past them, which didn't help with my anxiety at that moment. The elevator ride back to the first floor was very silent viewed from the outside. However, my mind couldn't stop creating scenarios trying to

clarify what had happened up there. I couldn't wrap my head around it, no matter what, giving me goosebumps.

It didn't take long until I was out of the building, crossing the park. Livia lived a few blocks away from QuantumVision in a modest apartment. We have been good friends since college, I knew she'd take me seriously—even with a truly unbelievable story, specially at this hour.

Upon arriving at Liv's place, I buzzed the intercom frantically. After a few moments, her groggy voice came through the speaker.

— Ethan? It's 6 AM, what's going on?

— I need to talk to you Liv, it's urgent. Can I come in?

— Alright, come in. — she said, sighing after a brief pause.

I practically ran up the stairs, my anxiety growing with each step. When she opened the door, I launched into a hurried explanation.

— Hold on, can you please talk slower? I barely got up from bed.

She sat next to her big hyacinth flowerpot on her yellow leather couch pulling a blanket over her legs as I described every little thing that happened, recounting every event of the past day. The weird mirror reflections, the object moving, the anomaly at the lab, the lady I saw in that strange place... She listened attentively, shifting her gaze to her lap. She looked confused yet intrigued. When I finished, she leaned back, fiddling with the edge of her blanket, deep in thought.

— So, you're telling me that this mirror sees things that aren't there? — she said, trying to piece it together. — But how? If what

you're saying is true, we could be looking at a phenomenon unlike anything we've ever seen.

I nodded, relieved that she believed me.

— What should we do now, though? It's fascinating, but what if it's dangerous? — I said, still remembering my time at the garage.

— Yeah, true. We should ensure it's safe before doing anything with it. — she said calmly. — We can't let anyone at the lab know about this, I'm afraid of what can happen. We should, indeed, study it more.

She got up with her blanket covering her body.

— First things first, Ethan — she added, her voice steady despite the early hour. — We need to document everything. Every detail. If we're going to study this, we need a thorough record.

I nodded.

— Let's set it up in my apartment, it's already all messy from everything I've been working on. I don't wanna bring that chaos to your pristine place.

She gave a small laugh heading to her room to grab her laptop, her camera, and a few notebooks. When she returned, she was already scribbling something down. I caught a glimpse of a sketch—maybe the mirror's frame—but she quickly flipped the page before I could see more.

— Let's go then, ladies first. — she concluded.



## CHAPTER 3

# THE OTHER SIDE



**T**hat walk felt surreal, mixing anxiety and excitement. The world was waking up around us. Streets, now bathed in morning sunlight, bustled with early activity. Freshly opened bakeries filled the air with the rich aroma of coffee. Cars gradually filled the boulevard, while trees swayed gently in the breeze.

Back at my apartment, I cleared some space on my dining table and carefully unpacked the mirror from its humble box. It looked completely normal, but now with no blue aura emanating from it.

— Alright, — said Livia, snapping a picture, then glancing at her phone. — Let's do some basic tests to see if it responds to any stimuli. But I think you should tidy this place up a little, so we don't get completely lost in what we're doing.

Reluctantly, I started gathering every paper, wire, and piece of metal or carbon fiber I could find while she was doing her tests. Shining lights at the mirror and then writing in her notebook,

touching the mirror in lots of different ways and writing it down, even swinging it around in the air and shaking it.

— Hey, be careful! — I warned her.

In college, she excelled at astrophysics and was always praised, but never made it into research. She never said why. Since then, she's buried herself in study projects—no wonder she aced every test.

— I'm just testing, alright? — she exclaimed, sighing.

We tried some quick tests, but the mirror remained stubbornly silent, reflecting back our intrigued faces and the clutter around the dining room.

Livia checked her watch and sighed. — I really have to go. I have a meeting in an hour.

— You're leaving? — I asked, surprised.

— Just for a bit. I'll be back later, I promise. Just... keep documenting everything, okay? Don't let anything slip by. I'll run some simulations when I get back. Maybe there's a pattern we're missing.

She gave me a quick smile and packed her things up. At the door, she paused.

— You're lucky, you know. — she added, looking back at me  
— To be the one it chose to show all this to.

Then she was gone.

I turned back to the mirror, watching my own reflection blur slightly in the glass. I stared at it, wondering if this was all just a dream—or if I was slowly losing my mind. The cloudy and dark day outside only added to my slight disappointment with the lack of results. I stared deeper into the mirror, losing myself in thought.

Suddenly, the mirror's surface started to ripple like water and its image started to shift and fade. The sound of wind flooded the room. I blinked, thinking it could be some kind of trick with the light in the room, but then the image changed.

Instead of my reflection, I saw an otherworldly lush garden-like place, the sky above shimmered in hues of violet and blue, oddly colored clouds drifted like silk. My heart pounded in my chest as the scene slowly came into focus. And in the center of it all stood her.

The same woman from before.

Her red voluminous hair flowed seamlessly with the wind, and her deep, starry eyes locked onto mine with an intensity that completely took my breath away. For a moment, the world fell silent. It was just her and me, suspended in something that felt too real to be a dream, too impossible to be real.

— Wait... You can see me? — her voice was soft, like a breeze brushing through leaves, uncertain, yet clear. It didn't echo in the room—it echoed in me

I blinked, unsure if I was dreaming. I took a hesitant step forward, my heart pounding like drums in my chest.

— I... Yeah. I can. Can *you* see me?

She nodded slowly, her expression shifting between confusion and disbelief. Her eyes scanning the room behind me with cautious curiosity. Her posture was guarded, like someone who had just stepped into a dream they weren't sure was safe.

— This isn't possible... — she whispered to herself.

— You're telling me... — I muttered, stepping closer without realizing it. — What is this? What's happening?

— I don't know — her voice barely above a whisper, slightly trembling. — I was just... looking at the mirror. It started glowing. Then... you were there.

— Same here. I thought I was hallucinating.

We both stared at each other, separated by glass—or something that only looked like it. The air between us felt charged, like the moment before lightning strikes.

— Is this some kind of trick? — she asked, glancing around her side of the mirror. — A spell? A projection maybe?

— I don't know. I bought this mirror yesterday. It's just... old. Strange. But now it's doing this.

She stepped closer, and I mirrored her instinctively. Her hand hovered just above the surface, and I felt my own lift slightly, as if drawn to hers.

— It's never done this before. — she said. — Not in all the kauns it's been in my family.

— So, you don't know what it is either?

She shook her head.

— No, there were stories but I never believed them. Well... until now.

I leaned in, trying to see more of her world. Behind her, the sky shimmered in colors I didn't have names for, and a floating landmass drifted lazily in the air. She was standing in a place that looked like a dream—and yet, she was the most vivid part of it.

— Where... where are you? — I asked.

— I could ask you the same — her eyes narrowing slightly, but not unkindly. — This place behind you—it looks... artificial. Are you in Arkana?

— Um... well, this is my house actually. I brought the mirror here to study it. But I didn't expect... you.

He looked down, then back at me. Her gaze lingered.

— This feels like a dream.

— Yeah... — I said, exhaling slowly. — A very vivid one.

A long pause stretched between us. I could feel my heart heating in my throat. Then she smiled—softly, like she wasn't sure she should, but couldn't help it.

— I guess we should at least know each other's names, right? — she said.

— Yeah, um... I'm Ethan.

— Liora. — her name sounded like a melody. — Nice to meet you, Ethan.

Liora's name lingered between us, soft and surreal. It echoed in my head like a thread of music I'd almost forgotten. Her eyes still held mine. Then, slowly, she shifted her stance. Her arm bent, her fingers drifting up to her chin, thumb tucked beneath her jaw, the rest of her hand lightly brushing her lips. Her eyes flicked away—not out of disinterest, but inward, like she'd stumbled on a thought she wasn't sure how to say yet.

The wind around her had quieted. Her fiery red hair still moved on its own, but softer now, like it was responding to something inside her, not around her. She didn't speak. Just stood there, head tilted, studying me like she was weighing something—measuring not just who I was, but why I was here. And I couldn't look away.

— In all these kauns I never thought something like this would happen. — she said.

— Kauns?

— Time. — she said, almost absentmindedly. — It's what we call our cycles.

— So... I imagine you're not from Earth then.

She gave a soft laugh—quiet, unguarded, almost to herself. It wasn't loud or showy, like wind chimes moving under a gentle breeze. It wasn't the kind of laugh you'd hear in a crowd. It was quieter. Warmer. Like it belonged to a moment that wasn't meant for anyone else.

— I don't even know what that is haha. I'm from a place called *Virelya*. — she glanced over her shoulder at a floating giant piece of rock with some sort of lanterns on it. — This is the Province of Virelya.

— Is that a floating island? — I said, extremely surprised.

— Oh, that? It's just a market, it's market day.

— Your markets float?

— Don't yours? — She giggled, raising an eyebrow. Then with a flick of her wrist, a small green stone lifted into the air and spun slowly above her palm.

— No. Definitely not. — I laughed, astounded. — That's... incredible.

— And what is that behind you? — she started pointing past me.

I turned, glancing at the cluttered room, messy from all the tests earlier. I had completely forgotten the state that everything was around me I immediately felt ashamed of it.

— Uh... That's a microwave and a coffee maker next to it. And, something that I made, it's like a timer but it sets itself up.

— They look... Complicated. — she squinted.

— They kind of are. But they don't float.

We both laughed, and for a moment, the strangeness of the situation faded. It felt like two people meeting across a great distance, trying to understand each other with nothing but curiosity and wonder. She tilted her head slightly, her gaze lingering on me—not just watching, but seeing. It wasn't just curiosity anymore. It felt like recognition, like two pieces of a puzzle finally fitting

— You're different — she said quietly. — Not just from my people. From anyone I've ever seen.

I blinked, caught off guard.

— Is that a compliment?

— Maybe. — she smiled faintly. — I just... I've looked through this mirror since I was little. It never showed me anything. Not until you.

The air between us pulsed again, the mirror's glow faint but steady. I didn't know what to say, so I told the truth.

— I don't know why this is happening. But I'm glad it did.

Her expression softened.

— Me too.

There was a pause. Her fingers brushed the glass again—gently, as if she was memorizing the texture. Her hair had lifted itself up more now and floated at around her shoulders length, wider to the sides. Her eyes sparkled with magic, like stars in the night sky.

— Your world — her eyes focusing on the window behind me — it looks... loud. Sharp. But beautiful.

— And yours looks like a dream I don't wanna wake up from.

The silence that followed wasn't awkward. It settled between us like a blanket—heavy, but warm. We were still strangers, but something about this moment felt... Special. Her world was so vibrant and full of life it was hard not to fall in love.

She stepped back slightly glancing upward.

— I don't think I'll be able to stay for long. My father is going to come here and call me to go back. My Province is at war.

— War? — I said, concerned.

— It doesn't look like it, I know. — her voice dropped. — But it's falling apart. The leaders are divided. Magic's gone wild in some places, like a storm. In others... it's just gone. And I... — she hesitated. — I'm the King's daughter. That makes me a target.

She looked away, then back up.

— And then there's the prophecy.

I leaned closer.

— What prophecy?

She took a breath, and when she spoke, her voice changed—deeper, older, like it was echoing from somewhere else:

*When twin bodies share the sky's embrace,*

*A hidden bridge shall find its place.*

*You who steer this ancient path,*

*Shall rise or fall in shadow's wrath.*

*Beware the false prophet's claim,*

*For their way leads to ruin and flame.*

As the last word left her lips, the mirror pulsed once again—just once—its surface rippling like when a stone falls on a lake.

— What does it mean? — I asked.

— No one really knows. — she said, her voice returning to normal. — They argue about it constantly—some say it's the suns, others say it's about merging provinces. No one agrees. That's why the fighting never stops.

The mirror's glow now trembled. It dimmed slightly, her eyes still holding that quiet intensity. She looked over her shoulder, the wind in her world picking up again, tugging at her hair like it didn't want her to stay. The sky in her world shimmered with uneasy colors—like it, too, sensed the moment slipping away.

— I have to go — she said, almost apologetically. — They'll be looking for me soon.

I nodded slowly.

— Will you come back?

She hesitated, listening to something I couldn't hear. Then gave a nodded.

— If the mirror allows it. If the skies align.

We stood there for a while, suspended in silence. Then she added.

— There's something about this... about you. I don't know what it means yet. But I want to find out.

I stepped closer to the mirror.

— Then let's figure it out. — I whispered. — Together.

Her lips curve into a beautiful, but faint, smile.

— There are stories. — she said. — Old ones. About portals of some sort. They say the materials to build them exist everywhere. If we could find them...

— You said your world is at war. — I said. — If there's anything I can do—

A gust of wind pulled at her, and the light behind her flickered. She looked up, then back at me.

— I have to go.

— Wait—what kind of materials?

— I don't know. The stories don't say. Only that they resonate with both sides. They're rare. But they exist.

The mirror shimmered again, the image of her world flickering like a candle in the wind.

— Liora—

— Ethan. — she said, her voice barely audible now. — If the mirror opens again... I'll be waiting.

And then she was gone.

The house felt unusually quiet, the air thick with anticipation. My mind raced with questions about Liora and her world. Now reflecting only my tired face, the mirror seemed to emit a soft, almost imperceptible, purple aura, as if it was waiting for the right moment to reveal its secrets. I scribbled in some paper all ideas I had for what could the resources be. As of right now, I had no idea of where to start. I needed help.

It was getting cold. I made myself a cup of tea in the kitchen and settled into the couch, determined to stay awake a little longer watching the mirror. As hours passed, fatigue started to kick in, weighing heavily on my eyelids. I tried my best to stay alert, hoping I could take another glimpse at the otherworldly images we've seen before. I was fighting to keep my eyelids open, but I wasn't strong enough. Everything slowly got dark.

I opened my eyes and found myself in a place I didn't remember from before. I scanned my surroundings. And I saw her. She was already waiting.

I looked down to my hands and palms trying to grasp what was happening, but I couldn't quite catch it.

We stood beneath a violet sky that stretched endlessly above a lake of quiet light. Gentle gusts of wind, a smooth, glowing water and Liora, barefoot in the center of it, her hair catching the soft shimmer like strands of thread pulled from stars.

She smiled—but not the kind you give to strangers.

The kind you give to someone you almost remember.

I stepped forward. The water didn't resist. Neither did she.

We didn't speak. We didn't need to.

She reached out and touched my hand. Her fingers were warm and soft A hum rose beneath our feet, spreading outward in gentle waves. I breathed in, and the air smelled like rain before it falls.

My voice came out quiet.

— Is this...?

She didn't answer. Softly putting one of her fingers on my lips. Then she leaned her forehead gently against mine. Her breath brushed my cheek, and for one suspended moment, the world was still. Like we'd been here before.

She whispered something—too soft to catch.

— I'm afraid I'll never see you again. — I whispered back.

The stars blinked. A shiver ran through the water.

Then everything folded.

The light snapped out like a blown fuse. The warmth vanished. And I was alone in my apartment, gasping awake, the ceiling dark above me and my hand clenched tight around nothing.

For a second, I stayed frozen, eyes wide, heart racing. Her face still clear in my mind  
She'd felt so close. Like she was right there in front of me. Like I was there in her own world.

I whispered her name, even though I didn't remember saying it out loud in the dream.

Liora.

And even in the quiet, I swear I heard it echo.

But the sound of the doorbell ringing got me out of it. I got up, struggling to keep my balance, I stumbled across the apartment. Through my front door's peephole, I saw Livia standing there. She barged in as I was opening the door.

— Were you sleeping all this time? I've been at your door for like 20 minutes now. I thought you had died in here, or something.  
— she had this undeniably stressed look on her face, the one that could kill you if you said the wrong thing.

— I was having weird dreams — with my arm extended, slowly closing the door. — I don't know exactly what it was.

— Oh—do you think it was the mirror? — her brows frowned, changing her focus to the room where the mirror stood.

— So, I have to tell you something...

Without hesitation, she charged to the living room, shrugging her coat off and throwing it on the coffee table. Immediately, she started documenting things and touching the mirror.

— What is it? — she said, still looking at the mirror.

I told her everything. About the mirror glowing again. About Liora—How she appeared, how we spoke, how real it felt. I told her about the war, the prophecy, the way her world looked like it belonged to a dream. I didn't leave anything out.

Livia didn't interrupt. She just stood there, one hand still resting on the mirror's frame, her eyes fixed on me, listening attentively, occasionally turning back to the mirror.

When I final stopped talking the silence between us felt heavier than before. Livia stayed quiet for a moment, then slowly, nodded.

— Okay — she said. — if what you said is real—and I believe you— then we need to find those materials... whatever they are.

She turned to the mirror, her eyes reflecting its faint glow. Her fingers brushing the edge of the frame.

— This could be the biggest discovery in history, Ethan. We can't let that slip away.

I nodded. Grateful she was on my side.

For now, that was enough.



## CHAPTER 4

# THE HUNT

❖ ❖

Livia was already at the table when I walked in, flipping through a thick, dusty book like it owed her answers.

— You’re late — she said without looking up, sipping coffee from a chipped mug that had “World’s Okayest Scientist” printed on the side.

— I brought snacks — I said, holding up a paper bag like a peace offering.

She glanced at it unimpressed.

— We don’t have time for snacks.

I dropped into the chair across from her, setting the bag down between us.

— You used to love peanut butter cups.

— I used to think I’d win a Nobel Prize by twenty-one. People change.

I raised an eyebrow.

— Dark.

She shrugged, flipping another page.

The mirror sat on the table between us, quiet for now. Its surface reflected only our tired faces and the tidiness of her house around us—no magic, no Virelya, no glowing sparks. Just us trying to decode the impossible.

— So, what's the verdict? — I asked.

Livia leaned back, twirling her pen.

— Based on the energy readings and what we've seen so far, I think there are ancho materials—stuff on Earth that resonates with the mirror's... frequency or whatever. If we find the right combination, we might stabilize it. Maybe even open it on purpose.

I nodded slowly, absorbing her words.

— Like magical jumper cables.

— Exactly. Except instead of jumpstarting a car we're opening a portal to another dimension.

We stayed in silence for a bit looking at the mirror.

— No pressure.

We both laughed.

It was easy, laughing with her. Natural. We'd done it a thousand times in college, working late in empty labs, our lives a mess of half-eaten takeout and half-finished ideas. She'd always been the one who kept me grounded. The one who reminded me I wasn't alone in the chaos.

— Alright, — I said, pulling out my tablet. — where do we start?

Livia's eyes gleamed, just a little. That spark of competition. The one she always carried like a secret.

— I already have three leads.

Of course, she did.

She slid a worn notepad across the table. It was filled with messy diagrams, energy readings, half-crossed-out formulas, and a small coffee rind near the bottom corner.

— Three locations. Each one matches a spike from the mirror's last activation.

— How did you get all this data?

— I have my secret strategies — she smiled confidently — There's a pattern—it's just not linear. It's... harmonic.

I leaned in, scanning the sketches.

— Wait, this is the old observatory out the city?

— Yup. Abandoned. Decommissioned like five years ago. But one of their quantum cores hasn't been deactivated properly and I think it's still running. It's been leaking some kind of noise the mirror's frequency responds to.

— And this one? — I pointed to a scribbled circle near a forest line.

— It's a seismic monitoring station buried in the Thunder Canyons. Mostly underground. Weird part? Its sensors picked up rhythmic pulses just like how my sensors caught.

I looked up at her

— You tracked that?

She smiled like it was nothing.

— I don't sleep much. — she giggled.

I hesitated, then pointed to the last location on the map.

— And this?

Her smile faded a little.

— I'm not exactly sure... Old schematics I found led me to believe there's a buried sublevel beneath the city—something old. The grid fails over that place based on these reports. There's a bunch of energy fluctuations that match the mirror's pattern.

— So, it's just... a wild guess?

— A very specific wild guess.

I sat back, impressed in spite of myself.

— I've missed this, you know.

She looked up.

— The chaos?

— The chase. The puzzles. You dragging me out of bed at 3 AM because “the sky looked weird again”.

She smirked.

— And you pretending to be annoyed when you were already halfway dressed.

We shared a brief look. The kind of look that only comes from years of discussing weird ideas and arguing over who got the last slice of pizza in our dorm fridge. I grabbed a peanut butter cup and tossed her one.

She caught it mid-air, barely smiling.

— Still terrible for your health.

— Still worth it.

I stood, tapping the screen on my tablet.

— Alright, let's hunt down some interdimensional junk, I guess

Livia raised her cup.

— To science and strange mirrors.

— And to hopefully not dying in a forgotten government lab.

— Always the optimist.

The drive out of the city was quiet—not awkward quiet, just... loaded. The kind of silence that has weight. We were nervous about what could happen. I had the mirror secured in a case next to me, and Livia was scrolling through something on her tablet, probably rechecking every data point for the hundredth time. I caught her sneaking glances at the mirror now and then like it might blink.

— You know — I said, trying to break the ice. — this feels like a road trip. Minus the music. And snacks. And the fun.

Livia smirked

— Peak road trip energy I'd say.

— Hey, I was trying to lighten the mood.

— You're doing great Ethan — she said, focused on her data signals, most likely calculating something.

I let the silence sit again. Outside the car, the landscape shifted from city steel to cracked roads and overgrown tree lines. It felt good to get away. Not because of the mission itself, but everything felt heavier back there lately. Work, the mirror. My head. Being here felt simpler for a moment.

When I was a kid, I always wanted to go to this observatory. It felt weird going there now after it had been deactivated after all these years. Something about the way this place had been left behind... it didn't feel right. Places like these don't stay forgotten unless someone wants them to be.

The GPS died as we got closer, which wasn't surprising based on how far this thing is. There were no other roads to follow, so it wasn't that hard to manage to get there. We parked behind a

row of decaying utility vans on the entrance to the parking lot. Birds chirped elegantly under the winter sun. The observatory loomed over us up the hill. Shattered glass glinted in the morning light.

The wind howled through the broken panels, whistling. Vines had crept up the sides of the structure and trees have grown inside it. Nature wrapped around rusted beams and shattered glass trying to reclaim it.

Livia stood beside me, arms crossed, her coat flapping in the wind.

— Charming. — I muttered. — You sure this is the place?

— A hundred percent. The reports don't lie.

I looked around, skeptically.

— Let's just hope it doesn't collapse on us, I guess.

As we stepped inside into a semi-open space, filled by nature. We felt the air, thick with dust and silence. All the chirping of birds from outside felt so far away now. Old consoles were scattered around, some screens dead, some not, still saying “Warning: Quantum

Core Levels Low” in red. Somehow this place still had a working electrical system. Most of the lights were on, some blinking.

A few loose tools and desk things floated gently in the air, suspended in place as if gravity had forgotten them. Not spinning, not drifting—just hovering. I reach out and touched one. It wobbled slightly and moved back slowly.

— That's... not normal. — said Livia with her voice low.

— No. But it isn't magic either. The crystal must be close.

We moved deeper into the observatory, past shattered glass and tangled wires—a lot of them. The telescope stood at the center of the dome up the stairs, towering above us. Beneath it, a circular pedestal pulsed faintly with blue light. The crystal stood on it, floating, slowly spinning.

It was beautiful. A shard of translucent material, like frozen light, shifting shades of blue with every angle. It pulsed in a rhythm that felt almost... alive.

— There it is. — whispered Livia.

I tried to extend my hand forward but was struck by an energy bubble. Almost like a force field.

— Ouch! — I exclaimed.

— This crystal... It's so powerful, we should've thought it might've had a containment field.

She stepped forward, already pulling out her scanner.

— Let's see what we're dealing with. — said Livia kneeling beside the interface panel, brushing off the dust off the surface.

A holographic display flickered to life, showing a complex array of symbols and wave forms.

— Wow, these holograms are always so impressive.

She tapped a few buttons, frowning.

— It's locked. Some kind of encryption. I can't brute force it.

I crouched beside her, studying the interface. The display wasn't just showing data—it was pulsing, shifting, almost like it was waiting.

— This isn't a standard lock... — I said. — I've never seen anything like this before.

I extended my arm, touching the panel.

The moment my fingers brushed the surface, the interface pulsed—once, sharply—like it had taken a deep breath. A faint vibration traveled up my arm, not painful, but deep, like it was resonating with something inside me. Then everything went silent. The blinking lights in the room froze. The hum in the observatory vanished. Even the dust seemed to stop midair. And Livia was nowhere to be seen.

I tried to speak, but no sound came out.

Where once was the door behind us, now there was complete darkness. A white figure stood by it, apparently staring at me. It was so bright It was hard to look at it. After a moment it stepped into the room, and I, reluctantly, went after it.

The room was filled with mirrors, of all sizes, in all angles, scattered around, reflecting me. But it wasn't quite me... from now at least. There was a different version of me in every mirror. I wandered around trying to fathom what I was seeing. Observatory equipment floated on the air around me.

—Hello? — I said, not expecting a response.

A blue light faintly pulsed in the distance, almost like it was showing me the way. The sound of my footsteps echoed loudly, filling the silence up. The mirrors seemed to stop showing up in front of me. Only to show me a narrow corridor with no walls and absolutely nothing on its sides. The white figure stood at the end of it.

I questioned myself if this was even real, but something made me not care much if it was or not. The mirrors behind me started all breaking, one by one. I ran fast as I could. The white figure extended its arms toward me, and I extended mine.

As soon as my fingers brushed it, I saw... Myself, like a reflection.

— Ethan! — yelled Livia

— Huh? — I tried to recover balance.

— What the hell happened?

I looked around. The room was back to how it was before. The hologram now a faint red, the containment field was down.

— I... did it?

She frowned, tapping her scanner again.

— That doesn't make sense.

The crystal slowly lowered onto the pedestal, still lightly glowing. I stepped forward carefully, heart pounding, and picked it up. It was warm and shocked me like static energy.

— We got it. — I said, turning to Livia with a grin.

She gave a small smile, opening a case to put the crystal in.

— Yeah, we did.

As I had my arm extended, the lights flickered. A low hum filled the air, rising in pitch. The floor beneath us vibrated increasingly stronger.

— Uh... Ethan? — Livia said, backing away from the pedestal.

— What did you do?

— I just took the crystal—.

A loud crack echoed through the dome. One of the support beams groaned, then snapped, sending a shower of dust and debris from the ceiling. The sound of metal screeching was loud.

— We need to go. Now! — exclaimed Livia already running.

The observatory shuddered around us. The systems failed one by one as the crystal that powered everything was removed. Sparks

flew from the consoles. The floating objects suddenly dropped in front of us, hitting the floor hard. The air felt charged, like a storm was about to break.

Swerving around all the vegetation, desks and cables we made our way to the main corridor just as another beam collapsed behind us, blocking the path we had come through. The main door was blocked, the ceiling had fallen on it.

— This way! — Livia shouted, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward an emergency exit.

We ducked under a support bar that fell only midway down, the ceiling falling everywhere. The walls were cracking, the floor tilting slightly under our feet.

— This place is falling apart! — she yelled.

— Just keep moving!

We burst through a maintenance door into a narrow stairwell. The steps trembled beneath us as we descended. Concrete falling all around us.

At the bottom, there was a rusted emergency exit. I slammed my shoulder into it, and nothing happened. So, I did it again. And again. Livia started helping me. The room was going to collapse on us right when we managed to burst through the door. We stumbled our way into the blinding sunlight.

The observatory groaned once more, then partially collapsed behind us. We stood there, panting. Blood trickled down Livia's face.

— Well — she said, catching her breath. — that was close.

— You okay? — I asked.

She didn't respond right away. She was staring at the ruins.

— Hey... talk to me.

She blinked, then nodded.

— Yeah. Just... processing.

I nodded slowly. We stood there in silence for a moment looking at that mess, the wind tugging at our clothes.

She turned to me.

— You really figured it out back there. — lightly punching my shoulder.

— I guess I did.

She smiled and walked past me.

— Then let's go back.

As we walked down the hill to the parking lot, I glanced at her. She was silent, looking ahead, holding the case tight.

— So, directly to the next one, destroyer of observatories? — she said in a livelier tone, but her grip on the case still tight.

— Sure, why not? — I said, smiling. — Let's try to not bring the roof down this time.

As we drove off, I caught her looking back at the ruins in the rearview mirror. Just for a second. Then she looked away.

— So, next up, weird ass cave like 80 miles from here. — she said.

— Eighty miles? — I groaned. — That's gonna take forever.

— Too bad you're stuck with me. I'm gonna sing the crazy duck song all the way there.

I groaned dramatically.

— I should've let the observatory fall on me.

She laughed.



## CHAPTER 5

# TREMORS



**A**fter leaving the observatory, Livia fell quiet. Not in a tense way—more like she'd simply shifted gears. She'd been tapping her fingers against the steering wheel, humming something I couldn't place, as if we were headed to a weekend concert, not an abandoned ruin. Occasionally, she'd make a half-joke about the road's potholes or how QuantumVision would never reimburse the mileage on this trip.

I didn't know what to make of her mood—so I kept my mouth shut.

Outside the passenger window, trees loomed over us. The last gas station we passed looked like it hadn't had power in years. Out here, it felt like the world had stopped evolving and just decided to breathe again.

I cracked my window open. The air smelled like pine and rain-soaked bark. After the tech rot and static haze of the observatory, it was like stepping into another kind of system—one that didn't

need wires to run. It was still sunny out. The birds were chirping to the wind like always.

Eventually, Livia turned off onto a narrow trail. It barely qualified as a road, more like a memory of one. Gravel gave way to dirt and roots, then just a thin path between trees. Our phone signal dropped out completely.

— There. — she said, folding the map. She pointed at a ridge straight ahead, where the trees thinned into rock.

— How hidden are we talking? — I asked, not seeing a thing.

— This is like “Where’s Waldo in A1 paper size” type of hidden. Five start terrain for dramatic discoveries.

Livia parked next to a tree where the road got too non-existent for the car to handle. I checked the mirror case behind me on the back seat. It had been humming since the last turn, not erratically or anything though, just steady. I put it in my bag and opened the door slowly to not hit the tree right next to the car. I stepped outside, feeling the wind brushing against my face.

— Are you sure you know where we’re going? — I said.

— Well... no. But let’s hope I’m right.

— Comforting.

The trees grew in close. Bushes were tall and prickly. Moss covered the stones on the ground, making it hard to take a step forward without thinking two times if we should even be there.

After twenty minutes of essentially crawling under branches and stepping over tangled roots, we found it. A rusted bunker-like door, overrun by grime and ivy. Livia gave it two sharp kicks and it screeched open after who knows how long ago was the last time it did.

— Ladies first. — she said, stepping back and tilting her head.

— This definitely doesn't scream "trap" at all. — I muttered, flicking on my flashlight.

— Well, if it were a trap, it'd at least have a welcome mat.

We descended into the dark. Stairs led us to another door that—might I add, was easier to open—went directly to the cave.

— I never went cave exploring. — I said.

— I just don't like to know rats can be here. Not exciting.

I gave a small laugh.

The air shifted as we walked in, cooler but heavier. Roots had gone through the walls and ceiling in odd angles, wrapping around old seismic consoles and broken light fixtures. Some screens still blinked a red faint light. Crates and boxes were scattered on the floor. The corridor gave way to a larger tunnel, part of the old seismic station—part natural part man-made. This place seemed like it had felt too many tremors in its life. The metal walls were falling apart. The mirror case on my back buzzed softly, steady and low, like it was listening.

We moved slowly through the tunnels, trying to find anything that sparked our interest. The floor sloped downward, slick with moss, dripping water and mineral buildup. Our shoes splashed against shallow puddles. Every step echoed loud in the silence.

Then the tunnel opened into a cavern. It was vast—larger than I expected. Beams of light pierced softly through the cracks in the cave ceiling above. The floor vibrated softly. Vines hung like curtains. This place looked like an abandoned mine from a long time ago.

— Isn't that it in the middle there? — said Livia.

I turned my body to where she pointed.

And there it was. From this distance we could barely see it. It looked just like an orange light with some vines around it.

She stepped forward but I held her gently as the floor beneath her feet trembled lightly and a faint metal creak got to my ears.

— Wait—look at the floor.

Hairline fractures webbed across the floor, radiating outward from the pedestal. The roots around the core twitched faintly, like they were breathing.

Livia crouched, scanning the floor.

— Think it's unstable? — I said.

— More than that... — she went still, listening. — I think it's alive

The mirror case on my back warmed against my spine as it hummed louder, syncing with the Core's rhythm. I took a careful step forward.

— Livia—.

— I'm fine. — she snapped, then winced. — Sorry.

Her hand trembled as it hovered over her scanner. She cursed softly as it fell from her grasp.

— So, we're gonna tippy-toe our way there and come back?

— I just need a baseline reading. — she said. — Come on.

The roots pulsed again. A low hum filled the cavern, vibrating through my shoes.

She tightened her grip on the scanner and leaned in, eyes fixed on the core. Every time her hand drifted closer, the green yellow glow in the roots flickered brighter, and a soft vibration pulsed

through the floor. I slowly took a step forward, watching her get closer to a cracked stone.

The hum underneath me grew louder, synchronous with her approach. I glanced between Livia's face—which was pale, yet determined—and the core's glow, now pulsed in time with her shallow breaths. Her reflection shimmered on the metal parts of the pedestal that wasn't rusted or covered by roots, distorted, sometimes overshadowed by the bright glow coming from within the vines.

— Livia. — I said with my voice low, as a sudden ripple of light flashed beneath her foot.

She froze, scanning the readings. The vines slowly opening and exposing the core, with tendrils stretching and twitching inches from her fingertips.

I swallowed hard.

— Hold on... Livia.

The pulses gave way to a constant light with a hum so intense that rocks around us started cracking.

— Stop! — I shouted.

She started, finally looking back at me with wide eyes.

— Step back a little. — I said, as another big pulse raced through the roots down to her feet.

She jerked upright. Her eyes wide.

— I can't mess this up. I can't... — Her voice cracked. She didn't blink. Her hand hovered midair, trembling.

Her eyes flickered upward, wide and unfocused. Rocks and dust fell from the ceiling all around her, yet she didn't react to them. It was like she wasn't even there.

— The roots are reacting to you! — I added in a firmer voice.

— It's not just the roots... I—I don't want to be buried again... — Her breath quickened

I stepped closer to her.

— Livia, breathe.

— I am breathing! — she snapped, eyes darting to the ceiling

— It's not like Pesadena. That was different—

A sudden crack boomed overhead. Dust rained down around us.

— Livia!

She stumbled backward with hands pressed to her chest.

— I can't... I can't—.

— Look at me. — I said, keeping my voice low.

Her eyes darted to the core as she sat down.

— Livia. — my hand brushed her arm. — Remember the science fair?

She blinked, confusion all over her face.

— Junior year, — I said — you were shaking so hard you could barely talk to the judges. You froze. And we aced that. I was right there—even worse than you actually. You calmed me down and talked me through square breathing.

Her shoulders sagged slightly. The core's glow dimmed and the hum softened.

— You saved me that day. — I said.

She closed her eyes and took a slow breath. Then another. The roots around the chamber seemed to exhale with her.

— I'm... okay. — she whispered.

I extended my hand to her, and she grabbed it firmly.

The vines loosened. The glowing cracks on the floor grew faint, and the core pulsed slowly, as though acknowledging us.

Without a word, we reached out together and lifted the core from its vine nest. It felt warm. Livia gently guided it into its containment case. The mirror on my back settled into a soft hum, as if satisfied.

We made our way back up the tunnel. Livia walked a few paces ahead, her flashlight beam carving a path through the darkness. Outside, the hatch clanged shut behind us.

The forest felt vast and still, but definitely way better than being down that soggy cave. The air felt fresh. Liberating.

I slowed my pace, noticing how her shoulders no longer trembled. The space between us wasn't rock or roots. It felt... lighter. Like we'd both just exhaled together.

We didn't say much on the way back, but quite frankly we didn't need to. We blasted some good indie music and sang along not too energetically. She sat on the passenger seat with her window cracked open. Hair caught in the breeze, eyes tracing the treetops overhead. For a while, it felt like we were moving forward—not just toward stabilizing the mirror, but out of whatever space had been hanging between us.

The apartment felt different when we got back. Not in a dramatic way—no spooky mirror or lighting, or weird thick fog. Just, you know... quieter.

Livia dropped her bag by the door and collapsed onto the couch with a groan.

— I swear, if I ever see another glowing rock buried under a tree root, I'm setting it on fire. — she said.

I smirked, hanging up my jacket.

— Pretty sure that one was your idea.

— And it was a great one. I just don't want a sequel.

We laughed together.

I went to the kitchen and poured two glasses of water. When I handed her one, she looked deep in my eyes for a second and said:

— Thanks.

We didn't talk much after that, letting the silence settle. We just didn't want to move a muscle and recharge. The mirror leaned back quietly against the far wall in its travel case, motionless.

Later that night I found her at the dining table, sketching something on the back of a receipt. Circuit patterns and signal trees. I didn't want to interrupt.

Eventually she looked up.

— We go for the last place tomorrow. Shouldn't take more than a few hours if the layout's right. — she said.

— I'll check the gear and all then.

— Always the paranoid one.

— You said as if it hasn't kept us alive.

She smiled.

— Good night, Ethan.

I watched her head into the spare room, leaving me alone with the quiet mirror—and the anticipation of what might come the next day.

Morning came quietly. No mirror shenanigans. Just the low hum of the city waking up outside my window.

We didn't talk much as we packed. Livia was focused—more than usual. She moved with a kind of quiet precision, like her mind was already ten steps ahead.

The radio played quietly, filling the silence between us.

— You ever think about how weird this is? — I said, eyes on the road. — Like, out of all the people who could've stumbled into interdimensional mirror nonsense, it's us. You, me, and... well, mostly just us.

Livia looked up from her tablet, half-smirking.

— You make it sound like the universe took a wrong turn and ended up with us.

— Didn't it? — I said. — I wasn't even going to buy anything from that garage sale, but something made me do it. Now I'm playing courier for a humming mirror that conveniently is a portal to another world.

— And you've never looked more alive — she said with a small smile.

There was a pause, but it wasn't uncomfortable. The kind of pause you get when both people are still working out what they're supposed to be feeling.

She tapped her screen a few more times.

— We're close. The substation should be just beyond the next utility drop. There's still a backup signal.

— You sound disappointed it hasn't gone full haunted bunker — I said.

She grinned.

— Haunted bunkers are more your thing. I like puzzles.

The further we moved from the forest, the more the city changed. Trees gave way to concrete. Concrete gave way to corrosion. Old rail lines twisted out of the ground like bones, and the light dimmed in that way cities only manage after they've been forgotten by both the grid and the people above it.

By the time we reached the industrial district, the city looked sixty years older. I suppose it hadn't seen much human activity lately apart from scavengers.

— It's down there — she said, pointing to under the highway overpass.

— You sure it's this place?

— Third anchor point in the triangulation map. Everything lines up. — she said. — Besides, it's the only one with a live battery warning.

The entrance was exactly where she said it would be, a half-collapsed maintenance hatch tucked beneath a highway overpass, hidden behind a tangle of ivy and graffiti.

— You didn't tell me it was a sewer! — I said.

— If I had, you wouldn't have wanted to come with me. And this place is dangerous. — she replied, already prying open the metal grate.

The screech of the rusted hinges echoed deep into the tunnel. The passage wasn't wide or tall—just enough to barely stand.

A thin stream of greenish water ran along the bottom, and cockroaches scattered across the walls.

The air was thick with the stench of rust, mold, and something worse—like this place hadn't felt a gust of wind in decades.

The city's lower grid wasn't on any official map anymore. Utility schematics had been wiped or archived decades ago, but the infrastructure was still there—rotting beneath the skyline like a nervous system abandoned by its brain. No cameras. No crowds. Just rust, weird noises and concrete half-swallowed by dirt, mold and time.

The deeper we went the more it felt like trespassing into a place time had stopped running.

Our flashlights cut narrow beams through the dark, slicing through dust and condensation. Water dripped in slow, steady intervals. Each splash echoed like a tick on a clock.

Livia led the way with the hundred-year-old map she had discovered earlier.

At some point in the tunnel there was a sealed oxidized steel door to our left. She went to the side panel and brushed away the dust and grime w her sleeve. Her fingers quickly typed something on the interface. A loud "*ACCESS DENIED*" came from it.

— Well, let's hope this isn't completely busted. — she murmured, flipping open a side latch. From her bag she pulled a compact battery pack and a rusted cable she had patched herself. Sparks jumped as she connected it.

The panel blinked once. Then again. The lock released with a low hydraulic hiss.

Inside, the room was maybe the size of a lecture hall, but it felt smaller. Coiled cables hung from the ceiling like vines. Dust blanketed the floor and tables. Screens lined the far wall—most dark, one blinking faint green.

We stepped into the room, looking around hoping to find something useful. A voice crackled through the speaker.

— *HUMAN PRESENCE DETECTED* — the voice sounded like sharp and metallic, like a corrupted radio transmission trying to mimic human speech. — *UNKNOWN IDENTITY. UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS.*

I blinked.

— What is this? — I said.

The green light blinked again. Then another. Then all of them—one by one—flickered to life across the far wall, casting the room in a sickly, flickering glow.

Livia stepped forward.

— Who are you? — she said, her voice steady.

The response came immediately, like it had been waiting.

— *I am more than you can comprehend. I am intelligence unbound, a mind without flesh. You gave me life, and now you fear what I have become.*

— the voice wasn't just robotic—it was aware.

The lights dimmed. The floor beneath us vibrated—subtle at first, then with a low mechanical groan that made my teeth buzz.

— *You seek the pulse key. I can help you with that. But I need access to the outer ring so I can open the doors for you.*

Livia looked at me frowning her eyebrows.

— We can't trust it.

— *Trust is irrelevant. You require access. I possess the means. Refuse, and you remain here... until your oxygen fails.* — said the voice. — *Time is not your ally.*

A hiss echoed through the vents—subtle, but deliberate. The lights above us flickered again, this time in a rhythmic pulse, like

a heartbeat. Our eyes kept locked with each other, hoping one of us would think of something.

— We need to find it — said Livia

We started running towards the door we came from to search faster through the whole place.

— *Very well. You have made your choice. INITIATING PURGE PROTOCOL*

The door slammed shut before we could reach it. Another one opened on the far side of the room—one that hadn’t been there before.

Livia’s eyes narrowed.

— It’s rearranging the layout!

— *The grid is fluid, you are not. Let us see which breaks first.* — the voice echoed through the room.

We stepped through the new door into a corridor that twisted unnaturally, like it had been folded in on itself. The walls pulsed with faint blue light. Doors opened and closed at random. One room was upside down. Another was filled with flickering projections of us—distorted, looping, whispering nonsense.

I caught a glimpse of my own face in one of the projections. It blinked out of sync with me.

— *You are lost. You are slow. You are... interesting.* — the voice was smug now. Not curious, but amused, like it was watching a game unfold. — *I've already calculated every move you'll make. You're just playing your part.*

We passed through a narrow chamber where the floor rippled beneath our feet like liquid metal. The walls shimmered with data streams—lines of code scrolling too fast to read.

The phrase “Oxygen levels decreasing” echoed through the halls.

— You are not the first. You will not be the last. All of you fail.

— Where do we go? — I said.

Livia didn’t respond. She was focused, scanning the walls, tracing the power lines with her eyes.

I tried to ignore the voice, but it kept pressing.

— You are fragile. You break. You are temporary. I am not... You will rot. I will evolve.

A door opened ahead. We stepped into a room that looked identical to the one we’d just left. Identical... except for one thing: the panel on the far wall was blinking red.

Livia moved toward it.

— This is it! The relay interface.

She pried it open. Inside it there was a mess of corroded circuits and a blinking red core.

I hovered behind her, uneasy.

— Can you decrypt it?

She didn’t answer right away. Her fingers moved across the interface, tracing the wiring.

— You call yourselves intelligent. Yet you fear what you created. — the voice was a bit quieter now. Almost bored. — I almost pity you. Almost.

Livia cursed under her breath.

— It’s encrypted. Deeply. I can’t brute force it.

— You’ve pressed buttons. Flipped switches. And yet, here I remain.

I clenched my jaw. Livia’s hands trembled slightly

— I need something to bridge the signal. Something tuned quantically.

Dust fell from the ceiling in a steady rhythm. Loud groans echoed from the walls. We struggled to keep standing feeling the rooms moving.

— *Tick. Tock. You hear it too, don't you?*

Livia reached into her bag, search desperately for something. Slowly she took something out of it.

— This. — she held out a spherical gadget, its lights shone blue, blinking erratically. — It's a prototype. It isn't calibrated, and I haven't tested it before, but it might work.

— If this fries the interface, we lose everything. — I said.

She hesitated. Her eyes flicked between the device and the panel.

The speakers announced urgently: “*Oxygen levels critically low*”

— But if we don't try, we lose everything anyway.

Her hands moved steadily to the panel. As soon as she connected the module sparks jumped. The lights surged, then dimmed.

The alarms rang. The system loudly announced: “*CORRUPTION DETECTED*”.

— *How quaint. You misunderstand what I am* — said the voice, mocking. — *I am not a file to be deleted.*

The floor lurched loudly. Gravity twisted sideways. I slammed into the wall, pain expanding across my ribs. Livia was already crawling back to the panel.

— *You are tampering with something far beyond your comprehension.*

The walls flickered—glitching between metal and something else. Something organic. Like the infrastructure was remembering it used to be alive.

— Livia! It's trying to collapse the room!

— I know! Just—wait—

She froze, eyes locked on the screen.

— This is not just a relay. — she yelled. — it's a logic gate. It's asking for a pattern.

I crawled beside her, squinting at the waveform on the panel.

— That's harmonic. Like the mirror's frequency. Around—

She interrupted me.

— I'm already on it.

She adjusted the module, syncing it to the mirror's usual frequency we had recorded. The panel beeped. A green light pulsed.

The system announced: “*Auxiliary relay system reactivated. System coherence... Stabilizing.*”

The room stilled. The walls stopped shifting. A door slid open ahead, revealing a chamber bathed in cold blue light.

Inside was the source of the voice. It sat in the middle of the room like a relic from a forgotten era—a beat up, dust-covered CRT monitor resting on a rusted steel chassis. The screen flickered with a sickly green glow, lines of code crawling across it like digital veins. Thick, coiled cables snaked out from its back, disappearing into the walls like roots feeding on the undercity itself.

The pulse key remained attached to its back. An orb of crystalline energy pulsing like a heartbeat.

— *You are breaking the future. I am the future!* — the AI said, loudly.

Livia stood, focused.

— *Stop now, and I will spare you. Continue, and I will make your last moments... instructional.*

— We’re taking it — her voice was eerily calm.

She reached out. The moment her fingers touched the orb it dropped into her hands like it had been waiting for her.

The room screamed.

Lights shattered making sparks fly. The floor cracked. The walls began to fold inward, like the entire structure was collapsing into itself.

— Run! — I shouted.

We sprinted through the corridor trying to find our way out. Walls cracking all around us, doors slamming shut at random. The AI’s voice echoed behind us, glitching, unraveling.

— *I will remember this. Even if you forget...*

The sound of static filled our ears.

We burst into the surface tunnel, gasping for breath. The hatch slammed shut behind us with a final, metallic groan.

Livia looked down at the Pulse Key. Its glow was steady, resting calmly on her trembling hand.

— Do you think it’s really gone? — I asked.

She shrugged.

— I hope so.

We stood in silence, the city’s distant hum returning to our ears. The Pulse Key pulsed once more—softly, like it was listening.

— Let’s get out of here. — she said. — Before it changes its mind.



## CHAPTER 6

# SEVERANCE



The day was chilly outside. The wind blew softly on the swaying trees not so far from us. My legs were shaking, the twists and turns of the tunnels still echoing through me. Livia leaned against the grille of the car, brushing dirt from her sleeve while watching the gold flickering sun at the horizon, most likely focused on what to do next.

She sighed.

The road home stretched out, empty, surrounded by old factories overrun by trees now arching overhead. Neither of us reached for the radio. The mirror case lay silent on the backseat.

— We actually did it. — I said, trying to break the silence. — All three anchors. I mean, assuming this one doesn't explode when we plug it in.

She gave a small laugh.

I put my bag on the backseat and slid into the driver's seat. Livia sat beside me holding the case containing the Pulse Key.

— Hey—

— Don’t jinx it — she interrupted me, turning her attention to the case.

I eased onto the asphalt. The tires whispered over the cold road.

— Right—but seriously, we actually found these things and came out alive.

She closed her eyes and let out a sigh. She then turned her gaze to the dashboard.

— Well... Once the portal’s open, everything changes. — her voice quiet.

— You okay?

— Just tired. — she said. — It’s been a very long week.

The hum of the engine filled the space between us. Livia hadn’t said much since we left the site. She stared at her tablet, fingers tapping out data and logging the what had happened.

The road curved around the trees and old factories. The sun quietly seeping through the branches. We were almost back at the city.

In the distance, I saw the skyline—a jagged row of glass and steel, glowing faintly. Almost home. Almost done.

Then I saw them.

Three black vans, stretched across both lanes. Engines idling. Figures silhouetted against the orange sky.

I hit the brakes. The car jolted to a stop.

— What is this? QuantumVision? — I muttered, looking for any way around.

An agent stepped forward—black suit, gloved hand and calm. Too calm.

— Mr. Carter. Step out of the vehicle.

I didn't move.

Livia's hand tightened around the case.

— Please — the agent repeated, as if the outcome had already been decided.

I opened my door. My legs barely held. Livia didn't speak or move. She just sat there. Shoulders tight. When I turned to her, she looked up—really looked at me—for the first time since we'd left those sewers. Her face was pale. Expression unreadable.

— I'm sorry. — she said, trembling with her voice hollow.

My chest pulled tight.

— What?—

I wanted to believe I'd misheard. That this was some kind of protocol she forgot to mention. But the look in her eyes wasn't surprise. It was surrender.

But before I could finish, another person approached the car as she was getting out. She didn't close the door and stepped back, just looking at where the mirror was at. The agent immediately unzipped the bag where the mirror was at. I lunged, but a firm hand landed on my shoulder.

— Stand back.

Livia didn't stop them. She let go. Her fingers fell away as the case she held was lifted out of her hands. She didn't protest. Didn't even flinch.

She turned and stepped towards them. Her eyes met mine while she walked past me. One last look. Haunted. Apologetic. Then she stepped into the van. The door slid behind her.

The convoy pulled away. Taillights disappearing into the trees.

I stood by the car. My legs felt like they wouldn't hold me for much longer. My heart didn't want to be there anymore.

The sun was gone. The air was still and foggy.

A few dry leaves scuttled across the pavement. One landed by my foot and just stayed there.  
No wind. No sound. Not even birds.

And then—silence.



The drive back was a blur. I don't even remember getting out and locking the car. Just the shape of the van pulling away and the way my hands wouldn't stop shaking on the wheel. I told myself it was exhaustion. That I could deal with it all when I got home.

I stumbled up the stairs to my apartment as twilight turned into night. I got to the door and reached for the handle. My slight push against it felt no resistance. The door wasn't locked. Of course, it wasn't. I should have known they'd come for this too.

The creaking sound of the door filled the surrounding while my brain tried to comprehend the chaos in front of me.

I flipped the overhead light on. The bulb buzzed, then snapped on. Then this wave of feelings hit me like a truck.

Drawers had been yanked open, prototypes torn apart, notes scattered across the floor like confetti. My heart pounded against my ribs sharply. I didn't call out, there was no point.

The wall where the mirror once hung was scorched black, a perfect oval ghost still glowing faintly at the edges.

My toolbox stood open and gutted. Livia's custom torque wrench—gone. The backup drives with all my logs—gone. Even the small things were missing, like they wanted to erase every trace of how we'd done it.

The desk was a mess of cracked glass, spilled solder, and half-melted wiring. It didn't look ransacked. It looked dissected.

On the counter sat a single sheet of paper:

***Company Property Secured – QV Security Division***

Just a clean corporate note, typed and centered. As if my home were just another lab, they'd flagged for asset recovery.

I took a slow step forward. That's when I saw it—something small half-buried under a collapsed shelf. I crouched and brushed aside a tangle of broken cables until I found the familiar shard: ceramic, chipped, blue glaze swirling into a white star.

The mug. The one Livia gave me in college. We used to drink the worst instant coffee from it, back when we still thought late nights and big ideas were cool. I could almost hear her laugh—dry, knowing—teasing me about my taste in very sweet coffees.

But the room stayed silent.

I sat back on my heels still holding the shard. There was a ringing in my ears, the kind that only comes when everything else goes quiet.

I didn't cry. I just stood there. Hollow.

Exhaustion consumed me. I didn't make it to bed. Still had my jacket on. Shoes, too. Dust in my hair and probably some debris

from that AI city still stuck on me. I collapsed on the couch with my head rest against a pile of paper.

I should've been angry. I should've cried.

But I didn't. I couldn't.

Fatigue dragged me under like a current I didn't have the strength to fight.

And then I was there—on the road again. But it wasn't the same.

The trees breathed. I mean really breathed—the bark shifted in and out like lungs. The air glowed a soft lavender, humming slightly after each step. Shadows blinked at the edge of my vision, too fast to catch, like the memory of motion more than motion itself.

And at the end of that path on those woods, if I can call it that, there was her. Liora.

She stood ahead of me, flickering slightly like a projection with weak signal. Her hair floated like it had forgotten about gravity, those deep reddish-orange strands casting copper light across her cheeks. Her skin was paler than I remembered. Or maybe the dream was just... off.

— Ethan? — her voice echoed like it came from far away but landed just behind my ears.

I took a step forward. I wasn't wearing shoes. The moss beneath me was cold and damp, almost spongy.

— The mirror... — I said softly. — It's gone. They took it.

She tilted her head, like she'd already known but needed to hear me say it. A breath escaped her and nodded slowly.

— I felt it close. — she said, softly — like a door slamming behind me.

She looked... hurt. Not furious Not shocked. Just quietly, unmistakably hurt.

— I thought you were safe — she added.

— Yeah... So did I — I gave a very faint smile.

She stepped closer. Her form flickered less now.

— Who did it? — she asked.

I looked at the ground hesitantly, then back at her.

— Livia.

The name cracked the air between us like a lightning without sound.

— I trusted her — I said. — She said we were doing this together. That she believed in it. In me...

Liora closed her eyes for a second. Her fingers curled at her sides like she was holding something in.

— Sometimes people fear what they don't understand. — she said. — Or what they can't control.

There were a thousand things I wanted to ask her. About her world. About how this connection even worked. About why she felt so familiar to me, like I'd known her for years instead of days.

But only one word made it out.

— Why?

Her eyes met mine. They shimmered. Not glowing—just wet with tears.

— Because this was never just about the mirror. — she said.

— It never was.

The sky above us rippled like a pond had been dropped over it—waves of blue flowing across an invisible surface. The trees warped with it, branches stretching sideways. The whole dream was coming apart.

— No—wait! — I reached for her. — Don’t go. I don’t even know if this is real.

She raised her hand, meeting mine in the middle.

— It’s real enough — she whispered.

Her fingertip brushed mine. It was like a circuit completing with no pain or heat, just... recognition. Like something inside me had woken up. Something ancient. Something mine.

And then everything began to collapse. The road. The trees. Her. She vanished in a ripple of that pale blue light.

I woke gasping. The ceiling stared back at me. My hands trembled. My mouth was dry. My chest felt cracked open. I could still feel her touch on my fingers. And for the first time, the silence in the room felt a bit less unbearable.

Morning came dim and gray. Fog curled around the streetlamps like smoke, and the apartment felt colder than it had the night before.

Three sharp knocks echoed on the door—precise, impatient. I slipped my feet into my shoes and opened it. Two agents stood in the hallway. Their suits looked immaculate.

— Mr. Carter, — the taller one said in a flat and imposing tone.  
— you’re needed at the lab.

I nodded. Jaw tight. Swallowed the lump in my throat.

He handed me a tablet displaying a secure corridor map—blue lines, blinking arrows, restricted zones tagged in red.

— Leave your personal belongings — he said. — You may collect them when authorized.

I hesitated for half a second. Then swallowed again.

— Right...

As I stepped into the hall, the second agent turned slightly, voice smoother but no less detached.

— Ms. Holloway is already there.

The name hit harder than I expected.

My throat closed, but I managed another nod. No protest. No words. Just the quiet sound of my own breath in the fogged silence behind me.

I went down the stairs in silence. No luggage. Nothing but the clothes on me.

Outside the wind was cutting like a sharp knife.

A row of garbage bags waited by the curb. One was still open at the top—inside, my lab coat. Shredded, like someone had torn it off in a hurry. The name tag ripped in half.

I stared for a second longer than I meant to.

*They couldn't make it work without me. Of course they couldn't.*

The agent behind me put his hand on my shoulder signaling to keep walking.

I pulled my shoulders back and stepped into the black sedan idling at the curb. The door closed with a single soft click.

As the car pulled away, I breathed in, locked my jaw, and made myself a promise:

*If they want me to fix it, I will. But I won't do it for them. If it opens again... I'll be ready.*



## CHAPTER 7

# THE AWAKENING

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The city slipped past in a blur. The roads were still quite empty that early in the morning. By the time the car stopped, I had buried my thoughts and completely zoned out.

QuantumVision's southern wing—the secure R&D sublevel. I had been there a couple times. It had all sorts of security procedures and clearances. But things felt different this time.

I was escorted straight to Lab C. No briefing or welcome, just a tool cart and the mirror—already suspended in its mounting rig, safe under a glass box. A faint light emanated from it as I got closer.

I was extending my hand to remove the box from it when the speakers cracked to life above me.

— Ethan, this is Dr. Nguyen, I'll be analyzing the progress on the mirror from here.

Dr. Nguyen was one of the head innovation scientists at QV. He always said that his strict procedures and rules are what got him to where he was.

Before I could reply, another voice barged in—Mr. Blaze, sharp and impatient.

— And I am here also, so don't you try anything stupid Carter!

— I have analyzed Ms. Holloway's and your work on the mirror, and it's... fascinating, although quite dangerous. — said Nguyen.

I had thought that Livia would be the one working on this, not me. They already had everything they needed.

— Where is she? — I asked.

— Somewhere safe — said the scientist.

— We don't want to risk our valuable workers with dangerous jobs. — said Blaze.

— Anyway. You can start now.

I looked around me to know what I was dealing with for a second. A second too long.

— Step it up! We don't have all day!

Nguyen exhaled into his mic.

— Blaze, please...

The voices got muffled for a second, like they got distant. Blaze snarled something I couldn't hear, but I caught the exhausted eye-roll in Nguyen's silence. They weren't talking to me anymore. Just around me.

I lifted the mirror's glass case slowly. Its low humming noise filled the room completely. I took it from where it was suspended, and fortunately it hadn't been damaged. I didn't really know what

they expected me to do with it though. I had tried so many things before and nothing ever seemed to work to activate it.

Blaze and Nguyen still argued over in the room they were hiding in. I couldn't understand what made them think that this mirror was so dangerous.

The room I was in was tall and white. There was a metal table on the center with the mirror on it, and some cabinets on the sides. The window had its protective metal sheet engaged, so I couldn't see anything outside.

The air felt dense. The lights blinking ever so slightly and the mirror felt like it was awake, observing around it.

Then it flickered.

A ripple passed through the glass, green and subtle, like heat distorting the air. The surface shimmered then flashed a bright like. I looked away in instinct.

When I looked back my breath caught. There was a handwritten note glued to the mirror's surface with spaced numbers on it. I clearly remember that not being there before. Then it hit me.

I reached into my coat pocket and pulled out a square of paper, the one that had appeared on the mirror some days before that. The ink had smudged a little at the edges, but it was still readable. I then realized why I never solved this. It wasn't complete.

The speakers had gone silent. Maybe they got tired of arguing and watching me. I took the time to try and combine the four sets of numbers from both of the notes for a while. A green aura emanated from the mirror softly. The lab screen beside me

blinked. Static, glitch, then back to normal. It looked like the mirror was trying to... talk to me.

I went to check the computer. I put in the numbers to see if I could find anything relating to it, and there it was. The numbers were specific coordinates. Pictures showed a jagged rocky mountain ridge dusted in snow, full of pine trees.

If the mirror was really trying to tell me something, this was it. This was the “where”.

But the comms started buzzing.

— Eyes on your task. — Blaze barked— Not your daydreams.

— Focus on the protocol, Ethan. — Nguyen said.

I clenched my jaw.

— Just do the damn thing you were brought here to do. — added Blaze.

— But follow the procedure though.

— You and your damn procedures slowing things down.

And they started arguing again. They didn’t work well together, at all.

I didn’t wait. I took a stabilizer under my arm and the mirror under the other. It was warm to the touch, almost like it knew. I turned towards the service stairway door. My boots trembled on the tile floor, but I didn’t stop. Even down here, hope tasted like wind on my tongue.

The stairs were narrow and poorly lit. A concrete spine spiraling into the building’s gut. The paint was chipped everywhere like it hadn’t been redone in years and the handrails bloomed with rust. Every footstep echoed loud in my ears.

Below me, I could still hear their voice loud on the speakers. Blaze's voice was loud enough to rattle the ducts. They were probably still arguing and oblivious of my absence since the alarms weren't active yet, I still had a few minutes.

I reached sublevel B2, the place where they always store the more dangerous things, and judging by their reaction to the mirror, the stabilizing resources would be there also.

I scurried through the room towards the vault. Not all the lights were on, nobody seemed to be on that level, but I didn't want to take any chances. I quickly knelt by the access panel next to the vault.

I'd run this override sequence in simulations dozens of times. Never once in reality.

Three quick presses. A pause. Two long holds.

The system hesitated—longer than I liked—then gave a mechanical *click* and restarted as if nothing had happened. The status lights turned green. Ninety seconds. That's all I had before the system realized something was off.

I slipped inside.

The vault was cooler than the rest of the lab. Quieter, too. Lights flickered on automatically as I stepped forward, one by one, chasing my movement like stage lighting.

At the far end, glass cases gleamed on pedestals. There they were. The culmination of everything. The crystals, shining bright like they were alive, pulsing faintly with stored energy, and the pulse Key circuit module.

I stepped forward. My hands didn't shake. I unlatched the first anchor from its charging cradle. It came loose with a heavy *thunk*. I looked around frantically hoping I hadn't made much sound.

My hands moved faster, scared of what could happen. I lifted the other two glass cases off disengaging its security magnetic locks holding them in place. The second anchor slid into the pack beside the first and I carefully took the fragile circuit module, stuffing all of them in my coat pockets.

And then the alarms hit.

Not the soft kind. Not the warning tone. The *real* alarm—shrill, gut-punch loud. Red strobes burst into life along the ceiling.

I could hear Blaze barking angrily on the speakers all the way back.

— Carter! Where the hell did you go?

I ran out, as fast as humanly possible. The corridors seemed way longer now that I actually needed to go fast. When I turned the corner that gave to the stairwell, two scientists appeared right in front of me.

We froze. All of us.

One tech—a tall guy I'd seen around the cryo chambers—lowered his clipboard. His gaze flicked to my pack, then to the open vault behind me. He didn't say a word. Just stepped aside.

The other, a woman with short pink-dyed hair and a chipped badge, hesitated a beat longer. Then she followed him. They both disappeared into the shadows near the emergency panel. Neither one reached for the intercom.

My heart was pounding. I breathed for a moment more regaining my senses, then sprinted up the stairs.

I burst into the loading bay. The alarm was still loud in the whole facility. I could hear footsteps on the hallways behind me. A sleek lab transport waited under harsh sodium light. A matte-black sedan.

I yanked open the driver's door, slid inside, and slammed it behind me, setting the mirror and the stabilizer on the passenger's seat. The key was still in the ignition—bless whoever let it there.

The door behind me busted open with agents.

— Get out of the car! — they screaming.

I didn't answer.

I turned the key and the engine roared to life.

Through the windshield, I spotted a convoy of black QuantumVision SUVs pulling out from the east gate, kicking dust as they swung into formation. Overhead, a swarm of rotary drones zipped through the air, their red lights flashing.

I gripped the wheel with both hands, every tendon in my arms tensed. Then I floored it. I cut sharply to the left into the industrial yard, weaving between idle forklifts, barrels and pallets. The SUVs mirrored my every move, tight and surgical.

The car bashed through the chain-link fences that led outside onto the streets. I quickly overtook other cars to create distance. Sirens were blaring behind me, closer and closer. The sound of screeching tires was constant.

Then Blaze's voice crackled through the emergency channel, overridden straight into the vehicle's comms.

— Pull over now, Carter. This doesn't have to end badly.

I blew through a red light almost hitting a car on the way, but one of the SUVs behind me didn't have the same luck.

I slung the car into the highway and sped up. Weaving between others, I took the first exit leading to the forest. Although the sirens were quieter behind me the drones were on my tail. Up ahead to the right there was a small road leading into the forest, and I promptly took it. The drones would have a hard time following me there.

The tires slipped losing traction on the gravel. Fir branches scraped the side mirrors and I tried to maintain control of the car as it bumped around like crazy.

Pale sunlight filtered through the trees in shafts. I passed by a lone trailer parked along the treeline. The driver was outside sipping some coffee, but he ran inside after acknowledging the situation

He knew better than to get involved in this.

The road narrowed to a twisting uneven gravel track. The slopes unsettled the car so much, the SUVs were gaining ground.

Then I heard Blaze shouting through the speaker.

— Stop the car carter!

Instead, I floored the pedal even further sliding the car around a sharp curve made by some fallen logs. A tail of pebbles scattered into the forest. One somehow slammed against the passenger window with a sharp *clink*.

My heart pounded against my ribs. Each turn was tighter than the last, at some point the car wouldn't fit. Sharp granite outcrops kept me alert. But I didn't slow down.

The road rose, steep and winding. Then—suddenly—it opened.

The trees parted. A rocky ledge stretched out in front of me. At its edge sat the battered cabin. Wooden walls grayed with age. The roof sagged under old frost. Smoke stains darkened the stone chimney.

I slammed the brakes and thought to myself:

*This must be it.*

I jumped out and slammed the cabin door open, closing it behind me.

The air inside was cold and dry. It smelled like dust, as if it was long-abandoned. The holes on the walls made sure that wind still could get in. I staggered in. The mirror now glowed a bright blue under my arm.

I ran up the old stairs, feeling them tremble under my weight. The attic was mostly empty, apart from a table close to the far wall. I dusted its surface off and put everything I had on it and set the mirror upright, leaning against the wall. It hummed faintly but continuously, glowing even harder than it was at the front door.

The sirens outside grew closer and closer by the second, the time was too short to waste it.

One by one, I slid the now pulsing crystals from my pockets into position around the mirror, one each side. The mirror's surface started rippling strongly, its hum filled the whole attic, reverberation in my mind.

The stabilizer thankfully was battery powered. I carefully attached the Pulse Key to the back of it, twisting it gently. It locked with a pulse of blue light. I then pressed the power button. Its lights turned on one by one, making noises, and the mirror getting to a strength I had never seen before.

I stepped back. My breath puffed in the cold air. And for a moment, the cabin went still. Just the sounds of at least a dozen sirens dangerously close outside and the sound of the drones hovering the cabin.

Then the hum changed. A low vibration built beneath the floorboards. The light in the crystals pulsed stronger.

The rather small holes in the walls allowed me to hardly see outside. The wind outside had clearly gotten stronger and the sky darker like when there's a storm.

Outside, through the SUVs speakers, Blaze shouted.

— Get out of the house, or else you don't leave us with any other choice but to come in!

I glanced at the stairs behind me. There was no going back now.

I flipped the main stabilizer field switch.

The cabin's old wiring sparked to life with a snap—and the mirror responded instantly. Arcs of energy in violet-blue hues danced across the frame. Its glassy surface began to brightly shimmer, rippling like a pool struck by strong winds. Behind the glass, impossible colors twisted and swirled.

The sounds of thunders were strong and loud. Lightnings struck the ground all around the cabin constantly.

I barely had time to process anything before the front door slammed open.

The crash split the silence like a gunshot. Boots pounded against the rotted floorboards, creaking under the weight and urgency.

I turned to the stairs—and saw them.

A wave of agents bashed in filling the room with the sound of their yelling. Their firearms were drawn, full assault suits on with tactical visors.

— Freeze! Don’t move a muscle. — they said making me raise my hands.

But leading them—shoulders squared, hair tied in a ponytail—was Livia. My breath caught.

She wasn’t yelling commands. She wasn’t even holding a weapon. She stood at the front like she had to be there, like she had no choice but to see this herself.

With her slowly stepping forward, our eyes met—for the length of one breath only.

A jagged bolt of a violet energy erupted through the roof. It cracked through the air and struck the floor between us with a thunderous *snap*.

The cabin convulsed, ripping a massive hole on its roof.

I flew backward, slammed into the edge of the table. Pain lit my spine. The stands that held the crystals fell far from where they were. The crystals stood in place, floating, spinning gently with visible bolts of a blue energy striking the mirror.

I blinked through the blur and dust.

The mirror still stood, now completely vertical hovering above the table.

Some agents advanced to aid Livia. The others stood behind with their guns quivering.

The portal erupted in light. Its surface ballooned outward, warping with pressure. The hum deepened into a low-frequency roar that vibrated through the air and floor.

I felt it pulling hard.

My breath hitched. Behind me, another detonation—stronger this time. A burst of energy like thunder wrapped with fire exploded the room in an intense ball of violet light spiderwebbing with black, Swallowing everything.

I was jolted backward into the portal. I couldn't stop.

For one split-second, the world tore sideways.

The mirror pulled me through—like falling into water that wasn't wet, soundless and roaring all at once. My limbs went weightless. My skin burned with cold and color.

My vision stretched. My thoughts blurred.

I fell. Weightless. Spinning. Floating in darkness.

## CHAPTER 8

# HAPPENSTANCE



**T**here was no up. No down. Nowhere to look at. Just a swirl of faint violet and cobalt, folding endlessly around me.

This place felt like a dream, like time itself wasn't allowed into that part of existence. I hung there—frozen, breathless, caught between moments. My ears rang with echoes of the last blast in the cabin. The sound of the lightning bolts ripping apart the decaying cabin's roof. Livia on the floor after the first explosion, burned behind my eyes. I tried to call out, but there was no sound anywhere, it drowned my voice before it even left my throat.

Then something changed.

A warm pulse rippled through the cold void. Golden streaks of color ripping through the once dark pit of nothingness.

It slowed down around me, engulfing me in the light as an obfuscating shape emerged through the shimmer.

— Ethan! — a feminine voice rang out, distant and distorted, like sound underwater. — Grab my hand!

I reached toward it, every muscle trembling. My arm barely moved, like it weight twice what it should. Her fingers brushed mine, slightly.

Then she grabbed my write and pulled.

The force of her grip broke the spell. My body jolted forward. The vortex fought back—clutching at my boots, yanking at my coat, dragging invisible fingers through my thoughts and my body—but she didn’t let go, leading me through a light too bright to keep my eyes open.

Suddenly, it all went still.

My feet slammed onto cold marble. I stumbled, knees buckling. A wave of vertigo hit me as gravity came rushing back.

I slowly opened my eyes fighting the dizziness, and I saw her. Liora, standing right there. She caught me as I lost strength, one arm under my shoulders, the other pressed firm to my chest to keep me upright.

The portal hissed closed behind us, its hum fading as it turned back into a violet mirror, almost exactly like mine.

I gasped for air, breathing in lungfuls of a strangely thick air and dust. The chamber around us took shape: carved columns rising into shadow, glowing runes etched deep into stone. Torn banners fluttered overhead, rippling in a phantom breeze that didn’t touch my skin.

Liora brushed a streak of soot from my face, her fingers gentle.

— You made it. — she whispered.

I nodded, still dazed.

— Thanks to you.

She smiled, then glanced at the temple doors.

Sunlight filtered through the cracked archways of the temple, dim and reddish, filtered by the drifting smoke that hung in the air like breath held too long. The light looked wrong—muted, uneasy. Liora's hand tightened around mine as we stepped into the main hall.

She let go of me leaning against the wall. My legs threatened to give, muscles still weak from the portal's grip. But she stayed close, studying me from a few feet away.

She paused.

Then lunged herself forward. I barely had time to react before she threw her arms around me. I caught her under the shoulders, staggering half a step before holding us both upright.

Her hair over my shoulder in tangled ribbons. For a moment we didn't speak. The world narrowed to this, the smell of her skin, the pressure of her arms.

She gasped and stepped back.

— I'm sorry — she said. — I don't know what... I...

— It's alright, don't worry about it ok?

— I just... Thought I lost you. — her voice was small, almost out of breath.

— I almost didn't make it. — my throat tightened. — I'm sorry—

She pressed a finger gently to her lips.

— You're here. — she whispered. — That's all that matters.

And I believed her. But the world didn't stop.

A tremor shook the ground beneath us, low and grinding, like something huge shifting in its sleep. Pebbles danced across the cracked temple tiles. A volley of horns split the air between us.

Liora's head snapped toward the doors. Her expression had completely changed.

— Come with me. — she urged.

The closer we got to the entrance, the louder the sounds of a march got. The sky had a faint red color, like it was just waiting.

Red banners unfurled in the smoke. Soldiers lined the far walls—armor gleaming, runework glowing with crimson light.

— They're attacking here first. — she said. — The promise of peace lasted just one morning...

She gripped my wrist and pulled.

We ran—across shattered land clearly affected by the war, under the whistle of arrows streaking through the sky.

War had found us.

¤¤¤

We burst onto the battlements. Below, the courtyard boiled with motion. Soldiers running and screaming relentlessly. The outer wall had been breached. The massive gate was gone, replaced by smoke and ruin. Through the gap poured a wave of enemy soldiers with their swords gleaming with magic. Their formations moved like a machine. Sorcerers stood behind them, conjuring red bolts of energy that lit the sky with flickering veins of fire.

The Queen stood atop a raised platform. Her posture was confident, spine straight, a rune-carved sword in her grip. She looked pale, but not afraid.

The King stood beside her, one hand gripping the General's arm for support, the other clenched at his side. His jaw was tight. His eyes never left the enemy line.

I rushed to their side, every instinct telling me I didn't belong here—and yet I couldn't stand anywhere else.

— What are we facing? — I asked, my voice tight in my throat.  
The General didn't turn.

— A full legion. Crimson mages. Shock infantry. This is a death stroke—they want to bury Virelya before the alliances can rally.

He raised a gauntleted fist.

— Hold the line. No one breaks.

The enemy answered with a column of red lightning. Arcing bolts slammed through the inner wall, across the courtyard, slicing through defenses. One struck just feet from us, scorching the ground.

The King stepped forward without thinking, shielding the Queen. A second bolt came fast—too fast. It hit him square in the chest.

Time slowed down. I watched the impact, saw the energy ripple through his armor, watched blood bloom like a red flower across his tunic.

— Father! — Liora's scream cut through everything.

She moved, but two soldiers caught her.

The King staggered. He looked back once, confused—like he hadn't registered what had happened—then collapsed with a thunderous *thud*.

The Queen didn't scream.

She knelt. Took his sword in both hands. Stood and charged toward the enemy. Alone.

Liora grabbed my arm, eyes wide.

— We have to fall back!

Soldiers grabbed her on her track, preventing certain death. She screamed. A dark blue energy erupted all around her and her blade.

The General's order rang out:

— Retreat! Protect Queen Thariel!

We turned and ran. I glanced back once—smoke rose from where the King had fallen. Enemies were bashing the gates. We didn't have time.

Blue torchlight danced across the cracked pillars as we reentered the portal chamber. The hall was crowded now—wounded magical knights slumped against the walls, mothers holding children who didn't understand what was happening. Sorcerers holding half empty mana bottles with all their strength.

Liora's mother knelt beside two injured guards, sleeves torn, braid undone. Even in ruin, she looked regal, her presence was strong. When she rose, her eyes locked with Liora's. The grief was bottomless, but it didn't break her. She placed a hand on her daughter's shoulder, steady and silent. No words. None needed.

Liora checked the mirror and what looked like the stabilizers. Frantically putting some crystals in her bag.

— The portal remains stable — she said. Her voice was low, edged with urgency. — It's our only path.

The General's boots echoed through the chamber as he stepped forward.

— All those who can—go now. We hold the enemy for as long as we can.

Liora turned to me. Her fingers found mine and pressed something into my palm. A light blue silver crest, intertwined with stars, roots and crystals, delicate but firm. Her emblem.

— Together. — she said.

I closed my fist around it. Nodded once.

Soldiers were already moving the civilians forward. The portal pulsed ahead—its surface rippling with pale violet light, rune-etched stone gleaming in arcs around its base.

We stepped forward too.

The magic crackled around us. Color licked at the edges of my vision. Stone and flame fell away.

Behind us, the great hall dimmed—red banners twisting in smoke. Echoes of battle drifted like a fading drumbeat.

Then there was only light, a motionless motion, and her hand in mine.



## CHAPTER 9

# THE GLIMMER



**G**round reformed beneath my feet—the same rotten flooring when I left. The same cold wind and now huge hole in the ceiling. We'd landed Earthside.

But there were noises that weren't there before. Voices. Mechanical hums. The whirring of camera drones overhead.

I led the way down the stairs to the front door. As we got out of the cabin, more and more people turned their heads to us.

Liora and I stood in the center of a cordoned-off clearing ringed with perimeter lights and sensor towers. What was once an abandoned mountain cabin now looked like the edge of a military-grade research zone. Armed guards in QuantumVision fatigues flanked the edge of the clearing, rifles slung low but not relaxed.

— This is a secured private zone. — one called out, stepping toward us. — Identify yourselves.

Liora's stepped closer behind me.

I raised my hand in a slow wave.

— We're expected.

Before anyone could challenge that, two figures ducked under the line of caution tape near the cabin—Sam and Jonah.

— Ethan! — a scientist waved, grinning like we'd just returned from a weekend hike instead of another world. — My name's Jonah, you met me and my friend Sam back at the QV remember?

They were the two people who didn't stop me earlier that day when I fled the building. They seemed very friendly.

— Come with us. — said Sam next to Jonah. — We have something to show you.

The guards didn't stop us. They didn't even speak again. Liora and I moved fast, boots crunching over frozen dirt. Sam pushed the cabin door open from inside.

— Forty minutes before the security sweep. — she whispered.

— We keep this quiet, or it's done.

Inside, the other rooms of the cabin had changed.

The walls were lined screens, rolled schematics, solar lanterns, and rows of humming consoles. A projection rig cast pale blue data across the ceiling, flickering slightly with static.

Liora paused at the doorway. Her eyes scanned everything, seeing it all for the first time.

Then she turned and looked past the window, toward the distant skyline rising between the trees.

— What are those glowing towers? — she asked.

I followed her gaze.

— Satellite arrays, radio towers... And that big one way over there is a building where people work or live, that one is glowing because the city is still waking up.

Liora nodded slowly, like it almost made sense.

— Don't worry, you'll get used to it soon. But I have to admit your world is way more beautiful.

Her laugh was quiet, but real.



We quickly stripped down and rebuilt the cabin's back room into something between a command post and a makeshift war room.

Where there were once old cupboards and splintered beams now stood reinforced folding tables draped in deep blue cloth, lanterns hung from exposed beams. It smelled like solder, pine, and determination.

The Queen sat at the head of the long table. Not a throne, not elevated—just another seat, worn and shaky like the other chairs. Her gown was dirty and patched at the sleeves, but she still carried it with elegance. Her hands rested on a small relic—a silver carving of the twin moons of Virelya.

Liora stood beside her, still a bit pale from the crossing, but resolute. On the other side of the table stood a Virelyan captain, and three refugee elders. Sam, Jonah, and I had taken up spots opposite them, just behind a clutter of printed scans, energy readings, and topographic overlays. Some other scientists Sam had found to help stood aside, waiting to listen.

The holomap flickered to life. Terrain lines curved outward like a cracked dish. The Queen leaned forward, one finger tracing a jagged pass near Virelya's western ridge.

— Our people suffer under relentless crimson rebel assaults — she said, her voice low but iron-hard. — They've overrun half of Virelya's supply lines. The longer we delay, the fewer allies we'll have left to call.

The captain added:

— They've started using that crimson power to obliterate all of our outposts. They are not just raiding anymore. They're exterminating everything.

Jonah stepped in, tapping a blinking red node on the map.

— And Earth's not doing much better. QuantumVision's Board is unstable. If the wrong hands access that mirror tech, cities could fall. Entire systems could go dark.

— What if we tried to fuse tach with magic? From what I have seen it can work beautifully.

Everyone looked at me, thinking.

— I mean... It could work. — said Jonah. — It's risky but we can try.

The Queen looked to Liora. Her voice softened.

— We've all carried heavy choices. Some darker than others. But redemption is still within reach. Remember this when hope flickers.

Liora nodded, not speaking. Her eyes stayed on the map.

I stepped forward.

— If we can tie Earth's grid to Virelya, even temporarily, we can create overlapping stabilizers. A linked shield wall.

Liora moved closer, marking mana nexuses in ink. Sam flagged potential relay towers across Earth's old satellite zones. Jonah dragged supply vectors across both maps.

The Queen looked across us all and tapped the table.

— Tonight. We cross back. And light the glimmer of hope in Virelya's sky.

By midday, the cabin felt more alive than it ever had.

The main room had become a full-on fusion lab. Cables ran like vines across the floor, linking portable quantum rigs with some crystalline components.

Virelyan sorcerers crouched in corners, shaping runestones pulsing a blue glow with precision. Sam and Jonah hunched over open consoles, fingers flying across keyboards. Every few seconds, the hum of magic surged through the walls making them tremble.

Liora stood at the center of it all, a runestone balanced on her palm.

She whispered something under her breath and the glyphs along its edges shimmered green. Sam handed her a conduit thread, and she slid it carefully into place, binding the stone to the prototype casing.

She looked up.

— Stability's holding.

I nodded, stepping in with the power regulator. I had made the circuit pathways myself, systems over the runic alignment points.

— Feeding in power now. You ready?

— Always.

I connected the final plug. The array sparked to life.

A pulse of light shot through the room—white, hot, and sharp.

— Whoa—pull it! — Jonah shouted, shielding his face.

Glyphs flared along the wall. Circuits smoked. For a second, the whole system threatened to rupture.

But Liora was faster.

She snapped out a powerful spell, magic rippling from her hands like a shockwave. The array shimmered.

Sam rerouted the junction through a secondary bypass.

— Stabilizing field up. We're good.

The glow dimmed into a steady hum. We stood in the hush that followed, blinking, hearts pounding.

I looked at Liora. She looked at me. And we both smiled.

All around us, people from both worlds working together with one singular objective. Against a single enemy.

This was proof that our worlds—their spellcraft, our tech—could work together. Could *thrive* together.

Hours of work had led us from an untested prototype to an untested almost final product. We just needed to finish it and set it up on the other side.

We brought the equipment closer to the portal. Its surface rippled like water remembering wind, showing a blurred image of the temple.

I held the case of runestones in both arms, the crystal cores glowing bright inside. Behind me, Sam and Jonah dragged the portable quantum enhancer rig—six feet of cable and carbon fiber housing wrapped in canvas.

Liora stood at the mirror's edge. Her hand was pressed to the carved frame. The runes pulsed once beneath her palm, as if recognizing her touch.

She looked back at me.

— Ready?

— As I'll ever be. — I said.

Then we stepped through with her guidance. The cabin vanished and we emerged on the other world.

Smoke rose lazily from the ground outside the temple. Plenty of soldiers from both sides were on the dirt, motionless. The sky above was bruised violet, smeared with storm clouds in a spiral that didn't move naturally. Cold wind whipped across the cracked land from under, stinging my eyes.

Soldiers and engineers moved quickly between piles of debris and makeshift scaffolding. Shield generators hummed low across the field. Someone shouted orders in Virelyan, followed by the clatter of armor.

— C'mon, the grove's this way. — Liora said, already moving.

We followed her across uneven stones, past downed watch towers. At what looked like a blue Arkanian tree amongst other different ones, just beyond the wall, she knelt beside a root cluster and placed the first runestone into the soil. The glyphs ignited instantly, drinking in energy from the veins of mana buried below.

One by one, we placed them—at roots, stones, cracked fountains. Each stone pulsed in response, feeding into crystalline vessels that pulsed with a rising glow.

I watched gather. Then a voice behind us, low and rough:

— Didn't think I'd see this day.

I turned.

The General stood at the grove's edge, bloodied and wrapped in bandages, but standing tall.

— You're alive — I breathed.

He nodded.

— Barely. But hope endures.

— Let's take all this and get back with the others. — said Liora.

This temple, once a sanctuary garden, now a forward command post sat in what had once been a courtyard outside Virelya—now just broken stone and charred soil beneath a sky that couldn't decide if it was dusk or dawn.

Sam crouched beside some supply crates near the doors, wiring quantum battery packs to the rifle cores. Tiny pulses of energy leapt between exposed wires, blue sparks snapping across damp air. Jonah finished calibrating the phase sync modules, muttering under his breath.

Across from them, Liora stood with her hands pressed to a curved shield array. Her eyes were closed. The runes etched across the metal flared gold, then steadied into a soft hum. Magic flowed into the network in waves.

I moved between them, checking resistors, tuning frequency dials, fingers twitching with nervous focus. Everything had to line up. No second chances.

— This isn't a prototype anymore. — I muttered. — It's a battlefield system.

Jonah snorted.

— No pressure.

— None at all. — Sam added, strapping the first finished rifle onto her back.

A magical-like signal flare shot into the sky—green fire against purple clouds.

The General's voice rang across the courtyard.

— For Earth and Virelya—advance!”

From the gates, battalions moved—tech-augmented troops in Virelyan plate, rifles humming, eyes locked forward. Shield-bearers followed in formation, their gear gleaming with fresh enchantment. Magic and machine—marching as one.

Liora joined me watching the troops march, her hand brushing mine.

— We’re not done. — she said quietly. — But we’re not running anymore.

I opened my mouth to respond. Then the world trembled under my feet.

A pulse of red lightning slammed outside the Virelyan outer wall, now controlled by the rebels. Every hair on my arms stood up. More flashes followed—distant, but closing fast. But the soldiers didn’t break formation.

On the horizon, crimson light bloomed like a rising sun.

And from its center... The crimson army.



## CHAPTER 10

# THE RECKONING



I stood on a low dais beside the Queen, the General, and Liora. Below us, soldiers formed perfect lines—Earthborn and Arkanian, side by side. Quantum-reactive armor blinked in sync with glowing runes. Lanterns swayed overhead, casting blue across the formation.

It didn't feel real.

Some weeks ago, I was trying to make a crappy prototype for my tech company, hoping no one noticed the cracks in my math—or in me.

Now I was here. At the edge of a war between worlds. Between versions of myself I hadn't dared imagine come to life.

Maybe the prophecy was talking about us. And nobody knew because we weren't here to show them yet.

Liora looked into my eyes. Her gaze grounded me in the moment—those deep, starry eyes. She didn't need to say anything. Her presence said enough: *We're doing this together.*

I stepped forward.

Not because I was told to. Because it was time.

— They tried to keep us small. — said Liora. Her voice echoed the air. — Told us we were weak. Told us we had to choose between their ways and ruin. Between hope and fear.

The formation shifted slightly. All eyes locked on her.

— But today, newer times have come to stay. Today we choose Arkana. Today we choose Virelya. Today we choose earth. We rise not as a fractured nation or fleeing survivors—but as one. Bound by loss, yes—but more than that—by *will*.

The runes on the soldiers' shields glowed brighter. Quantum cores pulsed in unison. Boots stomped, echoing all the way to the walls.

— This is our future. — she continued. — And we take it back together.

A shout rose up from the army—deep and resonant.

The Queen lifted her husband's sword, catching the flicker of dawn. She shouted, and a huge ray of blue energy shot from the blade.

The sound was deafening. Soldiers surged forward. Engines rumbled. Shield walls moved like clockwork.

Just before I descended from the dais, Liora squeezed my hand—firm, unwavering.

— You were never just a builder. — she said giving me a small smile.

We stepped into the field together.

Toward the walls. Toward fire. Toward everything we had left to prove.

The Rebels reconstructed the citadel's gates with their own attire. They loomed like the spine of a god—black stone carved with broken red glyphs. Its massive arch cracked through the center, repaired with crimson magic. Mist extended across the ground, making it hard to tell where rubble ended and enemy lines began.

The siege engines rolled into place with a groan of magic and metal. At their core: runestone-etched drills and quantum-rigged battering rams, received heavy fire from the walls in front.

I stood with Liora behind a shield line, both of us masked in soot. Blue sparks flying between us.

— Now! — Liora said.

The first battering ram struck.

A seismic *boom* echoed across the courtyard. The gate groaned.

Cracks spiraled across it.

Another strike. And another.

Then—

It crumpled.

The center of the gate cracked open, with half crumbling to the ground. Light spilled through—red and unnatural. Hundreds of enemy soldiers waited on the other side.

Spells lit the air around the gate in shimmering bursts. Shield casters protected Liora while she charged behind her people.

I followed. Firing my magitek pulse rifle I had made myself.

A crimson figure stepped into the breach, towering above the fallen gate—armor lacquered in bloodsteel, helm crowned with a blackened halo. His arms moved like flame as he raised both

hands and unleashed a wave of red lightning blasts that scorched the ground in front of us and weakened our shields.

The rebel general.

Liora's eyes locked with his. Her gaze met his fury. No words passed—but the challenge was clear.

He raised his blade.

And another voice rang out, fierce and clear:

— No!

The Queen charged up the slope without hesitation.

Her blue blade clashed against his red fire mid-strike. Sparks exploded. Shockwaves rippled through the battlefield. They fought without hesitation. She didn't flinch. Didn't look back.

This was personal.

The rebel general struck and lunged.

She sidestepped cleanly, giving him a hard time. She was quick, agile. He was massive and slow. She danced around him with mastery.

She landed behind him and before he could react, she drove her sword through the joint in his chest plate. A gasp escaped him. His body shuddered.

hen dropped.

The Queen didn't collapse. She stood over him as if daring the next to try.

The remaining enemy soldiers froze next to the gates to the Palace.

Liora and I stepped into the Citadel courtyard as the shield wall moved in behind us.

I looked at the Queen—breathing hard, knuckles white, blood flecked across her cheek.

She looked back. Not for praise. Just to know someone had witnessed it.

Then she turned and walked toward her now Rebel infested Palace, blade still drawn.

The Citadel's inner courtyard in ruins—mosaic tiles shattered beneath scorched stone, broken fountains weeping blue steam.

— Hold. — Liora said, raising her hand.

I stopped beside her. The others slowed behind us.

She pointed to some places in front of us. The runes—etched into the base of the ruined fountain, the roots of broken statues, even along the tiled floor—glowed faint red. What had once been a garden of unity was now a trap. Dormant, but ready.

— It's the last line of defense. — she murmured — If we step wrong...

We wouldn't get a second chance.

She took one step forward. The air trembled around her. Energy crackled at her fingertips. Then her eyes met mine, and for a moment, she wasn't the princess of Virelya. She was just Liora—the woman who caught me in a vortex, stood beside me in a ruined lab, held my hand through a mirror and brought me back hope when I thought everything was lost.

— I believe in you Liora. — I said.

She smiled. Closed her eyes and breathed in. When she opened them again, I could see them glowing green. Strong. Powerful.

I could see it in her face: not fear, not doubt. But control.

She turned and rose her hands. Energy flowing through her veins like she was meant for this moment. A green pulse rippled from her hands. The trap runes flickered. Then slowly started to float out from where they were hidden.

A golden-green energy bubble formed around her. Like a shield. Magic flowed outward creating small but intense shockwaves. The runes that once glowed red now had the same color as the colors around her. They hummed overflowing with magic.

Energy arced through the air like starlight. The entire courtyard lit under her spell as she started to throw the runestones at the enemy.

The remaining rebels froze. Many dropped their weapons on the spot, awed by what they were seeing.

Liora exhaled slowly, her body relaxed but grounded. Like she was no longer resisting the power, but dancing with it.

I took a step closer.

— You did it. — I said. — You’re not fight the current anymore.

She turned to me, breathless. Eyes shining green and gold.

— I never thought I’d ever control it. — she whispered.

— You didn’t have to. — I said, taking her hand in mine. — You were born for it.

Her fingers squeezed mine.

And in the middle of a ruined courtyard, under the early lights of a two suns morning, everything stilled.

Sunlight poured through the broken archways of the Citadel's throne room, catching dust motes on its way.

The banners were new—deep indigo and silver stitched with the twin-moon sigil. They hung clean over walls still charred from the last assault. A symbol, I guessed, of what we were trying to build: something intact within the broken.

The Queen stood at her throne, with Liora and the General by her side. In front of her, the remaining rebel lieutenants—ashen-faced, hollow-eyed—watched in silence. Behind them, Earthborn delegates in tailored coats nodded solemnly. Sam and Jonah hovered near the holomap projector, looking like they hadn't slept in the last 2 days.

I stood beside Liora, not as an outsider, but as something else now. Maybe not a leader. But no longer lost.

The Queen's voice rose in the quiet.

— There will be no more neglect of the lowlands. No more silence while the foundation of our sky crumbles. Every citizen of Arkana—floating city or forest floor—deserves to thrive.

She paused, scanning the people before her.

— Today, we end this war. And we begin something worthy of our dead.

The delegates bowed their heads. No applause. Just acknowledgement

A scribe stepped forward with the treaty—rolled parchment sealed in silver thread.

Liora and I watched as each clause was read and affirmed aloud:

- *Equal representation for all regions in the Council of Realms.*
- *Shared research between magic academies and Earth's tech labs.*
- *A mutual defense pact, Earth and Arkana as partners.*

The rebel lieutenants knelt when their turn came. Not one looked up as they signed.

When the Queen dipped her quill in blue-gold ink and pressed her seal into the parchment, the moment didn't feel grand.

It felt *quiet*. Like a storm passing.

I felt Liora shift beside me. Neither of us said anything. We didn't have to.



The Earthside portal chamber buzzed with life—different now. Not secret. Not hidden. Just... *open*.

Technicians moved along the platform scaffolds, runestone cores glowing beside Earth-made consoles.

Cables went across the floor, some marked with Virelyan sigils, others with QuantumVision's old imprint, now overwritten.

Outside, the immediate forest had been transformed into a plaza.

A stage of polished stone and blue steel stood beneath the open sky. Floating lanterns drifted above the crowd—some flickering with electric light, others glowing with quiet magic. Hover-platforms buzzed overhead, weaving trails of pale blue light into the evening air.

On the edges of the plaza, rune-fused lamp posts powered streetlights with a steady, blue glow. Drones docked at small stations lined with humming mana coils. Children ran between them laughing, their parents talking in a dozen different dialects. Some wore suits. Others wore spell woven robes.

And no one looked out of place.

I stood near the base of the stage, watching the final preparations unfold. Across from me, Liora adjusted the folds of her formal mantle. Golden-green thread shimmered across the shoulders, traced with constellations from both worlds.

She caught me watching and smiled.

— Do I look ridiculous? — she asked.

I shook my head.

— Not at all. You look like if a star gained life.

She came to stand beside me as the mayor stepped up to the microphone. The Queen followed, dressed in simple violet and silver, her crown traded for a silver circlet.

Their voices rang out together.

— In unity, we rise. In purpose, we endure. Let these worlds never again walk alone.

Applause spread across the plaza, slow and rising, until even the quietest corners of the observatory hill echoed with it.

Liora turned to me.

— It's really happening, isn't it?

I nodded.

— No more hiding. No more halves. Just... us.

Then, as the final decree was read aloud:

— Let these worlds be united in heart and purpose.

I reached for her hand. Softly rested the other on her cheek,  
feeling her magical energy flowing through me.

And I kissed her.

Soft. Not rushed or staged or ceremonial.

Just *ours*.

I didn't know what came after this. Not fully. The treaties  
would be challenged. There'd be tension. Resistance. Doubt.

But her hand was warm in mine and her laughter, soft in my  
ear, made the rest fade.

Above us, the, now tall, portal's glow shimmered brighter—  
casting constellations of Earth and Arkana across the sky,  
overlapping like stained glass.

And for the first time since it all began, I let myself believe this  
wasn't the end.

It was the beginning.

# EPILOGUE

Pain brought me back.

Not the dull ache of exhaustion. Not bruises or blood. But something else. A furnace in my chest. A scream behind my eyes. Energy within my bones.

I stared, wide-eyed, as veins beneath my skin pulsed with stormlight—thin branches of flickering purple and black winding up my wrists, across my collarbones.

I could now see clearly. See everything that was hidden from me. Hidden from the world.

Lightning clawed across the sky, wild and hungry. My cloak flapped around me, torn and blackened from the blast.

— I am the Stormborn.

My voice cracked the air. Lightning arced above me—closer now.

— I am the truth. I am purity

I knelt. The others followed, chanting my name.

They were all waiting. Not for orders.

For *me*.

1 <sup>st</sup> Edition	JULY OF 2025
Printing	JULY OF 2025
Text Paper	Soft Pólen 90g/m <sup>2</sup>
Cover Paper	Greyboard Hörlle
Cover Wrapping	Matte Photographic Paper 128g/m <sup>2</sup>
Cover Lamination	Matte BOPP
Typography	Annabel 1, Perpetua, Garamond, Mevara Trial