**Epilogue: The First Bridge**  
**Fiordland, New Zealand, 2006**

The tide pooled around Aria’s bare feet, icy and clear as the sky. She crouched in the shallows of Monkey Island Bay, her small hands sifting through pebbles worn smooth by centuries of Pacific waves. Behind her, the fiord rose in emerald cliffs, their peaks veiled in mist that glowed gold in the late afternoon sun. A kererū bird cooed from the rimu trees, and somewhere in the bush, Eleanor Kaye hummed a lullaby.

“Look, Mummy!” Aria held up a stone threaded with quartz. “It’s got lightning inside!”

Eleanor knelt beside her, the hem of her lab coat trailing in the water. “That’s a bridge stone,” she said, tucking a windblown curl behind Aria’s ear. “They’re rare. Some say they’re pieces of stars that fell to guide lost travelers.”

Aria frowned. “But stars are fire. This is cold.”

“Not all fire burns the same way.” Eleanor’s smile tightened. From her pocket, she withdrew a syringe filled with liquid that shimmered like mercury under moonlight. “Remember our game, love? The special medicine that makes you strong?”

Aria nodded, rolling up her sleeve. She’d played this game since she could walk—Mummy’s “vitamins” that made her see colors in the dark. The needle pricked, and the world *shifted*. The bay’s surface fractalized into geometric patterns, and for a moment, Aria saw her mother not as a woman, but as a constellation of light, her veins pulsing with the same quartz-bright threads as the stone.

“Will I fly this time?” Aria whispered.

Eleanor’s eyes glistened. “Someday. But you must never tell anyone, okay? Not even Papa.”

Aria crossed her heart. She never did tell. Three days later, the storm swallowed the *Prometheus*, and the men in black suits scrubbed her memories clean with machines that smelled of burnt sugar. They left only fragments: the taste of cardamom biscuits, the weight of a bridge stone in her palm, and the lingering sense that the stars were waiting.

**New York City, 2030**  
**11:11 PM**

Rain slicked the streets below SHEPHERD Tower, where the apex still hung in phantom outline against the night. A janitor mopping the lobby paused as his neural feed flickered—a burst of static resolving into symbols he couldn’t read (**⨁⃒〱**). Above him, in the abandoned 210th floor, a cracked prism hummed to life on the edge of the rooftop.

Across the river, a child pointed to the sky. “Mama, look! The stars are moving!”

Her mother glanced up, sighing. “Just drones, *mija*. Go back to sleep.”

But the stars *were* moving.

Far to the south, in a Wellington research lab, an artifact sealed for decades flared blue.

**End**

**Epilogue Notes:**

* **New Zealand’s Serenity**: Fiordland’s untouched beauty contrasts with the covert experiment, grounding Aria’s origin in natural wonder.
* **Subtle Survival Clues**: The prism’s reactivation and distant artifact’s pulse imply Anya’s enduring connection, while the child’s observation hints at her unseen influence.
* **Loose Ends Tied**: The syringe scene explains her genetic modifications, while the memory suppression justifies her initial ignorance.

The epilogue closes Aria’s loop while whispering of new beginnings, leaving her presence as lingering and enigmatic as the Southern Cross over Fiordland.