

VORTEX OF TIME

ECHOES OF TIME, SHADOWS OF REALITY

TEJVEER NAIDU MEHER MALASALA



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please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS
www.BlueRoseONE.com
info@bluerosepublishers.com
+91 8882 898 898
+4407342408967

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CHAPTER 1



THE BEGINNING



The lab was silent, but not still.

Monitors blinked with streams of quantum data. Wires sparkled, a faint electrical hum vibrated through the steel floor, fans whispered inside the lab. The quantum time machine's core pulsed like a living heart, casting pale blue light across the room – it throbbed gently, alive, waiting. Dr Ethan Thompson stood at the edge of the vortex chamber, his reflection fractured across the curved glass.

Twelve years. Twelve years of equations, failures, ridicule... and obsession.

What if you're wrong?

The thought flickered again. He forced it down.

Rachel Quinn leaned against the console, arms crossed tightly, though she tried to look calm.

Diagnostic screens reflected in her eyes.

"You're really doing this?" she asked.

Ethan didn't answer immediately. The vortex generator swirled slowly, energy folding in on itself like a storm trapped inside a bottle. The sound deepened—low, like distant thunder.

"We've run every simulation," he said finally. "The math holds. The machine's stable."

"That's not what I asked."

He turned toward her. Her voice was steady, but her fingers gripped the edge of the console.

"I have to know," Ethan said quietly. "If time can be touched... maybe it can be healed."

Rachel stepped closer. The hum of the machine grew louder, pressing against the walls.

"Just promise me you'll come back."

For a moment, Ethan couldn't breathe.

Can I promise that?

He nodded anyway. "I will."

The words felt heavier than gravity.

He stepped into the chamber. The air shimmered around him, charged with static. Tiny sparks snapped against his boots. His skin prickled as if invisible hands were brushing against him.

The countdown began.

10...

The chamber lights dimmed.

9...

The core's pulse quickened.

8...

Ethan's heartbeat matched it.

7...

Rachel's hand hovered over the activation switch.

6...

The vortex began to spin faster, light bending inward like a collapsing star.

5...

The hum turned into a roar.

4...

Ethan swallowed. His throat was dry.

3...

The floor vibrated violently.

2...

No more simulations.

1.

The world shattered.

He landed hard.

Pain shot through his shoulder as he hit the ground. Heat wrapped around him instantly. Grit scraped against his palms.

Voices.

Loud. Chaotic. Alive.

Ethan blinked against the blinding sun. The air smelled of spice, sweat, and sunbaked stone.

Merchants shouted in a language he barely recognized. Coins clinked. A camel groaned nearby.

Sand stuck to his lips.

He staggered to his feet.

In the distance—pyramids.

Ancient, immense, impossible.

“Ancient Egypt...” he whispered.

It worked.

A thrill of triumph surged through him—quickly replaced by unease.

Something felt wrong.

The noise of the market seemed to dull for just a second. A shadow stretched unnaturally across the sand.

A man stepped from an alleyway.

Tall. Cloaked. Still.

His eyes were dark—polished obsidian that reflected nothing.

“Welcome, Dr Thompson,” the man said calmly.

Ethan’s pulse spiked. “Who are you?”

The man’s smile curved slowly, but it carried no warmth.

“I’m Chronos,” he said. “And I’ll be your guide through the timestream.”

A chill crawled down Ethan’s spine despite the heat.

Something about the man felt wrong—like a predator pretending to be patient.

Chronos stepped closer.

“You’ve opened a door you don’t understand,” he said softly. “And now... you’ll help me reshape what lies beyond it.”

Ethan turned sharply, scanning the crowd.

The vortex was gone.

No distortion, no shimmer... Nothing.

His chest tightened.

I’m not just visiting.

I’m trapped.

Chronos’s shadow stretched long across the sand.

“And time,” Chronos said quietly, “has just welcomed its newest prisoner.”

CHAPTER 2



THE CHASE



The Egyptian sun scorched the horizon, casting long shadows across the marketplace. Ethan moved through the crowd, heart pounding, trying to stay unnoticed. The vortex was gone: no way back, no signal. Just sand, heat, and the echo of Chronos's voice in his head.

He ducked behind a stall of woven baskets, watching the flow of people. Priests chanted in the distance. A child chased a goat through the dust. Time felt thick here—like it had weight.

Then he saw him.

Chronos.

Standing at the edge of the square, untouched by the chaos. His cloak billowed unnaturally, as if the wind bent around him. His eyes locked onto Ethan's with a calm that felt ancient.

"You created the storm," Chronos said, voice low but clear. "You don't get to ignore the thunder."

Ethan stepped out, fists clenched. "What do you want?"

Chronos smiled. "To show you what you've broken."

He raised his hand.

The air shimmered.

Suddenly, the marketplace froze: people mid-step, camels mid-groan, even the wind paused.

Ethan spun around. "What did you do?"

Chronos walked toward him. "This is a fracture. A ripple caused by your jump. Time is bleeding, Ethan, and it's only going to get worse."

Ethan stared at the frozen world. "How do I fix it?"

Chronos stopped inches from him. "You don't. You follow me."

Ethan hesitated. "Why would I trust you?"

Chronos's smile faded. "Because if you don't, your world collapses. And the Keystone falls into the wrong hands."

Ethan's breath caught. "The Keystone?"

Chronos nodded. "A convergence point. A temporal anchor. The only thing keeping the time stream from unravelling."

Ethan stepped back. "Then I'll find it before you do."

Chronos tilted his head. "You're welcome to try."

He vanished.

The marketplace resumed—no one noticing the pause, the distortion, the man who had just rewritten reality.

Ethan stood alone.

And the hunt began.

CHAPTER 3



THE FALL OF CHRONOS



Marcus Elric had once been a man of brilliance. A physicist whose theories bent the edges of possibility. A father whose world revolved around a single orbit: his daughter Lena.

She died slowly.

An illness no one could name. It crept through her body like a shadow, defying every test, every cure, every hope. Marcus watched her fade—day by day, breath by breath—until even her smile became memory.

He never forgave the laws of nature for letting her go.

He stopped teaching. Stopped eating. Stopped being Marcus.

And started building.

The Reversion Gate was his obsession. A machine designed not to travel through time, but to rewrite it. He ran simulations. Hundreds. Thousands. Each one a desperate attempt to undo the moment Lena slipped away.

Sometimes she lived—but she was different. Cold. Unrecognising.

Sometimes Marcus died instead.

Once, the world collapsed into ash.

Reality resisted him. Time refused to bend.

So, he made a choice.

If time wouldn't yield, it had to be replaced.

Marcus Elric died in spirit.

Chronos was born.

He erased his name, buried his past, and began rewriting the future—not to save Lena, but to build a world where she had never needed saving.

He recruited minds from fractured timelines. Built the Syndicate.
Hunted the Keystone. And watched the time stream ripple under
his touch.

But grief is not a blueprint.

And love is not a machine.

Chronos became a ghost of purpose—driven not by hope, but by
control.

And now, Ethan Thompson had stepped into the stream.

A new variable.

A new threat.

Chronos watched from the edge of time, eyes burning with
memory.

“You’ll try to stop me,” he whispered. “But you don’t know what
it costs.”

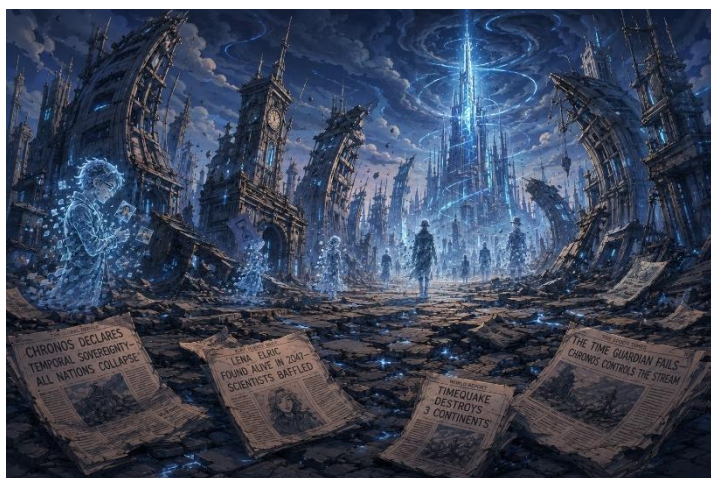
He turned to the vortex.

And vanished.

CHAPTER 4



GHOSTS OF THE FUTURE



The vortex spat Ethan out into silence.

He hit fractured stone hard, coughing against the dust that clung in the air like memory. The sky above was a bruised violet, clouds dragging slow and heavy—nothing like any weather system he knew.

Buildings twisted unnaturally—some ancient, some futuristic, all broken. A graveyard of timelines.

This wasn't the past.

It wasn't the present.

It was a future that hadn't survived.

Ethan pushed himself up, brushing ash from his coat. His wrist console blinked erratically, refusing to sync with any known stream. The air tasted metallic—cold, like time itself had stopped breathing.

He was alone.

Then he noticed them.

Newspapers.

Scattered across the ground like brittle leaves. Torn, faded, half-burned. He picked one up. The

headline screamed:

“Chronos Declares Temporal Sovereignty — All Nations Collapse”

Another fluttered past, caught in a breeze that shouldn't exist:

“Lena Elric Found Alive in 2047 — Scientists Baffled”

A third lay stuck beneath shattered glass:

“Timequake Destroys 3 Continents — Survivors Trapped in Memory Loops”

And the one that froze his breath:

“The Time Guardian Fails — Chronos Controls the Stream”

Each headline pulsed with memory. Each one felt like a scar.

Then came the whisper.

Not words—just fragments.

He turned. Silhouettes drifted through the ruins. Not people. Echoes. Glitches in reality. A woman carrying a child who flickered in and out of existence. A soldier walking backward. A man screaming silently as his body unravelled into light.

Ethan backed away.

This was a fracture/shatter zone. A place where memory and reality had collided and lost.

He stumbled forward, drawn to a tower in the distance—half-collapsed, glowing faintly with blue light.

The signal was coming from there. The Keystone fragment. He had to reach it.

But the ground cracked beneath him.

The vortex reactivated.

And the future let him go.

CHAPTER 5



THE RETURN



Ethan collapsed onto the lab floor, gasping.

The sterile lights flickered overhead. The hum of machines returned like a heartbeat. Rachel rushed to his side, eyes wide with relief and fear.

“You were gone for three days,” she said.

Ethan sat up slowly. “I saw it. The future. Or what’s left of it.”

Rachel helped him to his feet. “What happened?”

He looked at her, voice low. “Chronos wins. If we don’t stop him, he rewrites everything.”

Rachel froze. “What did you see?”

“Headlines. Echoes. People trapped in memory loops. Lena... alive, but wrong. A construct.”

Rachel’s face darkened. “Then we need to move fast.”

Ethan walked to the console. “There’s a tower. A signal. A fragment of the Keystone. I couldn’t reach it. But I know where it is.”

Rachel tapped the console. “We’ll need to rebuild the vortex. It’s unstable.”

Ethan nodded. “And we’ll need help.”

Rachel looked at him. “Who?”

“Kiran. He knows the Syndicate. He knows how Chronos thinks.”

Rachel hesitated. “You trust him?”

“I trust that he hates Chronos more than we do.”

The console lit up with coordinates. Prague. The next fracture.

Ethan placed his hand on the glass.

“We find the Keystone. We stop Chronos. We protect time.”

Rachel joined him.

And the war for memory began.

CHAPTER 6



PRAGUE PROTOCOL

The vortex opened with a low hum, and Ethan stepped into the cold.

Prague shimmered beneath a grey sky, its skyline fractured by time distortions. Gothic spires twisted into steel towers. Cobblestone streets flickered between centuries. The air was thick with static—time was bleeding here.

Ethan adjusted his wrist console. The signal was faint but steady. A Keystone fragment was nearby.

He moved quickly through the city, avoiding the shimmer zones—places where time folded in on itself.

A man walked past him wearing a 19th-century coat, followed by a drone from 2087. No one noticed.

No one belonged.

Then he saw him.

Kiran.

Leaning against a crumbling statue, arms crossed, eyes sharp.

“You’re late,” Kiran said.

Ethan approached. "You got my message?"

Kiran nodded. "Chronos is here. He's building something. Big."

Ethan looked around. "The Reversion Gate?"

Kiran's jaw tightened. "Not just that. He's rewriting the root stream. If he finishes, every timeline becomes his."

Ethan clenched his fists. "Then we stop him."

Kiran handed him a data chip. "This is a map. Syndicate intel. It shows where the fragments are buried."

Ethan took it. "How many?"

"Nine. You've seen one. Chronos has two."

Ethan looked up at the sky. "Then we're running out of time."

Kiran smirked. "We always were."

They turned toward the shimmer zone.

And the hunt began.

CHAPTER 7



THE SYNDICATE'S REMNANT

The shimmer zone rippled like a wound in the air.

Ethan and Kiran stepped through first, boots crunching on cobblestone that flickered between centuries. Rachel followed, her vortex stabiliser humming faintly as she recalibrated the stream behind them.

Prague was quiet now—too quiet.

The distortion had spread. Buildings leaned at impossible angles. Time echoes drifted through the streets, whispering fragments of futures that hadn't happened yet.

Kiran led them down a narrow alley, past a crumbling statue of Jan Hus that flickered between stone and hologram. "The vault is beneath the cathedral," he said. "It's where the Syndicate stored what Chronos couldn't erase."

Rachel glanced at Ethan. "Are you sure we're ready for this?"

Ethan touched Lena's pendant. "We don't have time to be ready."

They reached the cathedral.

Its doors were sealed with a temporal lock—symbols etched in shifting light. Kiran placed his palm on the scanner. The door hissed open.

And the past welcomed them in.

Inside, the chamber was lined with relics: broken vortex cores, fractured memory drives, and a single glowing map etched into the wall. The Syndicate's last archive.

Rachel stepped forward, eyes scanning the symbols. "This is a fragment trail. Seven shards. One stream."

Kiran nodded. "Chronos already has two. He's heading for the third."

Ethan stared at the map. "Where?"

Kiran pointed to a red zone. "The Red Loop. A collapsing timeline. No one comes back from it."

Rachel looked at Ethan. "We'll need a stabiliser. And a tether."

Ethan reached into his coat and pulled out Lena's pendant. "This kept her anchored once. It can do it again."

Kiran raised an eyebrow. "You're going to use memory to fight Chronos?"

Ethan nodded. "It's the only thing he can't control."

The vault lights dimmed, the map pulsed, and the next jump began.

CHAPTER 8



THE RED LOOP

The jump was violent.

Ethan hit the ground hard, his breath knocked out by the impact. The Red Loop was unlike any fracture he'd seen. The sky pulsed red, the ground shimmered with unstable geometry, and the air buzzed with static memory. Time here didn't flow—it snapped.

His wrist console blinked: Cycle Reset in 11:00

He had eleven minutes.

Then everything would restart.

He ran through the broken landscape, past flickering buildings and frozen echoes. A woman screamed in reverse. A clock tower melted upward. The laws of physics were suggestions here.

At the centre of the Loop stood a monument—half-formed, half-erased. The Keystone fragment pulsed inside it, buried in a shell of collapsing time.

Ethan reached for it.

The moment he touched the surface, the Loop reacted.

He was back at the start.

Same impact. Same breathless gasp. Same countdown.

Cycle Reset in 11:00

He screamed into the void. “No!”

But the Loop didn’t care.

It was a trap, a memory prison, and Chronos had left it behind like a snare.

Ethan tried again.

And again.

Each time, he got closer. Each time, the Loop reset.

On the seventh cycle, he saw her.

Lena.

Standing in the distance, watching him. She didn’t speak. She didn’t move. But her presence was real.

Ethan ran to her.

She vanished.

But the monument cracked.

On the ninth cycle, he reached the fragment.

He grabbed it.

The Loop collapsed.

Ethan landed in the lab, clutching the shard.

Rachel and Kiran stared at him.

“You did it,” Rachel said.

Ethan nodded, eyes hollow. “Chronos left her there as a memory. A warning.”

Kiran stepped forward. “Then we’re one step closer.”

Ethan looked at the shard.

And the countdown continued.

CHAPTER 9



THE MEMORY WAR

The lab was silent, but tension crackled in the air. Ethan placed the fragment on the console. It pulsed with faint blue light, syncing with the vortex core.

Rachel and Kiran watched as the system recalibrated, mapping the remaining shards.

“Chronos is accelerating,” Rachel said. “He’s rewriting timelines faster than we can track.”

Kiran leaned over the map. “He’s heading for the Nexus Stream. If he controls that, he controls everything.”

Ethan stared at the console. “Then we go there. We end this.”

They jumped.



The Nexus Stream was chaos.

Timelines collided mid-air. Buildings flickered between centuries. People screamed in languages that hadn’t been spoken yet. Ethan, Rachel, and Kiran moved through the storm, following the signal.

At the centre stood Chronos.

He was no longer cloaked, his body shimmering with fractured time—half man, half memory. Lena's pendant hung from his neck, glowing unnaturally.

"You're too late," Chronos said.

Ethan stepped forward. "You don't get to decide how time remembers her."

Chronos raised his hand. The stream surged. Rachel screamed as her body flickered—her past rewriting itself.

Kiran fired a pulse. It hit Chronos, but he absorbed it.

"You think this is war," Chronos said. "It's grief."

Ethan held up the fragment. "No. It's choice."

He slammed it into the vortex core.

The stream exploded.

Memories flooded the air.

Lena laughing. Lena running. Lena dying.

Chronos screamed.

The vortex pulled him in.

And time began to heal.

CHAPTER 10



THE KEYSTONE SCATTERED

The lab pulsed with unstable energy. Ethan placed the Red Loop fragment into the vortex core. The console lit up, scanning its structure, syncing it with the earlier shard. Rachel and Kiran stood behind him, watching the system struggle to stabilise.

The map flickered.

Seven points. Seven timelines.

Rachel leaned in. “It’s not whole; these are coordinates.”

Kiran frowned. “Chronos didn’t just hide the Keystone. He shattered it.”

The console projected seven locations—each pulsing with temporal distortion.

Ancient Egypt, Renaissance Florence, World War I, Mughal India, Cyber Tokyo, and a failed Mars colony.

And the Red Loop, already recovered.

Ethan stared at the map. “Each shard is buried in a different time. Each one tied to memory.”

Rachel nodded. “And each one guarded by Chronos’s echoes.”

Kiran loaded the first jump. “Florence. Da Vinci’s workshop. He sketched something he shouldn’t have.”

Ethan tightened his grip on Lena’s pendant. “Then we retrieve them. One by one.”

Rachel looked at him. “And if Chronos gets there first?”

Ethan didn’t blink. “Then we lose everything.”

The vortex surged.

The countdown began.

And the hunt across time was reborn.

CHAPTER 11



THE FLORENCE FRAGMENT

The vortex opened into candlelight and marble. Ethan stepped out first, boots landing on cobblestone slick with rain. Renaissance Florence shimmered around them—domes, towers, and alleyways flickering between centuries. The air smelled of ink, oil, and something older. Time here didn't scream. It whispered.

Rachel adjusted her stabiliser. "Distortion's subtle, but it's everywhere. Like memory trying to hold itself together."

Kiran scanned the plaza. "Da Vinci's workshop is two blocks east. The shard's buried in something he never finished."

They moved quickly, weaving through artists and merchants. Paintings changed mid-stroke. Statues blinked. A violinist played a melody that hadn't been written yet.

Inside the workshop, dust floated like memory. Blueprints covered the walls—flying machines, war engines, anatomical sketches. But one drawing pulsed faintly with blue light.

Rachel stepped forward. "It's the Chrono core."

Kiran frowned. “Da Vinci dreamed it centuries before Marcus built it. That’s not coincidence.”

Ethan touched the sketch. The paper rippled. A hidden compartment opened beneath the desk.

Inside was the shard, glowing softly and humming with potential.

But the room darkened.

The Vitruvian Warden

A figure stepped from the wall—Da Vinci’s unfinished sketch, animated by Chronos’s interference. Its limbs moved with geometric precision, its face blank but calculating. It didn’t speak. It attacked.

Kiran lunged, blade drawn. The Warden dodged with impossible symmetry.

Rachel tried to destabilise its pattern. “It’s reacting to emotion. Stay calm!”

Ethan slowed his breath. Focused on Lena’s laugh. The Warden hesitated.

He stepped forward. “You’re just a sketch. A memory without meaning.”

The Warden collapsed into charcoal dust.

Ethan retrieved the shard.

Florence exhaled.

Back in the lab, Lyra synced the Florence Fragment with the core. The console pulsed, recalibrating the stream.

Dr Virek studied the data. “Chronos is embedding himself deeper. He’s not just rewriting timelines—he’s anchoring himself to them.”

Rachel frowned. “If he becomes part of the stream’s architecture...”

Kiran finished the thought. “Then we can’t just chase him. We’ll have to dismantle him.”

Lyra looked up. “We’ll need all seven shards. And something more.”

Ethan nodded. “Then we keep going.”

The team stayed together.

But the fracture was coming.

And time was running out.

CHAPTER 12



THE VERDUN ECHO



The vortex spat Ethan into mud.
Cold. Wet. Deafening silence.

He landed hard, boots sinking into the trench floor, the air reeking of blood, rust, and cordite. Verdun, 1916. A battlefield frozen mid-collapse. Shells hung in the sky like paused thunder. Soldiers stood mid-scream, unmoving. Time here had stopped—but memory hadn't.

Rachel adjusted her stabiliser. "This place is bleeding history."

Kiran scanned the trench. "The shard's buried near a medic's satchel. But it's guarded."

They moved carefully, stepping over frozen bodies and flickering echoes. The trench twisted unnaturally—walls pulsing with memory distortion. A whisper followed them: not words, but sobs.

Then the ground shook.

From the far end of the trench, something appeared.

The Shellwalker

A soldier, twisted by a timequake. His body flickered between flesh and bone, uniform and ash. He carried a rifle that fired memory shrapnel—each shot a scream from the past. He didn't speak. He relived his death with every breath.

Kiran ducked behind a crate. "He's stuck in a loop. Chronos weaponised his trauma."

Rachel tried to stabilise the zone, but the Shellwalker charged. Ethan tackled him, and for a moment, saw the man's last memory: a medic trying to save him, a promise broken.

Ethan whispered, "You're not alone."

The Shellwalker paused.

And vanished.

They reached the satchel.

Inside was the shard.

It pulsed faintly, wrapped in bandages stained with time.

Ethan held it tightly. “One down. Six to go.”

But something had shifted.

Back in the lab, the shard synced with the core.

Lyra stood at the console, her voice calm but urgent. “The stream’s destabilising faster than expected.

We can’t just retrieve. We have to build.”

Dr Elan Virek stepped forward—tall, silver-haired, eyes like cracked glass. “Chronos isn’t just rewriting timelines. He’s embedding himself into the stream’s architecture. If we don’t construct a paradox disruptor, he’ll become permanent.”

Ethan looked at Rachel. “We need to split.”

Rachel nodded. “Retrievers keep jumping. Builders stay here. We fight on both fronts.”

Kiran stepped forward. “We’ll bring the shards. You build the weapon.”

Lyra placed her hand on the console. “I’ll guide both teams. The stream listens to me now.”

Dr Virek activated a new interface. “We’ll need all seven shards to align the disruptor. And we’ll need to sacrifice something to power it.”

Ethan didn’t ask what.

He already knew.

The team split.

Ethan, Rachel, and Kiran became the Retrievers—traveling through fractured timelines to recover the shards.

Lyra, Virek, and Mira became the Builders—designing the weapon that could erase Chronos from time itself.

From this moment forward, the mission was no longer about saving Lena.

It was about saving time.

And the cost would be unbearable.

CHAPTER 13



THE MARS COLLAPSE



The vortex opened into red dust and sand.

Ethan hit the ground hard, coughing against the dry, metallic air. The sky above was a dull copper, streaked with static clouds that pulsed like broken memories. Mars Colony, 2093, the future Lyra came from, the future that failed.

Rachel activated her oxygen stabiliser. “Atmosphere is thin. Memory density is high.”

Kiran scanned the terrain. “This place isn’t just dead. It’s rewritten.”

Lyra stepped forward, her voice quiet. “This was home. Before the fracture. Before Chronos.”

The colony was a graveyard of ambition. Towers half-collapsed, domes shattered, solar panels twisted into rusted sculptures. The sand itself shimmered with residual distortion—time had bled here, and the scars hadn’t healed.

They moved through the ruins, boots crunching on glass and bone. The colony’s central vault pulsed faintly beneath the sand—buried but not forgotten.

Inside, the walls were lined with memory servers. Each one flickered with fragments: birthdays, arguments, dreams. Lena’s name appeared again and again. Lena Elric. Version 3. Version 7. Version

12.

Ethan stared. “He tried to rebuild her here.”

Lyra nodded. “He used the colony’s memory architecture. Tried to simulate her consciousness. But she wasn’t real. Just echoes. Just code.”

Rachel touched one of the servers. It pulsed, then collapsed into static. “These memories are unstable. They’re feeding the distortion.”

Kiran knelt beside a shattered console. “Chronos didn’t just rewrite Mars. He tried to make it remember something that never existed.”

Then the vault groaned.

The temperature dropped.

And the lights flickered.

The Terraformer Ghost

It appeared from the shadows—tall, skeletal, its limbs built from terraforming rigs and memory conduits. Its voice was cold, synthetic, and wrong.

“Preserve the subject. Erase the intruders.”

Its eyes glowed with corrupted data. It didn’t see Ethan or Lyra—it saw threats to Lena’s preservation.

It believed Lena was the planet, that her memory was the ecosystem and that Ethan was the virus.

Kiran fired a pulse. The Ghost absorbed it. Rachel tried to destabilize its logic loop, but it adapted instantly.

Lyra stepped forward, her voice steady. “You’re not protecting Lena. You’re protecting a lie.”

The Ghost paused.

“Memory integrity compromised.”

It turned toward Lyra.

“Subject origin: anomaly. Stream contamination detected.”

Ethan stepped between them. “She’s not the anomaly. You are.”

The Ghost lunged. Its limbs extended like blades, slicing through memory servers. The vault began to collapse.

Rachel shouted, “We need the shard—now!”

Ethan ran to the core. The Mars Fragment pulsed inside a containment unit, surrounded by corrupted data. He reached for it.

The Ghost screamed.

The vault shook.

Lyra closed her eyes. "Let me guide the stream."

She placed her hand on the wall. The distortion slowed. The Ghost flickered.

Ethan grabbed the shard.

The Ghost collapsed, and Mars exhaled.

Back in the lab, the Mars Fragment synced with the core.

Lyra stared at the console. "Chronos is accelerating. He's embedding himself deeper."

Dr Virek studied the readings. "We'll need more than shards. We'll need a weapon."

Mira traced the memory patterns. "The grief is converging. Every shard carries a piece of Lena—but also a piece of Chronos."

Rachel looked at Ethan. "How many more can we take?"

Ethan didn't answer. He was staring at the shard. At the corrupted data. At the versions of Lena that never lived.

Lyra placed her hand on his shoulder. "We're not just retrieving. We're rewriting."

Kiran loaded the next jump. "India. 1632. The Taj."

Ethan nodded. "Then we keep going."

Four shards remain.

And the fracture is coming.

CHAPTER 14



THE TAJ FOUNDATION

The vortex opened into moonlight and marble.

Ethan stepped out into the warm night air of Agra, 1632. The Taj Mahal loomed ahead—white, perfect, and impossibly still; Time here didn’t fracture violently, it mourned.

Rachel adjusted her stabiliser. “The distortion’s subtle. Like grief carved into stone.”

Kiran scanned the perimeter. “Shard’s buried beneath the foundation. But this place isn’t unguarded.”

Lyra stepped forward, her voice hushed. “This monument was built for love. But Chronos twisted it. He made it a shrine to permanence.”

They moved through the gardens, past flickering echoes of mourners and masons. The Taj shimmered between centuries—sometimes pristine, sometimes cracked, sometimes unfinished. Time here was layered, like paint on silk.

Inside, the air was heavy with memory. Ethan felt it in his chest—like Lena’s absence had followed him here. The marble walls whispered with the weight of devotion, loss, and longing.

They descended into the crypt.

The shard pulsed beneath the marble floor.

Then the ground trembled.

The Marble Sentinel

It rose from the tomb—a statue carved in grief, animated by Chronos’s distortion. Its face was serene, but its eyes burned with permanence. It moved slowly, but each step cracked the floor.

“Love must be eternal,” it said.

“Memory must never fade.”

Its voice echoed like a prayer and a curse.

Kiran drew his blade. Rachel activated her pulse field. Lyra stepped back, whispering to the stream.

Ethan didn’t move.

He stared at the Sentinel. “You think love is stone. But it’s breath. It’s choice.”

The Sentinel raised its arm, and the ceiling groaned.

Rachel shouted, “We can’t fight it head-on!”

Lyra whispered, “It’s bound to grief. We have to let go.”

Ethan stepped forward, holding Lena’s pendant. “She’s gone, and that’s why she matters.”

The Sentinel paused.

Cracks spread across its body.

But it didn’t fall.

Instead, it spoke again.

“If you let go, she will vanish. If you hold on, you will fracture.”

Ethan's voice trembled. "I'm not choosing between memory and survival. I'm choosing to remember without breaking."

He placed the pendant on the floor.

The Sentinel knelt.

And shattered.

Ethan retrieved the shard.

The Taj shimmered—whole again, but softer.

Back in the lab, the Taj Fragment synced with the core.

Dr Virek studied the readings. "Chronos is embedding emotion now. He's evolving."

Mira traced the grief patterns. "This shard was the heaviest. It nearly broke the stream."

Rachel looked at Ethan. "You let go of her. Didn't you?"

Ethan nodded. "Just enough to move forward."

Lyra placed her hand on the console. "Three shards remain."

Kiran loaded the next jump. "Tokyo. 2150. The archive."

Ethan turned to the vortex.

And stepped in.

CHAPTER 15



THE TOKYO ARCHIVE



The vortex opened into neon and silence.

Ethan stepped into Cyber Tokyo, 2150. The skyline pulsed with holograms and memory streams.

Buildings shimmered between physical and digital, and the air buzzed with static. Time here wasn't fractured—it was layered, coded, and watching.

Rachel adjusted her stabiliser. "This place is alive. The distortion's not just ambient—it's interactive."

Kiran scanned the street. "Shard's buried in the archive beneath Shibuya. But this zone's unstable. It's rewriting us as we walk."

Lyra's voice echoed through the comms. "The Tokyo stream is built on identity. It'll try to fracture you from the inside."

They moved quickly, passing citizens who flickered between versions of themselves—young, old, angry, joyful. No one seemed to notice. Everyone was everyone.

Inside the archive, the walls were lined with memory servers. Ethan saw his own face on a screen.

Then Rachel's. Then Lena's.

Kiran froze. "This isn't just storage. It's replication."

Rachel whispered, "Chronos didn't just preserve memories. He cloned them."

Then the lights dimmed.

The Identity Thief

It stepped from the shadows—shifting, flickering, wearing Ethan's face. Then Rachel's. Then Lena's. It spoke in their voices but twisted.

"You failed her."

"You're not real."

"You're just a memory pretending to matter."

Kiran fired. The Thief dodged, laughing in his own voice.

“You left me behind.”

Rachel tried to stabilise the stream, but her own memories began to fracture. She saw herself as a child, then as a Syndicate agent, then as someone she didn’t recognize.

Lyra’s voice cut through the distortion. “It’s feeding on unresolved identity. You have to anchor yourselves.”

Ethan closed his eyes. Focused on Lena’s laugh. On Rachel’s loyalty. On Kiran’s rage.

The Thief screamed.

Its form collapsed.

But not before whispering,

“You’re not done breaking.”

They reached the central vault.

The Tokyo Fragment pulsed inside a corrupted archive labelled: Lena. Version 12.

Ethan hesitated. “She never lived this version.”

Rachel placed her hand on his. “But she was remembered.”

He retrieved the shard.

The archive collapsed.

And Tokyo exhaled.

CHAPTER 16



THE FLORENCE REQUIEM



The vortex opened into candlelight and geometry. Florence shimmered with distortion. Buildings twisted into impossible angles. Streets folded into themselves. Time here wasn't just fractured—it was calculated.

Rachel adjusted her stabiliser. “The distortion’s recursive. It’s learning from us.”

Kiran scanned the skyline. “Shard’s still beneath Da Vinci’s workshop. But the zone’s locked. We’ll need a coordinated breach.”

Lyra’s voice crackled through the comms. “The Vitruvian Warden has adapted. It’s not just reactive—it’s predictive. You’ll need to outthink it.”

Ethan nodded. “Then we go in as a unit. No solo moves. No emotional spikes. We fight like a blueprint.”

Tactical Formation

- Ethan: Lead vector. Draws enemy attention, tests pattern shifts.
- Rachel: Stabilizer. Monitors stream fluctuations, counters distortion surges.
- Kiran: Flanker. Executes unpredictable manoeuvres to disrupt symmetry.
- Lyra (remote): Stream whisperer. Feeds real-time data and counter-patterns.

Inside the workshop, the air was thick with graphite and memory. Blueprints covered the walls. One sketch pulsed with blue light.

The Chrono Core.

And beside it stood the Vitruvian Warden.

The Vitruvian Warden

Tall, symmetrical, terrifying. Its limbs moved with mathematical precision. Its face was blank, but its eyes tracked every breath. It didn't speak. It calculated.

Kiran lunged.

The Warden countered instantly—mirroring his strike, then fracturing it mid-motion.

Rachel shouted, "It's using predictive geometry! We need to break the pattern!"

Ethan moved left, then feinted right. The Warden hesitated—just for a second.

Lyra's voice: "Inject chaos. Use asymmetry."

Kiran switched stance—erratic, off-balance. Rachel destabilized the floor grid. Ethan threw Lena's pendant into the air.

The Warden tracked the pendant.

And Ethan struck.

The blow wasn't strong, but it was unexpected.

The Warden staggered.

Rachel activated a pulse field. Kiran hit the core. Lyra flooded the stream with emotional noise—memories of Lena, of failure, of choice.

The Warden screamed.

Its limbs collapsed inward.

And the workshop exhaled.

Ethan retrieved the Florence Fragment.

The sketch faded.

The distortion lifted.

Back in the lab, the shard synced with the core.

Dr Virek stared at the readings. “Chronos is nearing full integration. He’s learning from every encounter.”

Mira whispered, “The stream is becoming sentient. It’s reacting to our grief.”

Rachel looked at Ethan. “You beat it. Not with strength. With unpredictability.”

Ethan nodded. “We’re not fighting machines, we’re fighting memory.”

Lyra placed her hand on the console. “One shard remains.”

Kiran loaded the final jump. “Egypt. The origin.”

Ethan turned to the vortex.

And stepped in.

CHAPTER 17



THE TEMPLE OF THOTH



The vortex opened into sand and silence. Ethan stepped into the heart of ancient Egypt—dawn breaking over the Nile, the air thick with incense and prophecy. The Temple of Thoth rose ahead, carved into the cliffside like a question waiting to be answered. Time here didn't fracture. It waited.

Rachel adjusted her stabiliser. "This zone's different. It's not broken—it's preserved."

Kiran scanned the horizon. "Shard's buried beneath the temple altar. But this place isn't just sacred.

It's sentient."

Lyra stepped forward, her voice reverent. "Thoth was the god of memory, wisdom, and time. Chronos didn't just steal from him. He rewrote him."

They entered the temple.

Hieroglyphs shimmered on the walls—some ancient, some modern, some impossible. The air pulsed with echoes. Lena's name appeared in Egyptian script. El-Ra-Ka.

Ethan touched the wall.

It whispered back.

The Archivist of Thoth

It emerged from the altar—neither man nor god, but a construct of memory and myth. Its body was made of stone tablets and golden scrolls. Its eyes were hourglasses. It didn't speak. It judged.

Lyra whispered, "It's not here to fight. It's here to test."

The Archivist raised its hand.

And the temple split.

Each team member was pulled into a separate memory stream.

Ethan's Trial

He stood in Lena's hospital room. She was alive. Smiling. Whole.

"Stay," she said.

"Forget the mission. Forget the pain."

Ethan stepped forward.

Then stopped.

He looked at her. "You're not her. You're what I want her to be."

The room dissolved.

Rachel's Trial

She stood before her Syndicate commander.

"You were loyal once. You can be again."

Rachel clenched her fists. "I wasn't loyal. I was afraid."

The commander vanished.

Kiran's Trial

He faced the boy he left behind in the Syndicate raid.

"You promised you'd come back."

Kiran dropped his blade. "I broke that promise. But I won't break this one."

The boy smiled.

And faded.

They returned to the altar.

The Archivist knelt.

And revealed the final shard.

But it came with a price.

"One memory must be surrendered. Forever."

Ethan looked at Lena's pendant.

Rachel looked at her childhood.

Kiran looked at his brother.

Lyra stepped forward.

"I'll give mine."

She placed her hand on the shard.

And her memory of Ethan vanished.

The Temple exhaled.

The shard pulsed.

And the stream began to shake.

Back in the lab, the final shard synced with the core.

Dr Virek activated the Chrono Disruptor.

Mira wept silently.

Lyra looked at Ethan. "I know you, But I don't remember why."

Ethan nodded. "That's enough."

Rachel whispered, "The final battle begins now."

Kiran loaded the coordinates.

Chronos was waiting.

And time was ready to break.

TO BE CONTINUED ...