

NUCLEAR SECONDS

WHERE SYSTEMS WORK, BUT REALITY BENDS

NISHANT KUMAR SHARMA



BlueRoseONE^{.com}
S t o r i e s M a t t e r

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

Copyright © Nishant Kumar Sharma 2026

All rights reserved by author. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author.

Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

BlueRose Publishers takes no responsibility for any damages, losses, or liabilities that may arise from the use or misuse of the information, products, or services provided in this publication.



BlueRoseONE
Stories Matter
New Delhi • London

For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-93-7825-084-2

Cover design: Aafiya Saifi

Typesetting: Namrata Saini

First Edition: May 2026

Dedication

“To Tia, Ria and Jia who complete my world.”

Foreword

I have spent years around systems that are designed to be understood precisely.

Nuclear reactors are explained through equations, models, and control. Every parameter is defined. Every outcome is calculated. Margins of error are themselves measured and managed. On paper, nothing is left to imagination because imagination, in that world, is considered a liability.

And yet, standing close to that world for long enough, I often felt something that the numbers could not explain.

A sense that what is happening at the subatomic level does not fully belong to the reality we experience every day. Time does not feel the same near these systems. Cause and effect do not always feel immediate. The distance between an action and its consequence can stretch across milliseconds or decades, and both feel equally invisible to the human standing at the console.

What unsettled me most was the silence. The way enormous things happen in complete quiet. The way a chain reaction, something that exists at the very boundary of our understanding of matter, makes no sound you could hear, casts no light you could see, and yet reshapes the energy of everything around it. There is a strange loneliness in witnessing something so significant through instruments rather than senses. You are always one degree removed from the thing itself.

This book began from that discomfort.

Not from a desire to explain nuclear physics, but from the persistent feeling that something about this world deserved to be written about differently. That the experience of it, the texture of standing near systems this complex, this powerful, this quietly indifferent to human intuition was being lost somewhere between the technical literature and the dramatic

portrayals that dominate public imagination. Neither the textbook nor the thriller felt honest to me.

Nuclear Seconds is an attempt to translate a deeply technical world into something that can be experienced without scientific language. There are no formulas here. No definitions, no diagrams, no effort to teach. I have not written this book to make you more informed about nuclear science. I have written it to make you feel, however briefly, what it might be like to inhabit its edges.

What I have tried to build instead is an atmosphere. One where the reader can sense the strangeness, the scale, the occasional absurdity, and the odd beauty of the atomic world not through explanation, but through proximity. The goal was never clarity. The goal was something closer to resonance.

In doing so, I have allowed the narrative to move in ways that are not always linear, and not always comfortable. It shifts between moments of humour and unease, between the personal and the vast, between what can be known and what can only be inferred. At times it may feel disorienting, as though the ground beneath the story is not entirely fixed.

That is intentional. Because the world it draws from is not entirely stable either.

My own background in nuclear systems has shaped this book but not in the way one might expect. It has not made me certain. It has not given me a vantage point of authority or resolution. If anything, the longer I spent inside that world, the more aware I became of how much remains genuinely difficult to grasp not in calculation, where the methods are established and the answers are reproducible, but in experience, where the human mind keeps reaching for analogies it cannot quite find.

That gap between what we can compute and what we can actually feel is where this book lives.

I should be honest about what this book is not.

It is not a technical book. It is not a guide, nor an explainer, nor an argument for any particular position on nuclear energy or the

people and institutions that surround it. I have no agenda here beyond the one all writers secretly carry: the hope that something true about an experience can pass from one mind to another through language.

What it is, I hope, is an invitation.

An invitation to step into a space where time behaves differently, where systems operate at scales both smaller and larger than intuition can hold, and where the boundary between control and uncertainty is not always clearly marked. Where the most important things are often the ones that cannot be directly observed.

You may find yourself amused in one moment, and quietly unsettled in the next. You may lose the thread of where the story is taking you, or feel that the ground has shifted without warning. There will be moments of stillness that carry more weight than the moments of drama.

I have not tried to resolve these contradictions. I have tried to hold them.

Because that, in the end, is what the experience of standing near these systems actually felt like not mastery, not fear, but something more patient than either. A long, careful attention to things that do not fully reveal themselves. A willingness to remain in the presence of what you cannot entirely understand, and to find that there is something worth staying for.

If, at the end of this book, you feel that you have not learned something new but have instead *felt* something unfamiliar then it has done exactly what I intended.

That is all I ever wanted it to do.

Nishant Kumar Sharma

Writer Introduction

Nishant Kumar Sharma has spent his career in the power sector, which sounds more exciting at parties than it actually is, until you mention the nuclear part, at which point people either edge away or ask if he has been in a *reactor*.

He has worked across nuclear, thermal, and renewable energy, studied engineering, and picked up a management degree from the Indian School of Business, presumably to learn how to explain reactor physics to people in suits. His work sits at the intersection of energy transition, policy, and emerging technologies, which is a sophisticated way of saying he spends a lot of time thinking about problems that will take a lifetime to solve.

Nuclear Seconds is his first book. It was not planned so much as it was inevitable, the result of spending years inside a world of extraordinary precision and walking away with more questions than answers. At some point, the questions needed somewhere to go.

He considered writing a technical paper. He wrote this instead.

Whether that was the right decision is, much like most things in nuclear systems, still being monitored.

Contents

Phase I: The Outer Perimeter.....	1
Chapter 1: The Platform That Wasn't There	3
Chapter 2: The Geometry of Silence.....	24
Chapter 3: The Induction of Uncertainty	46
Phase II: The Secondary Loop	73
Chapter 4: The Turbine Hall's Echo.....	75
Chapter 5: The Maintenance of Yesterday.....	102
Chapter 6: The Airlock Interlock	131
Phase III: The Containment	165
Chapter 7: The Blue Eye of Cherenkov.....	167
Chapter 8: The Flux Divergence	204
Phase IV: The Fluctuation of Meaning	245
Chapter 9: The Auditor's Paradox	247
Chapter 10: The Control Room Vigil.....	283
Chapter 11: The Auditor's Salvation	321
Chapter 12: The Stationary Departure	341
Chapter 13: The Platform That Remained.....	363

Phase I
The Outer Perimeter

The Denial of Logic

CHAPTER 1

The Platform That Wasn't There

Tash had always prided himself on punctuality. It was something he clung to, like a personal religion. In an uncertain world, at least the watch on his wrist generally obeyed. That morning, punctuality mattered more than usual. He was not arriving for leisure, or curiosity, or even ambition. He was arriving to audit Oridyn Nuclear Power Station.

A routine assignment, according to the email.

A procedural inspection, according to the attachment.

A standard safety and compliance review, according to the six-page document that had repeated the word standard seventeen times.

So when the train shuddered to a halt and the doors hissed open, Tash stepped out with the confidence of a man who knew exactly where he was and why he was there.

This confidence lasted perhaps three seconds.

Because the platform he stepped onto looked like it had been built reluctantly, as if compelled by an old signature that didn't fully believe in platforms. The station roof sagged with an air of apologetic indifference. The signboards hung crookedly, each displaying a different name for the station one said ORIDYN, another said ORI-DYN, a third simply blinked between characters as though still deciding its identity.

And then there was the schedule board.

Tash's suitcases thumped onto the concrete as he stared at the giant illuminated board above him. It listed trains in three neat sections:

ARRIVED

SHALL ARRIVE

COULD HAVE ARRIVED UNDER FAVORABLE INTERPRETATION

His own name appeared under the third category.

Next to it, a note read:

“Passenger arrived three days ago”

Tash tapped the board lightly, as if hoping the pixels would rearrange into sanity. They did not. If anything, the display flickered and added a footnote:

“Late arrivals may be on time”

A few passengers shuffled past, each glancing at him in the way one glances at someone who has stepped into the wrong century by mistake.

A woman dragging a cart of wilted flowers paused briefly.

“You should have come earlier” she said.

“I’m right on time” Tash replied, baffled.

“Yes, yes, of course” she said, already walking away. “But only if you ignore the records.”

He opened his mouth to ask what records she meant, but she had vanished between two pillars that seemed uncomfortably close together, as though the architecture itself was trying to swallow her.

Tash inhaled deeply.

Air, at least, behaved as expected.

He adjusted his glasses, picked up his bags, and walked toward the station office, where a weather-beaten sign declared:

STATION MASTER – ALWAYS AVAILABLE.
SOMETIMES PHYSICALLY.

Inside, the Station Master was hunched over a wooden desk, scribbling fiercely on a ledger that seemed older than the station.

“Excuse me,” Tash began politely.

The man looked up with an expression of profound disappointment, as though Tash’s arrival required him to rearrange entire metaphysical assumptions.

“You’re late” he declared.

“I’m actually right on schedule” Tash said.

The Station Master blinked slowly, as if Tash had said something indecent.

“No, no, no. Look.” He flipped the ledger toward him. Under ARRIVALS, Tash saw his name written neatly in black ink, next to the date three days prior. The handwriting looked distressingly familiar.

“I didn’t sign this!!” Tash said.

“Oh, we don’t use signatures here” the Station Master replied. “Signatures are too linear. We’ve transitioned to predictive entries.”

“Predictive?”

“You were expected three days ago. So naturally, you arrived. Whether you know it yet is your concern.”

Tash blinked. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

The Station Master sighed. “It rarely does. This is Oridyn Station. We follow timetable philosophy, not timetable reality.”

He stamped something violently.

A cloud of dust rose, sparkling as if lit from inside.

“Here,” he said, sliding a small iron key across the desk. “This is for your room.”

Tash picked it up. It was heavy, uncomfortably heavy, like it had ambitions of being a paperweight in a more respectable establishment.

“Where’s my room?” he asked.

“Not built yet,” the Station Master replied cheerfully. “Construction is behind its own schedule. They were waiting for your arrival three days ago to begin.”

“But I’m here now.”

“Yes, but the workers respect causality. They refuse to build rooms retroactively.”

He leaned forward confidentially. “They tried once. It led to unpleasant choices”

Tash decided not to ask.

Instead, he tried a different angle.

“Is there another room I can stay in?”

“Oh yes,” the Station Master said immediately. “Several”

Relief washed through Tash.

“They just don’t exist.”

“...What?”

"They're on the blueprint," the man clarified.

Tash exhaled slowly. He wasn't sure what he had expected, a modest station, a mildly disorganized staff, maybe a misplaced luggage cart. But not a philosophical crisis delivered by a man with ink-stained fingers and absolute confidence.

"Do you at least know where I should go right now?" Tash asked.

"Of course!" the Station Master said, smiling warmly. "You should proceed to the Administration Wing. They will issue you the proper welcome documents."

"Great. And where is that?"

"Oh, that depends entirely on your temperament."

"My... temperament."

"Yes. Calm people find it to the east. Anxious people find it to the west. Confident people appear directly inside it. You seem uncertain, so the building will likely avoid you."

Tash stared at him.

The Station Master smiled back, utterly unburdened by coherence.

After a long moment, Tash nodded, thanked him sincerely, because politeness cost nothing, even in alternate timelines, and stepped back onto the platform.

It looked even more incomplete than before.

He had been at Oridyn Station for ten minutes, and already he felt the odd sensation of time stretching, thinning, sliding past him sideways.

He checked his wristwatch.

The second hand wasn't moving.

It wasn't stuck either, just hesitating, as if considering the pros and cons of proceeding.

Tash sighed.

He understood now why the Station Master had looked so tired.

The platform stretched outward in a way that felt inconsistent with basic geometry. When Tash walked toward the eastern end, it seemed to retreat. When he turned to walk west, that end retreated instead. After three attempts, he conceded that the platform wasn't being uncooperative, it simply didn't acknowledge the concept of *destination*.

He scanned the signs overhead, some flickered through languages he didn't recognize, others displayed numbers that seemed to rearrange themselves when he blinked. One sign read PLATFORM 2,

but when he walked closer, it gently retracted into PLATFORM TO BE DISCUSSED.

A railway worker in a faded orange vest stood nearby holding a lantern that was clearly electric.

"Excuse me," Tash said. "Which way to the Administration Wing?"

The worker stared at him blankly. Then he turned the lantern on, even though it was broad daylight. The beam of light pointed straight down, forming a perfect circle on the ground like a spotlight for philosophical announcements.

"Depends," the worker said.

"On what?"

"Who you think you are."

Tash blinked. "I...what?"

"Identity affects navigation," the worker said, as if explaining how umbrellas affect rain. "If you think like an inspector, the building will hide. If you think like you're lost, sometimes it finds you."

Tash pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Is this... a guideline?"

"No sir. This is personal experience. Guidelines were discontinued because they kept contradicting themselves."

The worker pointed toward a cluster of mismatched signposts that seemed to quarrel with each other.

"One moment that's East, next moment it's Regulation. Very moody signage."

Tash took a deep breath. "All right. I'll figure it out."

"Good luck," the worker said sympathetically. "Most people only stay lost for an hour or two, unless they panic. Then the Station takes an interest, and no one wants that."

Tash didn't ask what it meant for the Station to "take an interest." His sanity was fragile enough.

He gathered his suitcase, straightened his coat, and chose a direction at random. It turned out not to be random at all, the moment he stepped forward, the air thickened slightly, as if nudging him like an usher at a theatre.

The platform ended abruptly, not logically, not at a railing or wall, just ended. One moment there was concrete beneath his feet, the next there was grass, as if two terrains had been poorly stitched together.

Ahead lay a road that couldn't decide whether it wanted to be paved or dusty. A metal archway rose above it, its sign reading: **ADMINISTRATION – PROVISIONALLY ESTABLISHED**

Below that, in smaller print:

Constructed Pending Revision of Its Own Purpose

Tash muttered, "That explains nothing," and walked through.

The Administration Wing sat at the end of a short path lined with trees that rustled suspiciously, as if trying to exchange gossip behind his back. The building was rectangular, or at least trying to be. It had the same uneasy relationship with architecture as the rest of the Station everything looked functional from a distance and faintly nonsensical up close.

The entrance door was slightly ajar, though it also carried a sign: **DO NOT ENTER WITHOUT EXPLICIT PERMISSION**

(This sign is invalid during odd hours.)

Tash checked his watch instinctively, but the second hand still hadn't moved.

"Well, if time refuses to cooperate, I can't be held responsible," he murmured, and stepped inside.

The lobby was deserted except for a single receptionist whose desk appeared to have grown around her like a second ribcage. She looked up, startled, as if surprised by the concept of visitors.

"Name?" she asked mechanically.

"Tash"

She opened a ledger, but instead of writing anything, she simply stared at the empty page with mild suspicion.

"Your arrival was registered three days ago" she announced.

"I've been informed."

“Unfortunate,” she said sympathetically, closing the ledger without making a mark. “These things tend to complicate paperwork.”

She gestured vaguely toward a stack of files. “We already processed your entrance forms.”

“How?” Tash asked. “I wasn’t here.”

She offered a small shrug. “The system anticipates arrivals. You’re expected to sign all documents retrospectively.”

“Retrospectively to what?”

“To your previous arrival.”

Tash rubbed his temples. “But I didn’t arrive previously.”

The receptionist blinked slowly. “You might not have experienced it yet, but according to our records, you did. Don’t worry, it happens more often than you’d expect. Some people have quite complicated arrival histories.”

She pulled out a bundle of papers. “These forms require your signature. You’ll find your signature pre-applied on some pages. Please don’t be alarmed.”

Tash flipped through them.

On the third page, he found his own signature.

Dated next week.

“This isn’t possible,” he whispered.

The receptionist glanced up. “Rule number one of Oridyn Station: Never assume impossibility. It offends the infrastructure.”

He stared at her, unsure whether she was joking. She stared back with a bland, administrative smile, the kind that suggests she had long ago surrendered to the absurdity.

“Is there someone I can speak to?” Tash asked.

“Oh yes, absolutely,” she said brightly. “But whether they’ve spoken to you already is another matter. The Director is often ahead of herself.”

“Can I meet her?”

“Certainly.”

She paused.

“If she hasn’t met you already.”

Tash opened his mouth to protest, but she pressed a buzzer before he could.

A distant voice answered:

“Is that the new auditor?”

“No,” she replied, “it’s the old one.”

There was silence. Then static. Then the voice said:

“Send him in anyway.”

Tash stood uncertainly.

“Where is her office?”

The receptionist pointed down a hallway that somehow managed to lean left and right at the same time.

“Follow that corridor. When you feel the carpet slowing your footsteps, you’re close.”

Tash stared down the corridor.

The carpet seemed to ripple like a mild hallucination.

He glanced back at the receptionist.

“Welcome to Oridyn Nuclear Station” she said sympathetically.

“Don’t take anything personally. Not even your own timeline.”

Tash exhaled, took a cautious step toward the corridor, and felt the carpet soften under his shoe like warm memory foam.

It was going to be a long audit.

The corridor felt alive in the way abandoned buildings sometimes feel alive, silent, watchful, a little resentful of footsteps. The carpet was a deep maroon, but under Tash’s feet it pulsed faintly, as though reacting to each step. It didn’t glow, but it suggested it might glow if the lights ever went out.

Tash moved forward hesitantly, dragging his suitcase behind him. The wheels made no sound on the carpet. Not a squeak. Not a rumble. Not even the faint whisper of friction.

It was as if the floor was swallowing the noise whole.

About twenty steps in, the corridor forked into three identical branches.

Tash stopped.

One sign pointed left: ADMINISTRATION – PROVISIONAL
AUTHORITY

One pointed right: ADMINISTRATION – CONDITIONAL
ACCESS

The one in the middle was blank except for a small, hand-written note:

“Try your luck.”

Tash sighed.

Of course.

He approached the left fork first. The sign flickered, then rewrote itself:

ACCESS DENIED (PENDING YOUR FUTURE PERFORMANCE)

He stepped back.

The right fork rewrote itself too:

GO BACK (YOU ARE ALREADY INSIDE)

Tash frowned. He turned around to check.

He was definitely *not* inside anything resembling an office.

He hesitated, then looked at the centre path, the one advising luck. It seemed the least committed to reality, and therefore the most promising. The carpet on this route was smoother, as if many indecisive souls had walked it before him.

“Fine,” Tash muttered, “I’ll trust chaos.”

He walked down the middle corridor.

Halfway along, a door appeared on his right, not opened, not closed, just *there*, like a thought someone had forgotten to finish. It had no nameplate, no handle, no hinges. Just a faint outline on the wall.

As Tash watched, the door trembled slightly, then produced a brass doorknob out of nowhere, protruding like a mushroom that had grown overnight.

He stared at it.

The door stared back metaphorically, at least.

He reached out, hesitant.

The knob was warm, almost reassuring.

He pushed.

The door dissolved open, revealing an office that looked not merely used, but slightly lived in as if someone had napped on the paperwork recently.

A voice behind the desk said, without looking up:

"You're late for the briefing you haven't attended yet."

Tash froze.

The Director of Oridyn Nuclear Station was smaller than he expected, with thin spectacles perched on a nose that seemed perpetually offended by gravity. Her hair was pulled into a bun that radiated administrative authority.

She continued writing in a ledger without acknowledging his existence beyond the accusation.

Tash cleared his throat. "I just arrived."

"Not according to our records," she said.

"I've been hearing that a lot."

"Records don't lie," she said.

"People do?"

"Constantly. That's why we rely on the system."

Tash resisted the urge to check whether her pen was writing anything at all. It seemed to hover over the ledger, scribbling shapes that might have been letters or might have been an elaborate method of stalling.

"I'm here to conduct an audit," he said.

"Yes," she said. "You submitted your request three days ago."

"No, I..."

"Three days from now," she corrected.

Tash hesitated.

He wasn't sure whether to question her grammar or her chronology.

The Director finally looked up, peering at him as if measuring his density. "You're confused," she said.

"I'm trying not to be."

"That's admirable," she said flatly. "But at Oridyn Station we discourage unnecessary clarity. It leads to reports."

"Isn't that the point? I'm here *to* write a report."

"Yes," she nodded. "But ideally not a long one."

She flipped the ledger closed.

"Let's begin with your room."

"My room doesn't exist yet," Tash said.

"Yes, it's under temporal review."

"Temporal review?" he repeated.

"Yes. It exists according to the 3-day-ahead schedule. But the 3-day-behind schedule disagrees. We're waiting for the timelines to reconcile."

"And where am I supposed to stay until then?"

"We have a spare office chair in the storage bunker. It reclines slightly."

Tash stared at her.

She stared at him with perfect administrative indifference.

He tried a different topic.

"Is there someone who can... help guide me through the nuclear station?"

The Director's eyes brightened as if he had asked a question she genuinely liked.

"Yes. The Guidance Officer."

"Wonderful," Tash said.

"He's been missing for six months," she added. "We expect him to reappear any day now. The Station takes people sometimes."

Tash swallowed.

"...Takes people?"

"Temporarily," she said. "Though the definition of 'temporarily' varies."

She stood abruptly.

"Come," she said. "You must see the Orientation Wall."

She led him to the back of the office, where a massive chart covered the entire wall. It was supposed to be a map of the facility, but looked more like a painter had tried to chart the emotions of a migraine.

"That's the Administration Wing," she said, pointing to a shape that was either a building or a bruise.

"That's the Nuclear Reactor Containment," she added, pointing at a spiral that looped in on itself twice.

"The containment is what stands between an incident and a disaster," she replied. "It's where the reactor's excess heat, pressure, radiation gets told no. Where it's slowed down, boxed in, persuaded to behave."

She paused, then added more quietly, "Everything outside that line exists because that one holds."

"And that's the Outer Perimeter."

Tash leaned closer. "That's just... blank space."

"Yes," she said. "It expands and contracts depending on staffing levels."

Tash stepped back.

He felt a faint pressure behind his eyes, like his brain resisting the urge to understand.

The Director returned to her desk.

"Any questions?"

Tash considered his options.

He wanted to ask:

What kind of place is this?

What is wrong with the clocks?

Why do your records contradict reality?

Is this whole station some kind of elaborate prank?

What he actually said was:

"Where is the restroom?"

The Director smiled with bureaucratic serenity.

"Ah," she said. "The first real test."

She pointed to the corridor behind him.

"Third door on the left unless it's not there. In which case, try the fifth."

Tash nodded politely, stepped out of her office, and walked back into the hallway, where the carpet hummed faintly underfoot.

He had already lost track of how long he'd been inside the station.

Minutes?

Hours?

The receptionists and clerks behaved as if he had been there his whole life.

He checked his watch again.

Still no movement.

Not stuck.

Just unconvinced.

Tash walked down the corridor in search of the restroom, which had now become his anchor a simple, mundane objective in a station that treated logic like an optional extra.

The corridor stretched ahead of him like a polite threat.

Doors lined both sides, but each one carried a different excuse:

UNDER TEMPORARY REVISION

LOCKED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE

NOT ACCESSIBLE TO VISITORS, STAFF, OR ANYONE
BOUND BY TIME

REPAIRED YESTERDAY, MALFUNCTIONED
TOMORROW

And then:

RESTROOM: SUBJECT TO AVAILABILITY OF SPACE

Tash sighed.

One would think it was the easiest resource to maintain in a hallway.

He approached the third door on the left. It had a wooden finish that might have been stylish decades ago. The sign was crooked, but encouraging:

RESTROOM (LIKELY)

He pushed the door.

It opened into an empty supply closet.

A mop leaned against the corner in a defeated slump.

A bucket sat in the centre of the floor, collecting drops from a pipe that didn't appear to exist.

Tash stepped back into the hallway.

Fine, he thought. The fifth door.

The fifth door bore the sign STAFF USE ONLY but someone had scribbled below it:

"Use anyway. They won't mind."

Tash opened it tentatively.

This time he saw urinals.

Progress.

He stepped inside then froze.

A man stood at the sink, staring into the mirror with the haunted concentration of someone trying to confirm their own existence. He looked at Tash through the reflection.

"You're new," the man said flatly.

"Yes," Tash replied.

The man nodded as though this was a diagnosis.

"I'm supposed to be retiring next week," he said. "But I retired last year. And I begin training tomorrow."

Tash opened his mouth, then closed it. There were no safe responses to that.

The man dried his hands with a paper towel that dissolved into powder immediately.

"You'll get used to it," he said. "Or you won't. Either way, the Station adjusts."

He walked toward the door, but paused beside Tash.

"Word of advice," he said softly. "Whatever you see in the mirror here don't assume it's you."

He left without further clarification.

Tash stared at the mirror.

For a moment, his reflection lagged just half a heartbeat behind. It caught up reluctantly.

He exited the restroom quickly.

The corridor seemed slightly darker now, the lights dimming out of courtesy for his confusion. He made his way back to the lobby, where the receptionist was re-sorting papers in a method that would certainly have violated several international standards for documentation, assuming such standards existed here.

She looked up.

"Oh good," she said. "You haven't disappeared!"

"I didn't know that was an option," Tash replied.

"It is. Temporarily. Administration calls it 'unscheduled absence across localised timelines.'"

Tash swallowed. "Has that happened recently?"

"Last Thursday. The man reappeared before he left, so it wasn't a problem."

"I see."

"I'm sure you don't," she said pleasantly. "Most people never do." Before Tash could ask what the penalty was for "unscheduled absence," the receptionist handed him a laminated badge.

"This is your access card."

Tash examined it. It had his photo, older, somehow, and an issue date that read NEXT MONTH.

"It's pre-issued," the receptionist explained. "You'll receive the past version after you finish your audit."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Exactly," she said cheerfully. "You're adjusting well."

Tash forced a smile.

"Where do I go now?" he asked, hoping for something straightforward, like a fire exit.

"Orientation Hall," she said, pointing toward another corridor. "You must sign the Entry Declaration."

"Which is?"

"A form stating you entered the station willingly."

"I... did."

"We assume," she said smoothly. "But documentation must reflect certainty. Even if reality cannot."

Tash took a reluctant step toward the corridor.

He walked to the Orientation Hall, which oddly resembled a place where important ceremonies were held, except everything looked permanently paused, like a stage set waiting for actors who never arrived.

Chairs were arranged in perfect rows, but none faced the same direction.

A projector flickered silently, showing a slide that read:

WELCOME TO THE ORIDYN FAMILY (UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE)

Tash sat in the least risky-looking chair, one that didn't vibrate or hum or lean suggestively backward.

A thin man in a grey uniform appeared from a side door, holding a clipboard like a shield.

"Declaration?" the man said.

"Yes," Tash replied cautiously.

The man handed him a sheet of paper and a pen.

The sheet was blank except for one sentence:

I hereby confirm that I have entered Oridyn Nuclear Power Station of my own free will, despite evidence suggesting otherwise.

Tash read it twice.

"I have to sign this?"

"Yes."

"What if I don't agree with the wording?"

The man shrugged. "Most don't. But the Station insists."

"Why does the Station insist?"

"Because if you didn't enter willingly, it implies the Station invited you."

"That sounds... okay?"

"It isn't," the man said darkly. "It *never* is."

Tash stared at the declaration.

"What happens if I sign?"

"You proceed."

"And if I don't sign?"

The man blinked. "You proceed."

Tash frowned. "Then what's the difference?"

"The Station likes its rituals," he said.

Tash sighed and signed the document with a flourish of resignation.

The man inspected the signature.

"Good," he said. "This matches the version we received last week."

Tash nearly dropped the pen.

"Last week?"

"Yes. Now you may begin your audit."

"Where?"

"Oh," the man said thoughtfully. "The Station will tell you."

He gestured to the corridor outside.

"Be alert. Time is a poor communicator."

Tash stepped back into the hallway.

The hallway ahead was dim, lit by bulbs that seemed to flicker according to their own time zones.

Tash took a breath.

“Let’s find this audit,” he murmured.

The Station seemed to hear him.

Soft footsteps echoed behind him, then in front of him, then above him. Tash snapped his head around but saw no one. The sound was not loud, nor threatening, simply... suggestive. As though the Station was trying to get his attention.

He walked faster.

A security camera mounted overhead rotated to follow him but did so slowly, reluctantly, as if it resented the responsibility.

Finally, the corridor opened into a circular atrium with a massive board mounted on the wall. It displayed a constantly shifting list titled:

**AUDIT TARGETS, IN ORDER OF RELEVANCE
(PROVISIONAL)**

The items rearranged themselves fluidly, like a waiting line in which no one wanted to be first.

He stepped closer.

The list settled, temporarily, into something legible:

1. Outer Perimeter Documentation
2. Containment Entry Protocols
3. Staff Timekeeping Compliance
4. Reactor Flux Crosschecks
5. Any Other Observations (Expected, Not Required)

Under that, a small note blinked:

**NOTE: FINAL PRIORITY DETERMINED
RETROSPECTIVELY**

Tash exhaled.

If the Station could write instructions, it could surely make them less smug.

He scanned the items again. “Outer Perimeter Documentation” seemed like a reasonable place to start, after all, he had technically entered from the perimeter, even if the perimeter seemed reluctant to acknowledge him.

He turned to leave when a soft chiming sound pinged behind him.

He looked back.

At the base of the board, a compartment had opened silently. Inside it, a small folder rested, stamped:

AUDITOR PACKET, VERSION 0.9 (TIME-STABLE EDITION)

Tash removed it cautiously, half-expecting it to evaporate. It didn't. Good start.

Inside the folder:

- A map of the station that looked like it had been drawn by someone with an emotional grudge against right angles
- A list of "SAFE TIMES" to walk through specific corridors
- A chart explaining how to interpret clocks that were "ahead," "behind," or "independent" of the present
- A single instruction card that read: "Trust your watch, unless it is correct."

He stared at it.

"What does that even mean?"

A voice answered from behind him, close enough to feel deliberate, causing him to nearly drop the folder.

"It means your watch is loyal," the voice said. "But not competent."

Tash turned.

A woman in a lab coat stood leaning lightly against the wall, arms folded, posture relaxed in a way that suggested she had learned which things here were worth reacting to and which weren't. Her badge read:

Dr. Calle

Timekeeping Supervisor

Someone had scribbled beneath it in pen:

(Role Determined by Local Time Field)

She noticed him reading it and smiled.

"You're the new auditor," she said. "I could sense the confusion."

"You could sense it?"

“Yes.” She tilted her head slightly, studying him with an attention that felt unhurried but precise. “Confusion vibrates. Particularly yours.”

That landed closer than he expected.

She pushed off the wall and held out a hand. “I’m Dr. Calle. I monitor time irregularities. Formally, I mean.”

A brief pause.

“Informally, everyone here monitors time irregularities. They’re hard to ignore.”

Tash shook her hand.

Her grip was steady. Warm. Unapologetically present.

Something in his chest tightened not alarm, not curiosity. Recognition, maybe. Or relief.

“Could you explain what’s happening here?” he asked.

“Oh, certainly,” she said, as if he’d asked for directions to the cafeteria. “Time at Oridyn Station has... layers.”

“Layers?”

“Yes.” She smiled again, softer this time, like she was choosing her metaphor carefully. “Like pastry. Some parts are flaky, some dense, some misplaced. But taken together, it still forms something edible”

Tash stared at her.

She didn’t rush to fill the silence.

That, more than anything else, unsettled him.

She met his eyes, holding them a fraction longer than necessary.

“You don’t look like someone who panics when the rules bend.”

She said

A pause.

“You look like someone who wants to understand why.”

For reasons he couldn’t immediately explain, that mattered.

She turned and began walking down the corridor, not checking whether he followed.

After a beat, he did.

And somewhere between his first step and the second, Tash realized this wasn’t just the station testing him anymore.

It was paying attention.

Tash followed her down the corridor.

"Your badge," she said, tapping it, "will help the doors recognize you. Though they have opinions, so don't take it personally if they don't open."

"Doors have opinions?"

"Everything here has opinions," she said. "It's an old facility."

They reached a junction where three hallways intersected. Dr. Calle pointed to each in turn.

"That corridor leads to the old administrative records. They tend to rewrite themselves."

"That one leads to the control offices. They prefer staff over visitors."

"And that one," she said, pointing to a corridor that pulsed faintly, "leads to the Outer Perimeter files. That's where you must begin."

Tash exhaled. Finally, something resembling a direction.

"Before you go," Dr. Calle added, "one warning."

Tash braced himself.

"If you hear footsteps behind you... don't turn around."

"...Why not?"

"Because if someone is following you, turning will confuse the timeline. If no one is following you, it will invite someone to."

Tash blinked. "I'll... keep that in mind."

"Good," she said. "And one last thing."

"Yes?"

"You're doing well."

Tash wasn't sure how she concluded that. He felt like a man drowning in conceptual quicksand.

She smiled in the politely cryptic way everyone here seemed to smile, then disappeared into one of the side corridors, leaving Tash alone with the unnamed hum of the Station breathing faintly around him.

He took a step toward the Outer Perimeter corridor.

The carpet under his foot exhaled, a soft, relieved sound.

Tash's expression tightened.

“Am I imagining that?” he whispered.

The hum of the lights flickered in a way that implied: **absolutely not.**

He tightened his grip on the auditor packet and forced himself forward.

Whatever lay ahead, he had a job to do.

Even if time itself disagreed with his arrival.

CHAPTER 2

The Geometry of Silence

Tash had expected hallways.
He had not expected... this.

The entrance to the Administration Wing, at least, according to the map in his Auditor Packet, should have been a straightforward corridor with standard signage. Instead, Tash found himself standing before a rectangular frame that looked, unmistakably, like the **idea** of a doorway rather than a functioning portal.

The frame was nailed into the wall at a slightly apologetic angle, as if aware of its own inadequacy.

A sign beside it read:

ADMINISTRATION WING

(Actual location subject to mood)

Tash took a breath and stepped through the frame.

Instantly, the air felt... thicker.

Not humid, just dense, as though information was suspended in it. The silence that settled around him was not empty, it had the texture of a held breath.

The corridor beyond was angular in a way that seemed deeply offended by classical geometry. Walls slanted inward but did not meet. Corners failed to corner. A door on his right was shaped like a rhombus having a breakdown.

Tash lifted his hand experimentally and touched the nearest wall. It was warm.

Warm, and faintly vibrating, like a creature trying to pretend it was made of drywall.

He jerked his hand back.

The wall seemed to settle, disappointed.

He took a slow step forward. The silence deepened, a silence so precise it felt curated. Not the absence of noise but the presence of intentional quiet.

Even his footsteps were swallowed instantly. The soles of his shoes landed on the floor, but his ears heard nothing.

He tried humming to test the acoustics.

The sound left his mouth but refused to exist more than a foot in front of him. As though the space absorbed it with clinical efficiency.

He stopped humming.

Some places demanded respect.

This one demanded whispers.

The corridor branched into two narrow passages. Each was labelled with an engraved brass plate:

LEFT: PAPERWORK

RIGHT: MORE PAPERWORK

Below both signs was a smaller plaque:

“Choose wisely.”

Tash frowned.

“How much worse can the right be compared to the left?”

The silence answered by becoming slightly more judgmental.

He chose the left corridor, mostly out of spite.

At once, the floor dipped, then rose in a slow wave. It wasn't dramatic enough to unbalance him, but it was certainly deliberate. As if the building wanted to remind him who controlled the geometry here.

As he continued, he became aware of something odd: The corridor was narrowing.

Not in the obvious way, no visible tapering. Just a subtle tightening, like the walls were breathing in.

At first, Tash thought it was an illusion caused by the dim lighting. By the fifth step, he was certain it wasn't.

The corridor was shrinking.

Silently. Patiently.

With all the menace of an old elevator descending one floor too many.

He spun around to retreat, but the way behind him had narrowed too, far more dramatically than the path ahead.

And there, at the end of the narrowing passage, sat a small wooden desk.

Behind it, a man in a brown suit was hunched over an avalanche of papers, stamping them with impressive mechanical efficiency.

Tash approached cautiously.

The man did not look up. He simply stamped another sheet and said, "You're early."

"For what?"

"For whatever you think you're here for."

Tash blinked.

The man stamped again.

Another sheet went into one of three towering piles.

Stamp.

Shuffle.

Stack.

"You must be the clerk?" Tash said politely.

"No," the man replied, stamping another page. "I'm the Assistant to the clerk. The clerk is presently suspended."

"Suspended from duty?"

"No. Suspended in Room B-7. Temporarily misplaced during a routine review. Happens often."

Stamp.

Shuffle.

Stack.

Tash looked around. The walls now hovered uncomfortably close to his elbows.

"Is the corridor shrinking?" he asked.

"No," the man said. "You're expanding."

"What?"

"It's common among auditors," the man said. "Your sense of self grows when confronted with administrative ambiguity. The architecture makes room."

Tash was too exhausted to argue.

"I'm here to review nuclear reactor documents," he said, gesturing to the piles.

The man paused mid-stamp.

He looked up for the first time, eyes dull and resigned.

"Oh," he said. "Those."

He gestured to a stack taller than Tash.

"That's the paperwork."

"And it's stored in this hallway?"

"Yes. It's the only place large enough."

The walls pressed in demonstratively.

Tash cleared his throat. "I don't suppose there's an index."

"Of course there is," the man said, standing.

Hope fluttered weakly in Tash's chest.

The man reached under his desk and produced a thick binder.

"Here."

Tash opened it.

Every single page was blank.

He stared down at the empty pages. "This is the index?"

"Yes."

"There's nothing in it."

"Correct. Our documents are arranged in a system that defies cataloguing. The index reflects the cataloguing honestly."

Tash shut the binder.

The silence hummed around them, almost pleased.

"Is there at least some way for me to find what I'm looking for?"

The man shrugged. "Depends. What are you looking for?"

"Safety records. Protocol deviations. Inspection logs. Anything relating to the reactor's operational status."

The clerk's assistant winced slightly. "Ambitious."

"I'm an auditor."

"Yes," the man said sympathetically. "That's the problem."

He rummaged through the nearest stack, pulling out a paper at random.

"This", he handed it to Tash, "is last year's evacuation drill report."

Tash scanned it.

His name was listed among the participants.

"I wasn't here last year," Tash said.

"Yes," the man said. "But the drill accounted for future personnel."

"That's not how drills work."

"That's not how time works either," he replied calmly. "But this is Oridyn Nuclear Station."

Tash handed the paper back.

"Is there any *actual* documentation? Something I can use?"

The man sighed deeply, stamping another sheet with weary purpose.

"Paperwork experiences half-life decay," he said. "The older it is, the less sense it makes. After six months, it becomes unreadable. After a year, it becomes predictive."

"Predictive?"

"It begins documenting things that haven't happened yet."

Tash stared at the mountains of paperwork.

"And these piles?"

The clerk's assistant gestured proudly.

"That's the predictive zone."

Tash pinched his forehead, feeling a pressure building behind his eyes, the same pressure he felt when someone explained a complicated tax rule using interpretive dance.

"I'm supposed to audit this?" he asked.

"Yes," the man said, stamping another page. "But don't worry."

Tash raised an eyebrow. "Why not?"

"Because whatever you write," the man said gently, "the Station will correct it before it becomes official."

Tash stared.

"You mean... my audit isn't actually final?"

"Oh no," the man said. "Your audit determines the Station's self-assessment. The Station determines the truth."

"So my work is symbolic."

"Precisely."

The silence grew smug.

Tash exhaled.

“Well,” he said, “I suppose I should begin.”

The man nodded approvingly, handed him a stack of papers, then pointed down the shrinking corridor.

“You’ll find more documents ahead. Just keep walking. The Wing will contract where it dislikes you, and expand where it approves.”

“Approves of what?”

“Your intentions.”

Tash blinked.

“I didn’t know buildings could judge intentions.”

“They can here,” the man said. “Good luck.”

Tash took the stack of papers and stepped deeper into the narrowing hall, where the geometry bent itself like a polite but unforgiving labyrinth.

The silence closed in behind him, unbroken, dense, and watching. The corridor ahead twisted slightly to the left, as if trying to avoid direct eye contact. Tash adjusted the stack of papers under his arm and stepped forward cautiously, testing each floor tile like one might test the loyalty of a suspicious friend.

The silence thickened around him, no air conditioner hum, no fluorescent buzzing, no distant footfalls. Even the sound of his own breathing seemed hesitant, as if reconsidering its presence. He reached a bend where the hallway turned sharply, forming an unreasonable angle that interior designers would classify as “hostile.” The paper underneath his arm crinkled faintly. The sound was so loud in the dense quiet that Tash nearly apologized to the corridor.

He turned the corner.

The hallway widened unexpectedly. Not by a few centimetres, dramatically. A sudden, cavernous room opened up in front of him without warning.

Tash froze.

The room was large enough to be a small archive or a modest-sized gymnasium, he wasn’t sure which the architects had intended. Tall shelves lined the far wall, holding stacks of files

arranged in meticulous disorder. A single desk sat in the middle, illuminated by a pale, unhelpful lamp.

At the desk sat a woman wearing half-moon glasses perched dangerously low on her nose. She didn't look up as he approached, but her fingers continued typing on a typewriter that seemed older than both of them combined.

The keys clacked rhythmically, but the page didn't move.

Tash waited politely for her to acknowledge him.

She did not.

He cleared his throat softly.

She typed faster.

He cleared his throat louder.

The typewriter clacked aggressively.

Finally, he ventured, "Excuse me!"

"No," she said, without looking up.

"I... haven't said anything yet."

"You intended to," she said sharply. "And right now I'm rejecting that intention. Try again later."

Tash stared at her, unsure whether to be offended or impressed.

He tried again, more cautiously. "I'm looking for reactor documentation"

"And I'm looking for peace," she said, still typing. "We can't always have what we want."

"This is the Administration Wing, correct?"

She sighed, pulled her hands off the typewriter, and looked up at him with the weary grace of someone who had fought randomness for so long she had begun to resemble it.

"What do you need?"

"R-reactor documents," he stammered, as if asking for something indecent.

She considered him like a judge weighing a sentence.

"Which ones?"

"Any," he said. "All. Everything relating to the reactor's operational history."

Her expression softened slightly. "Oh. You're that auditor."

"Yes."

She nodded. "We were warned about you."

"Warned?"

"Oh yes." She tapped a paper on her desk. "You're supposed to be 'diligent, punctual, and occasionally delusional.'"

Tash frowned. "I don't think that last one is.."

"Accurate?" she interrupted. "Oh, don't worry. They didn't mean it as a criticism. Delusion is a survival mechanism here."

She stood up with effort and walked toward the tall shelves. As she moved, the shelves seemed to tilt away slightly, as though uncomfortable with her approach.

She pointed at a stack of folders.

"These are the containment reports."

Tash took the top one and opened it.

The first page read:

"CONTAINMENT INCIDENT #47 – COMMITTED IN THE FUTURE (DATE TBD)"

He flipped to the next page.

"See next week's documentation for cause."

Next page.

"Refer back to previous annual report."

He groaned.

She shrugged sympathetically. "The containment cycle is circular. Happens to the best of systems."

"What about incident logs?" he asked.

"Oh, those are easy." She handed him another file.

He opened it.

Inside, the pages were blank.

"Is this... a joke?"

"No. Those are the logs. The incidents haven't happened yet."

Tash stared at her. "Then why are they logged?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Because they will happen. We simply prepare."

He felt a headache forming.

"Inspection reports?" he asked desperately.

She walked to the next shelf and pulled out a binder so large it could bench-press smaller binders.

She placed it on the table with a thud.

Tash opened it to the first page.

The text read:

"Inspection conducted by Auditor Tash, satisfactory."

His blood ran cold.

"That's me," he whispered.

"Yes," she said. "It's your future inspection."

He turned the page rapidly.

"All records validated by Auditor Tash.."

Page after page, he found his own signature, looping neatly at the bottom of reports he had never written.

"This is impossible," he said.

She patted his arm gently. "Nothing is impossible here. Only inconvenient."

"I didn't write these."

"No, not yet. But the Station likes to get ahead of paperwork."

He felt dizzy. He sat down.

She watched him with professional concern. "First displacement episode?"

"First what?" he croaked.

"Displacement episode. When time-sensitive individuals first encounter predictive documentation. It's very common."

Tash rubbed his eyes. "Why does the Station do this? Why pre-write my reports?"

"Efficiency," she said.

"That doesn't explain anything."

"Exactly," she said. "Which is why it explains everything."

The silence around them tightened, as if approving this reasoning.

Tash took a deep breath.

"Fine," he said. "Show me something real. Something not predictive. Something that actually happened in the past."

She smiled kindly. "Ah. You want historical records."

"Yes."

She walked to a separate drawer, opened it, and pulled out a single slim file.

He reached for it eagerly.

She held it back. "Before I give this to you, I must warn you..."

"What?"

"These documents do not like being read."

"...What?"

"They resist. They blur. They rearrange themselves. They get offended easily."

"They're paper."

"You think so now," she said.

She handed him the file.

Tash opened it.

Inside, the pages were filled with dense handwriting that seemed to shift slightly whenever he tried to focus.

He pressed the page with his finger.

The ink blurred subtly, as if trying to dodge contact.

"This is absurd," Tash muttered.

"Shh," she whispered sharply. "You'll hurt its feelings."

He stared at her.

Then at the file.

Then back at her.

"You're serious."

"Very."

Tash sighed.

The silence in the room seemed amused.

He decided to change tactics.

"Do you have a floor plan of this Wing?"

"Of course," she said, and handed him a folded map.

He opened it.

The map showed a hallway.

A single hallway.

No rooms.

No archive.

No desk.

Just a straight, empty corridor ending in a wall.

Tash looked around.

The room they were standing in did not exist on the map.

“Where are we?” he asked quietly.

She smiled apologetically.

“In the space between what the Station admits exists,” she said, “and what it refuses to acknowledge.”

Tash closed the map and inhaled carefully.

He had seen enough.

“I think I’ll continue my audit elsewhere,” he said.

She nodded. “Reasonable. The Geometry rarely treats visitors kindly.”

As he stepped out of the room, the walls welcomed him by narrowing slightly.

Tash walked forward, holding tightly to the vibrating file of historical records, while the silence behind him rearranged itself in satisfaction.

The corridor outside the archive room felt tighter than before, as if the Wing was punishing him for discovering a part of it that wasn’t officially on the map. The floor sloped downward now, so subtly he doubted his own senses, but undeniably. Walking felt like descending a polite incline designed by someone who didn’t believe in stairs.

The vibrating file under his arm hummed faintly, like a disgruntled insect. Tash wished it would stop.

He turned a corner.

Immediately, he came face-to-face with a sign so large and so officious-looking it demanded obedience:

**“SECTION 14B , PAPERWORK HALF-LIFE ZONE
AUTHORIZED PERSISTENCE REQUIRED”**

Below that, in smaller print:

“Documents decay. Visitors may too.”

Tash considered turning back.

Then he remembered the Director’s confident, cruel smile.

No, running wasn’t an option.

He pushed forward.

The corridor opened into a chamber with exposed beams and dust motes dancing in shafts of light that didn’t seem to have a

source. A massive metal cabinet dominated the far wall, its drawers labelled not by years or subjects, but by half-lives:

30 DAYS

145 DAYS

1 YEAR

5 YEARS

INDETERMINATE

Tash stepped toward the nearest drawer: 30 DAYS.

When he pulled it open, a warm gust of air escaped, humid, like the breath of a creature in hiding. Inside lay a pile of documents so faded they resembled ancient scrolls. The ink had bled into the paper in soft swirls, as if someone had written them underwater.

He picked up a sheet labelled:

“VENTILATION SYSTEM – URGENT”

The date read: Ten Months Ago

Which meant it shouldn’t even be in this drawer.

As he blinked at the page, the letters began to pale further, as though embarrassed by their own existence.

Tash dropped it back into the drawer.

A voice behind him said, “Careful. They don’t like being stared at.”

Tash whirled around.

A tall man in coveralls stood leaning casually against a filing cabinet. His badge read:

HALF-LIFE CUSTODIAN

(Provisional)

The man lifted a hand in greeting. “You must be the auditor.”

“Yes,” Tash said. “And you are...?”

“Maintenance of Reality,” the man replied matter-of-factly. “I patch holes in documentation before they collapse. Keeps the place running.”

Tash blinked. “Holes in documentation?”

“Oh yes.” The custodian tapped a drawer. “Old paperwork decays. Pages fall apart. Sentences rot. The meaning leaks out. If

you leave them unchecked long enough, they take the walls with them.”

“That sounds impossible.”

“That’s the attitude that gets people lost in here,” the custodian said cheerfully.

He moved to the next drawer, 145 DAYS, and pulled it open.

Documents inside glowed faintly, just a soft bioluminescent shimmer like deep-sea creatures.

“They’re at a delicate age,” he explained. “Too young to ignore, too old to trust.”

Tash tried to read a page.

It shifted under his gaze, words rearranging like timid animals.

The custodian gently closed the drawer. “Better not encourage them.”

“I’m starting to understand why the Administration Wing is... what it is,” Tash muttered.

“Good,” the custodian said. “Understanding is the first stage of disorientation.”

“That sounds more like a warning.”

“It is.”

The custodian leaned closer conspiratorially. “Let me guess. You’re looking for stable records?”

“Yes.”

The custodian laughed, a low, patient laugh of a man who had tried and failed to warn far better auditors.

“Stable records,” he said, wiping his eyes. “In this station. Good one.”

Tash resisted the urge to groan.

“Do you at least have anything useful in that cabinet?” Tash asked, pointing toward the INDETERMINATE drawer.

The custodian stiffened slightly.

“That drawer,” he said solemnly, “is not to be opened.”

“Why?”

“Because we don’t know what’s in it.”

“You never checked?”

“We checked once,” he said darkly. “We lost two interns and most of the definition of ‘Tuesday.’ Still haven’t gotten it back properly. Feels shorter now.”

Tash stared at him.

“Then why keep the drawer?”

“For compliance.”

“Compliance with what?”

The custodian shrugged. “Whatever the Station believes in at the moment.”

Tash exhaled and looked around the chamber.

“Is there any section here that contains documents that don’t fight back?”

“Oh yes,” the custodian said. “Two rooms down. The ‘Paperwork of Certainty’ archive.”

“That sounds promising.”

“It used to be,” he said. “Until certainty expired.”

“How does certainty expire?”

He pointed at Tash’s vibrating file.

“You’re holding proof.”

The file buzzed weakly, offended.

Tash put it down gingerly.

The custodian sighed. “Come on. You need context.”

He led Tash through a narrow doorway into a smaller chamber filled with meticulously labelled folders.

The labels read things like:

PROTOCOLS (TEMPORARY)

TRUTHS (REVISION 3)

ABSOLUTES (PENDING REVIEW)

“This used to be where we kept unchanging rules,” the custodian explained. “Then the Station grew older, and now everything shifts.”

Tash flipped through a folder labelled ABSOLUTES (PRE-REVIEW).

Inside, he found:

“Gravity: Recommended but not mandatory.”

“Time: Suggested but variable.”

"Logic: Use sparingly."

Tash closed the folder immediately.

"So nothing here is reliable?" he asked.

"Reliable? No. But informative? Yes. In the same way thunder informs you rain is coming."

Tash massaged his temples.

"Is this Wing designed to confuse people?"

"No," the custodian said. "It's designed to organize documents. People are incidental."

Tash leaned against the nearest shelf.

It leaned back.

Just a fraction.

Just enough to remind him who was in charge.

The custodian clapped his hands suddenly. "Right! Before the Wing gets moody, you should meet the Archivist."

"There's an Archivist?" Tash asked hopefully.

"Yes. She remembers things the Station forgets."

"That sounds incredibly useful."

"It isn't," the custodian said. "She's always arguing with reality."

Tash blinked. "Arguing?"

"Yes. Reality insists on reformatting itself. She insists it shouldn't. They've been fighting for years."

"And who wins?"

"Reality," the custodian said. "Always wins."

Tash sighed. "Where is she?"

The custodian pointed to a heavy door marked:

ARCHIVIST, HANDLE WITH CARE

"Good luck," he said. "She doesn't get visitors often."

Tash took a deep breath, reached for the doorknob, and stepped inside.

The room beyond was quiet.

But not the same quiet as before.

This silence had weight.

History lived here, warped, wounded, and waiting.

The Archivist's room was the quietest place Tash had entered in months, perhaps in years. Not the suffocating, curated silence of the corridors, but a deeper quiet, the kind one encounters in ancient libraries.

The room was lit by a single lamp on a desk overflowing with loose pages, bookmarks, and pencils that had chewed marks on them, as if someone had fought reality with their teeth.

A tall, severe woman stood with her back facing him, sorting papers with the precision of a surgeon and the resentment of an underpaid deity. Her hair was tied in a tight bun, but unruly strands escaped, as though the job had become too much even for her hairstyle.

She spoke without turning around.

"If you are here to ask where the Geometry ends, it doesn't."

Tash froze.

He hadn't said a word.

The Archivist continued rearranging pages.

Her voice was low, dry, and somehow brittle.

"If you're here to ask which papers are accurate, none are."

Tash swallowed.

"And if you're here to ask whether the Station is 'haunted' or 'sentient' or 'malicious' or simply incompetent, the answer is yes."

He cleared his throat. "I'm the auditor."

"I know," she said before he finished. "Your predecessors screamed much louder."

Tash stepped forward cautiously. "I just want access to the station's historical records. The real ones."

She laughed, a thin, sharp laugh that sounded like folded paper tearing.

"Oh, I like you," she said. "So naive. So considerate. So tragically optimistic."

She turned around.

Her eyes were sharp, restless, and faintly exhausted, like someone who had read too many contradictory reports and survived only by developing contempt for them.

"You're wasting your time, you know," she said.

“That seems to be the theme here.”

She walked toward him, carrying a stack of yellowing papers.

“I’m the Archivist,” she said. “I preserve what the Station tries to forget.”

“The Station forgets things?” Tash asked.

“Constantly. It’s old. It’s stubborn. And it prioritizes relevance over truth.”

She dropped the stack of papers into his arms.

Dust exploded from them like a sigh escaping a corpse.

Tash coughed.

“What are these?”

“Records from the era before the Station began... reorganizing itself.”

She turned back to her desk, already lost in another stack of rebellious papers.

Tash looked at the vibrating file in his hands.

He took a deep breath, stepped back toward the door, and opened it.

The corridor outside was narrower.

And it was watching him.

The corridor outside the Archivist’s room had narrowed by at least a third. Tash felt it immediately, his shoulders brushed the walls with every step, and the floor rose just slightly at the edges, like it was trying to encourage him toward the centre.

He walked slowly, one hand pressed against the vibrating folder, the other holding the Archivist’s notebook. The silence here had grown heavier, more personal. It felt like the building was tuning itself to his presence, adjusting, compressing, observing.

He didn’t appreciate the attention.

About ten steps in, the lights flickered.

Not the usual flicker of old fluorescent bulbs, but something more intentional:
bright, dim, bright, dim, as if signalling him in a code he didn’t know.

Tash froze.

The flickering stopped.

He exhaled. “Okay. Good. Stay that way.”

The light flickered once more, almost spitefully.

He resumed walking, trying to ignore the sensation that the walls were leaning inward to listen.

A few meters ahead, the hallway split into two paths. Both were labelled:

ADMINISTRATIVE RECORDS (TEMPORAL DIVISION)

But underneath, someone had added two handwritten notes:

Left hallway: "Not to scale."

Right hallway: "Not to trust."

Tash stared at both options.

"I hate this place," he whispered into the geometry.

The geometry, predictably, said nothing.

He chose the left path, mostly because it seemed slightly wider. Unfortunately, that advantage evaporated the moment he set foot inside. The walls promptly slid closer.

He sighed. "Of course."

As he walked, something strange happened: The hallway subtly lengthened.

One moment the end was twenty steps away.

Next moment, it was thirty.

He tried to speed up.

The hallway matched his pace.

He slowed down.

The hallway slowed too.

He stopped entirely.

The hallway obediently froze, holding its breath.

Tash took a step backward.

The hallway *reluctantly* shortened.

It was unmistakably alive.

Not in a biological sense, but in the way, full of grudges, preferences, and extremely loud silences.

"Okay," Tash said softly. "I understand. You want something."

The hallway responded by slanting downward by a single degree.

Not enough to make him fall.

Just enough to convey disappointment.

He cleared his throat. "Do you... expect me to go forward?"

Silence thickened. The angle increased half a degree.

"Fine," he said. "Fine."

He walked forward.

Ten meters later, the hallway spat him out into a small administrative chamber.

The room was startlingly neat, an unsettling contrast to the chaos outside. Two desks sat opposite each other. A clock ticked loudly on the wall, the only audible sound in the Wing.

A man stood behind the nearer desk.

He was dressed in a crisp shirt that looked freshly ironed, which was impressive considering the Wing's refusal to acknowledge time consistently. His hair was neatly parted. His smile was unnervingly symmetrical.

"Welcome," he said. "You've reached Administrative Timing Control."

Tash glanced around. "This is a timing office?"

"Yes," the man said proudly. "We coordinate clocks."

"All of them?"

"Not all," the man corrected. "Just the ones that agree with reality."

"How many does that include?"

The man opened a filing cabinet, pulled out a paper, and handed it to Tash.

The paper said:

"Number of clocks aligned with reality: 0 (Temporarily unstable)"

Tash stared. "Zero?"

"We had one last year," the man said nostalgically. "A wristwatch belonging to a technician. It remained accurate for twenty-seven glorious minutes."

"What happened?"

The man sighed. "He walked through Corridor G9."

"And?"

"G9 has... strong opinions about punctuality."

Tash nodded slowly.

“Of course it does.”

The man gestured to the second desk. “Please sit. You must fill out a Time Acknowledgment Form.”

Tash hesitated. “What is that?”

“It is a declaration that you accept the Wing’s temporal behaviour and agree not to question inconsistencies.”

Tash felt his sanity wobble. “I’m here to *audit* inconsistencies.”

“Yes,” the man agreed cheerfully. “But acknowledging them is different from questioning them.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Good,” the man said. “That will make this much easier.”

He slid a form toward Tash.

It was a single-page document titled:

“TEMPORAL BEHAVIOR CONSENT FORM”

Below were three statements:

1. *I accept that time may fluctuate without warning.*
2. *I will respect the autonomy of clocks, watches, and rhythm-based devices.*
3. *I shall not blame the Administration Wing for personal temporal disorientation.*

Tash groaned softly.

“And if I don’t sign?”

“You will still be subject to all the above,” the man said pleasantly. “But the Wing will take it personally.”

Tash considered the possibility that the Wing had already taken several things personally.

He signed the form.

The man stamped it with undue enthusiasm. “Lovely. Now, do you need anything else?”

Tash opened the Archivist’s notebook. “I need to verify safety protocols. But I can’t find anything consistent.”

“Consistency,” the man said gravely, “is not compatible with the Wing’s atmosphere.”

Tash exhaled. “Is there at least a record of who maintains the documentation?”

“Oh yes,” the man said, pulling out another file. He opened it proudly.

Inside was a single sentence:

“MAINTAINERS OF FILES: N/A (SELF-MAINTAINING)”

Tash shut the folder.

He felt his brain physically resisting comprehension.

The man smiled sympathetically. “Would you like tea?”

Tash blinked. “Tea?”

“Yes,” the man said. “We find it helps newcomers accept the inevitability of structural confusion.”

Tash nodded. “Fine. Tea.”

The man disappeared into a side room.

Tash allowed himself a moment of rest.

The silence here was different, structured, orderly, almost civilized. It reminded him of office silence rather than cosmic silence.

But then

Something clicked behind him.

He turned.

The door he had entered through was now on the opposite wall.

“Oh no,” he whispered.

The room had rotated.

Or he had.

Either way, the geometry had changed again.

The man returned with a cup of tea. “Here you go.”

Tash gestured to the moved door. “Did you see that?”

“Oh yes,” the man said. “The Wing rearranges rooms when it thinks meetings are becoming unproductive.”

“But I just got here.”

“Exactly. It’s pre-emptively disappointed.”

Tash drank the tea, which tasted how confusion feels, warm, a little bitter, slightly wrong.

He looked at the file in his lap, the notebook in his hand, the rearranged room around him.

“I have to leave,” Tash said, standing.

“Of course,” the man said. “The Wing has decided your time here is complete.”

“How do I exit?”

“That,” the man said, “depends on how the Wing feels about you.”

Tash exhaled dramatically. “Which is...?”

The man listened to the silence for a moment, then nodded.

“Moderately tolerant.”

“Meaning?”

“You may leave.”

Tash walked through the new door, which opened into a corridor that, mercifully, seemed slightly less judgmental.

He took two steps.

The silence stretched, as if waiting.

Tash straightened his coat, squared his shoulders, and marched forward.

He had survived the Geometry of Silence.

CHAPTER 3

The Induction of Uncertainty

The Radiation Safety Office was located at the far end of a corridor that clearly hadn't decided whether it wanted to be indoors or outdoors. The ceiling above Tash alternated between concrete and cloudy sky in irregular patches. One moment he walked beneath fluorescent lights; the next, beneath drifting clouds that somehow didn't let in rain.

A sign on the door ahead read:

RADIATION SAFETY OFFICE

Tash paused.

He pushed the door open.

Inside was a small waiting area with mismatched chairs arranged in a semicircle, as if preparing for an intervention. A poster on the wall showed a cheerful cartoon atom giving a thumbs-up and saying:

"RADIATION: IT'S NOT THE DOSE, IT'S THE COMPANY YOU KEEP!"

Tash sat in the least dangerous-looking chair. A moment later, another man entered the waiting area, tall, gaunt, with an expression halfway between concern and resignation. He sat two seats away and nodded politely.

"You the new auditor?" the man asked.

"Yes."

"Condolences."

"Thank you," Tash said automatically. "You work here?"

"Work?" The man laughed softly. "No one really *works* here. We persist."

Tash decided not to pursue that.

Before he could ask another question, a door swung open with theatrical abruptness.

“YOU!” a voice thundered.

Both men looked up.

A tall woman with a bun so tight it looked weaponized stood in the doorway, pointing directly at Tash.

“You’re late for the safety briefing!”

Tash blinked. “I’m... sorry?”

“Don’t apologize!” she snapped. “If you apologize, the system will record you as responsible for delays occurring next week.”

Tash swallowed. “I won’t apologize, then.”

“Good,” she said. “Come.”

She marched into the next room. Tash reluctantly followed, glancing at the gaunt man, who mouthed “good luck” with the solemnity of a farewell blessing.

Inside, the briefing room was set up like a classroom from the 1970s, long wooden benches, a chalkboard, and a projector cart that seemed to hum in ancient dialects. The woman gestured for Tash to sit.

“I am Dr. Angelina Nord,” she declared. “Chief Radiation Safety Officer.”

She tapped the chalkboard, where several diagrams had been drawn.

Except... the diagrams were moving.

Not animated, just slowly shifting their positions like restless furniture. One arrow slid to the left. A diagram labelled “FALLOUT VECTOR” turned ninety degrees without permission.

Tash stared.

“Oh, ignore the drawings,” Dr. Nord said casually. “They’re imprecise.”

“What do they represent?” Tash asked.

“Danger.”

“...What kind of danger?”

She smiled patiently.

“The kind that doesn’t want to be described.”

Tash suppressed the urge to cry.

Dr. Nord picked up a strange device from the table, a rectangular badge with a small screen.

"This is your dosimeter" she said, handing it to him.

Tash examined it, normally dosimeters measure radiation but this looked different.

"It's... different."

"Yes!" she said proudly. "Because it doesn't measure radiation."

"It doesn't?"

"No, no. That would be too simple. This measures your *temporal drift*."

"My what?"

"Your drift through localized time distortion," she said, as though describing the weather. "At Oridyn Station, ionizing radiation is the least of your worries. Time is the real hazard."

Tash stared at the device. The screen displayed:

TEMPORAL LOSS RATE: 0.03 SEC/MIN

STATUS: ACCEPTABLE (FOR NOW)

"Is this normal?" he asked quietly.

"Normal?" Dr. Nord laughed. "Nothing here is normal. But that's within tolerance."

"What's high?"

"Anything above 0.1 seconds per minute."

"What happens then?"

"You begin losing time too quickly. Minutes slip away. Then hours. Some people lose days during lunch."

Tash blinked. "Days?"

"Oh, yes. We had an engineer last year who aged four months during a coffee break."

"...How?"

Dr. Nord shrugged. "Poor hydration, probably."

She stepped toward a strange display case at the back of the room. Inside were dozens of other dosimeters, each flickering, blinking, or simply stuck at zeros.

"These," she said, "are from employees who didn't calibrate properly."

Tash peered at one labelled 'T. Klemens , Last Seen Wednesday'.

“What happened to him?” he asked.

“Which version?” Dr. Nord replied.

“I’m sorry?”

“We have two reports. One says he quit. The other says he is still missing. I personally believe he simply wandered into a time pocket and will re-join us when causality loops back around.”

Tash opened his mouth, but Dr. Nord held up a hand.

“Save your questions. You’re not ready.”

She turned to the chalkboard again.

“Let me explain how we handle radiation at Oridyn.”

Tash braced himself.

“First,” she said, writing in big, authoritative letters:

DOSE IS IRRELEVANT

Tash blinked. “Irrelevant?”

“Yes. The reactors here are shielded well. Exposure is minimal. The bigger issue is how long you remain in the Station.”

She wrote:

DURATION = DANGER

“So radiation is safe, but time is dangerous?” Tash asked.

“Oh yes,” she said brightly. “We’ve had far more injuries due to time slippage than radiation exposure.”

She continued writing:

SAFETY RULE #1: TRUST THE CLOCKS THAT DISAGREE WITH YOU.

SAFETY RULE #2: IF YOU FEEL DÉJÀ VU, LEAVE THE ROOM IMMEDIATELY.

SAFETY RULE #3: IF YOU SEE YOUR PAST SELF, DON’T MAKE EYE CONTACT.

Tash’s stomach sank.

“These are serious?” he whispered.

“Deadly serious.”

She paused, then added:

SAFETY RULE #4: IF YOU SEE YOUR FUTURE SELF, RUN.

Tash stared.

“Run where?” he asked.

"Anywhere. It won't help, but it will make you feel better."

The silence in the room thickened, nodding in agreement.

Dr. Nord moved to the projector.

"Let's continue," she said. "We have seventeen slides to cover."

She pressed a button.

The projector displayed:

SLIDE 1: TEMPORAL MALPRACTICE AND YOU

(Note: Future slides may contradict this one.)

Tash felt a migraine beginning in real-time, perhaps accelerated-time.

"Before we proceed," Dr. Nord said, "I must warn you: the content of this briefing may not remain consistent."

"What do you mean?"

"Sometimes the slides get... ahead of themselves."

As if to prove her point, the next slide appeared automatically:

SLIDE 9: WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU HAVE ALREADY DONE IT

Tash raised a trembling hand.

"Dr. Nord... why did it skip eight slides?"

"It didn't skip," she said cheerfully. "Slide 9 simply arrived early."

Tash stared up at the ceiling.

He missed the days when "uncertainty" meant an unclear deliverable or an ambiguous deadline.

Here, uncertainty had become a living organism.

Dr. Nord clapped her hands. "Excellent. Let's begin your induction."

Tash closed his eyes.

This was going to be a very, very long briefing.

The projector whirled softly, as if sighing under the weight of its own responsibility. Slide 9 lingered, uncomfortably self-aware, before jumping backward to a title slide Tash was fairly certain he had already seen, unless it hadn't happened yet.

SLIDE 3: WHAT NOT TO DO WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING

Dr. Nord nodded approvingly. "Ah, good. The slides are calming down."

Tash resisted the urge to ask calming relative to what.

Dr. Nord paced slowly in front of him, each footstep absorbed into the thick silence like sugar dissolving in tea.

"As you've probably noticed," she said, "Oridyn Nuclear Station operates under slightly... unconventional rules."

"I've noticed," Tash said weakly.

"Excellent. Awareness is half the battle."

"What's the other half?"

"Not panicking."

"I'm doing poorly, then."

"That's fine," she said. "Most auditors do. Some even panic before arriving. The Station sends the feeling backward."

Tash rubbed his forehead. "Dr. Nord, does anything here make sense?"

"Of course," she said. "Just not at the time you want it to."

She clicked to the next slide.

SLIDE 4: TEMPORAL HOTSPOTS AND WHY AVOIDANCE IS YOUR FRIEND

The slide displayed a cheerful diagram of an employee walking calmly away from a glowing purple vortex.

Tash raised a hand. "Is that... accurate?"

"More or less. We don't have actual images, temporal hotspots refuse to be photographed."

"Refuse?"

"Oh yes. Cameras behave strangely near them. Last time we tried, the camera aged fifty years in ten seconds."

Tash closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, the slide had changed.

SLIDE 12: SYMPTOMS OF TEMPORAL DRIFT

- Memory loops
- Short-term déjà vu
- Long-term déjà vu
- Chronological indigestion
- Sudden nostalgia for events you have not yet lived
- Seeing Thursdays on Mondays

Tash stared. "What is chronological indigestion?"

Dr. Nord smiled. "You'll know it if it happens."

"I don't want it to happen."

"Then you're already a step behind. Temporal conditions here don't honour preferences."

The slide flickered, rearranging itself into discrete chunks, then stabilized again.

Tash's dosimeter buzzed softly at his waist.

He looked down.

TEMPORAL LOSS RATE: 0.04 SEC/MIN

STATUS: MILD DISPLACEMENT

"Dr. Nord?" he said nervously. "My drift just increased."

"Yes," she said calmly. "Safety briefings tend to accelerate temporal loss. Concentration distorts time."

"That seems counterproductive."

"Well," she shrugged, "Though safety is the Station's strongest subject. The Reactor was designed for efficiency. We were added later."

Tash's sense of reality wobbled.

The projector dinged cheerfully and moved ahead.

SLIDE 7: SAFE PRACTICES WHEN YOU'RE UNSURE
WHAT YEAR IT IS

Dr. Nord gestured at the bullet points.

"Now this is important. If you ever feel temporally displaced..."

"I think I am now," Tash muttered.

"..follow these steps.

Step 1: Sit down."

"I'm already sitting."

"Good.

Step 2: Close your eyes."

Tash hesitated.

Dr. Nord leaned forward. "Close them."

He obeyed.

Darkness pressed against him gently, like a blanket.

"Step 3: Do not attempt to orient yourself by memory," she said.

"Your memories will lie."

"That's comforting."

"Step 4: Check your dosimeter."

"I did."

"Do it again."

He looked.

0.05 SEC/MIN

STATUS: UNSTEADY

Tash's breath caught.

"It's rising!"

"Perfectly normal. The first briefing always accelerates uncertainty. You're absorbing information faster than your personal timeline can process."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you'll adapt," she said calmly. "Or you'll fragment. But adaptation is much more likely."

Tash had no interest in being a statistical outlier.

The slide changed again.

SLIDE 15: TIME POCKETS: SMALL, ADORABLE, DEADLY

The image showed a smiling purple orb.

Tash pointed. "What exactly is a time pocket?"

"Localized temporal disjunction," Dr. Nord said. "Like a bubble of time behaving independently from its surroundings."

"Are they dangerous?"

"They're... energetic," she said diplomatically. "Harmless if left alone. Fatal if stepped inside."

Tash froze. "Have people stepped inside?"

"Yes."

"And... what happened to them?"

"Oh," she said lightly, "they came back."

"And?"

"With opinions."

"Opinions?"

"Yes. About everything. Especially past events they haven't lived yet."

Tash swallowed.

"I'm never going near one."

"Excellent!" she said. "They adore confidence. They only swallow the timid."

This was not reassuring.

The slide clicked.

SLIDE 2 (REPEATED): UNDERSTANDING YOUR DOSIMETER

(Presented again for your convenience)

Dr. Nord beamed. "Wonderful. It's looping."

"Is that good?"

She shrugged. "Loops happen. You'll get used to those too."

Tash's head spun.

He concentrated on the dosimeter.

0.06 SEC/MIN

"Dr. Nord, this is getting worse."

She approached him, examined the screen, and nodded.

"Yes. You are entering your Induction Phase."

"My... what?"

"Induction Phase. The period where new arrivals begin absorbing ambient temporal noise. Your drift will increase until your internal time stabilizes with the Station's."

"That sounds terrible."

"It is. But temporary."

"How long does it last?"

She thought for a moment.

"Between ten minutes and five weeks."

Tash's heart rate skyrocketed.

The dosimeter beeped.

Not helpfully.

"Calm," Dr. Nord said, placing a steadying hand on his shoulder.

"Panicking increases drift. The Station senses emotional instability."

"The Station senses emotions?"

"Oh, absolutely. It's very sensitive. That's why we recommend emotional neutrality."

She clicked the projector.

SLIDE 17: EMOTIONAL MANAGEMENT FOR
TEMPORAL INTEGRITY

Bullet points appeared:

- Don't think too hard
- Don't worry too much
- Don't fear the inevitable
- Do not question the structure
- Do not ask why
- Avoid existential panic
- Avoid non-existential panic
- Avoid panic

Tash stared at the list.

"I'm not equipped for this environment."

"No one is," she said cheerfully. "Not even me. I've just stopped resisting it."

The projector hummed again.

SLIDE 18: WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU'RE OUT OF SYNC

Tash leaned forward.

Finally, useful information.

Dr. Nord read aloud dramatically:

"When out of sync:

- Sit down
- Breathe
- Do not attempt to catch up
- Allow time to pass you
- Trust the Station
- Trust your dosimeter
- Trust nothing else"

"That's contradictory."

"Exactly," she said. "The Station respects balance."

Tash felt dizzy.

"Dr. Nord," he said weakly, "is there any chance of going back to normal?"

"Yes," she said confidently.

Tash brightened.

"For a moment," she added.

He deflated.

She checked her watch.

"Time for your field demonstration."

"What demonstration?"

"Reactor-adjacent temporal acclimatization."

"That sounds dangerous."

"It is," she said. "But you'll learn much faster when your life is at risk."

Tash paled. "Can I refuse?"

"Oh, absolutely," she said.

He exhaled in relief.

"But the Station won't."

The door behind her opened by itself, silently, ominously.

A breeze swept into the room, even though there were no windows.

The dosimeter beeped.

Tash felt the temperature drop by one impossible degree.

Dr. Nord smiled encouragingly.

"Come," she said. "Let's accelerate your uncertainty."

The corridor outside the briefing room looked nothing like the one Tash had used to enter. The ceiling had grown taller, the walls smoother, and the lights above pulsed gently, like the hallway itself was breathing.

Dr. Nord walked ahead with brisk confidence.

Tash trailed behind with the posture of a man being escorted to a cosmic dentist.

His dosimeter beeped once.

0.07 SEC/MIN

STATUS: HEIGHTENED DRIFT

"Dr. Nord," he said softly, "is my rate supposed to keep climbing?"

"Yes, yes," she said. "That simply means the Station is noticing you."

"And that's... good?"

"no!"

She stopped at a sealed metal door and pressed her palm against a glowing square. The door responded like a contemplative animal slow, heavy, and reluctantly majestic. It slid open by inches.

Beyond it lay a dim chamber filled with metal equipment, glowing screens, and a faint, steady thrumming that Tash felt in his ribs.

"What is this place?" he asked.

"This," she said proudly, "is the Temporal Boundary Preparation Room."

"That sounds like a warning label."

"It is" she replied.

She gestured to a set of suits hanging neatly on a rack.

"Suit up" she instructed.

Tash lifted one. It weighed far more than he expected.

"What is this made of?"

"Regret," she said. "And tungsten."

Tash frowned. "...Regret?"

"It's a model number," she lied quickly. "Mostly."

He pulled the suit on with difficulty. It clung stubbornly, as though the fabric wanted to learn his emotional history before adjusting.

Dr. Nord zipped up her own suit with practiced ease.

"Now," she said, "we begin your acclimatization."

"To... what exactly?"

"To everything the Station tries not to tell you."

She pressed a button on the wall.

The floor shuddered.

A second door slid open ahead, revealing a narrow walkway bordered by pipes and dim orange lights. The air that drifted toward them was warm and humming, vibrating softly like a plucked string.

Tash felt his heartbeat sync momentarily with the hum then fall out of sync again.

"After you," Dr. Nord said.

He stepped onto the walkway.

Immediately, the dosimeter squealed.

His hand trembled as he checked it.

0.08 SEC/MIN

STATUS: DISSONANT

Dr. Nord leaned over, looked at the screen, and nodded approvingly.

“Excellent.”

“Excellent?” Tash croaked.

“You’re drifting at a healthy rate.”

He wanted to scream.

They walked forward. The hum grew louder, not the hum of machinery, but something older, deeper, like a massive pulse reverberating through metal bones.

Tash felt his sense of time begin to slide, just a fraction, like water slipping under a door.

“Dr. Nord,” he whispered, “what is that sound?”

“That,” she said reverently, “is the reactor’s temporal field.”

“The reactor has a temporal field?”

“Of course. Any sufficiently complicated nuclear system interacts with time. We merely... emphasize it.”

Tash stopped walking. “Why would anyone do that?”

“To increase efficiency,” she said. “Time dilation improves reaction control.”

They continued down the walkway until they reached a glass observation window. Beyond it lay a cavernous chamber, filled with thick shielding, massive conduits, and a swirling blue haze that seemed to drift like underwater smoke.

“That,” Dr. Nord said, pointing, “is the Dilation Interface.”

Tash stared.

The haze pulsed, slow... slow... slower, each beat stretching slightly.

“What does it do?” he whispered.

“It slows everything inside it,” she said. “Particles. Reactions. Processes. Even thought.”

Tash felt his mouth dry. “And why do we slow the reactor?”

"We don't slow the *reactor*," she corrected. "We slow the *universe around the reactor*"

Tash's knees weakened. "That's worse"

"Yes, but effective."

He leaned toward the glass.

The haze shifted subtly, forming shapes that dissolved the moment he tried to focus.

"Is it supposed to move like that?" he asked.

"Absolutely not," she said. "It's behaving unusually today. Perfect time for your acclimatization."

She turned to him.

"Now... I need you to step closer."

Tash did not move.

Dr. Nord placed a hand on his back and gently pushed.

He resisted.

She pushed harder.

The dosimeter beeped louder.

0.09 SEC/MIN

STATUS: FRAYING

"Dr. Nord," he said, voice trembling, "I'm not comfortable with.."

She cut him off.

"No one is comfortable with time distortion. If they claim they are, they've already drifted."

She guided him toward a platform with a glowing circular symbol etched into its centre.

"What is this?" he whispered.

"The acclimatization circle," she said. "Just stand on it."

"I don't want to."

"You must."

Tash stepped onto the circle.

Instantly, the air thickened.

A faint tug pulled at the back of his skull, like a soft magnetic pressure.

His heartbeat slowed...

then reset...

then slowed again.

Dr. Nord watched carefully.

"Good," she murmured. "Your drift is synchronizing."

Tash's hands shook.

"What's happening to me?"

"Time is calibrating around you," she said. "Don't resist."

"I'm not resisting!"

"You are," she said calmly. "Most people resist emotionally."

"Of course I'm emotional! My timeline is unravelling!"

"Lower your voice," she warned. "The field responds to stress."

The glowing haze beyond the window pulsed brighter, then dimmed abruptly, like a giant taking a deep breath.

Tash felt a cold pressure sweep across his skin.

"What was that?" he gasped.

"A wave," she said. "A temporal ripple from the reactor core. You'll feel several."

Another ripple.

This time stronger.

The walkway vibrated lightly, like a tuning fork.

Tash nearly lost his balance.

Dr. Nord steadied him. "Don't fall. Falling into dilation is extremely exhausting."

"What happens if I fall?"

"You skip the fall," she said. "And hit the ground two seconds before you begin falling."

He squeezed his eyes shut.

"What's the purpose of this orientation?" he asked through his teeth.

"To acclimate you," she said, "so the Station stops toying with you."

"The Station is *toying with me*?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "You're new. It likes testing your stability."

"I'm not stable!"

"Exactly. That's why it's testing."

The dosimeter shrieked.

Tash looked.

0.10 SEC/MIN

STATUS: CRITICAL DRIFT

His chest tightened.

“Dr. Nord,” he whispered, “I’m losing a lot of time.”

“That’s fine,” she said. “The field is pushing your personal timeline slightly forward.”

“Slightly?”

“Oh yes. You’ll catch up later.”

“How?”

“There’s always a lag correction somewhere. You’ll feel it as a headache.”

Tash shut his eyes again.

Another ripple struck the observation chamber.

This one was intense enough that the glass flexed visibly.

Dr. Nord narrowed her eyes. “That’s unusual.”

“Unusual how?!”

“Unusual as in: we usually don’t get three ripples in a row.”

A fourth ripple arrived.

Deep. Heavy. Pulsing.

The lights flickered.

The walkway groaned.

Dr. Nord stiffened.

“That’s not normal at all.”

“What does it mean?” Tash asked, voice cracking.

She watched the haze beyond the glass shift colour, from blue... to violet.

Then the violet deepened.

“Dr. Nord?” Tash whispered.

She inhaled sharply.

“It means,” she said, “the reactor knows you’re here.”

Tash nearly fainted.

The violet haze beyond the glass pulsed again, slow, deliberate, like a creature waking from a long sleep and stretching its limbs

across a dimension that had previously belonged to someone else.

Tash tried to step back, but the acclimatization circle held him in place. Not physically, psychologically. Something about it demanded stillness. Moving felt like an act that required permission.

"Dr. Nord," he whispered, "why does the reactor know I'm here?"

She didn't answer immediately.

Her eyes darted across the haze, analysing, calculating.

Finally she said, "The reactor's temporal field responds to anomalies."

"I'm an anomaly?"

"You're an auditor," she said. "Same thing."

He wanted to protest but couldn't form the words. The air around him grew heavier, thick like honey poured through an hourglass.

His dosimeter vibrated violently.

0.11 SEC/MIN

STATUS: TEMPORAL SLIP IMMINENT

Tash's heart stuttered. "Slip? Slip into what?"

"Not into what," Dr. Nord said. "Into when."

"That's NOT BETTER."

She held up a hand. "Stay calm. Panicking will cause you to slip faster."

"I'm not panicking!"

"You are," she said gently. "And the field loves panic."

The haze twisted. A spiral formed, broad, slow, and impossibly deep, like a whirlpool of condensed seconds.

Tash pointed at it with a trembling finger. "What is that?"

"Oh," Dr. Nord said quietly, "that's new."

"New how?!"

"New as in: I've never seen it before."

Tash felt ice creep down his spine.

He realized now that Dr. Nord, calm, confident, chronologically unshaken Dr. Nord, was unsettled.

She stepped forward, studying the spiral.

The violet deepened to indigo.

Then to black.

“Dr. Nord,” Tash whispered, “is that... dangerous?”

She hesitated.

Too long.

“Possibly,” she said. “But it could also be harmless.”

“How do we know?”

“We wait.”

“I don’t want to wait!”

The reactor pulse answered him.

A wave hit the chamber, this time accompanied by a faint distortion, like a low, metallic moan bending under pressure.

Tash staggered.

Dr. Nord grabbed his arm. “Stay on the circle. If you step off while disoriented, you may step out of sequence.”

“Out of sequence?”

“Yes,” she said. “You might reappear in a moment that’s not expecting you.”

“That makes no sense!”

“Neither does the Station,” she said calmly. “Yet here we are.”

Another ripple.

This one sharper, crisp, like a snapped wire.

The lights flickered.

The walkway trembled.

The haze churned violently.

Tash clung to the railing. “Why is this happening?!”

Dr. Nord inhaled slowly.

“Something is interfering,” she murmured. “Something inside the field.”

He stared at her.

“What kind of interference?”

She didn’t answer.

Instead she moved toward a control console near the window, pressing buttons with increasing urgency. The machinery groaned, screens flickering between warnings.

FIELD NOISE DETECTED

TEMPORAL TURBULENCE
DRIFT LOCK FAILURE
UNKNOWN INPUT SOURCE

Dr. Nord swore under her breath, which startled Tash more than the alarms.

"Dr. Nord?"

She spun toward him.

"Tash," she said sharply, "how long have you been inside the Station?"

"Since this morning," he said.

"No," she said. "How long, *exactly*?"

"I... I don't know! A few hours?"

She stared at him, then at his dosimeter, then back at the reactor haze.

"Impossible," she whispered to herself.

"What's impossible?"

"That reading."

She snatched his dosimeter, held it up to the light.

0.13 SEC/MIN

STATUS: TEMPORAL LOCK FAILURE

"Your drift is too high," she murmured. "Far too high for a first day."

"I told you, this place hates me!"

"No," she said. "This place is *reacting* to you."

"What does that mean?!"

"It means," she said, turning slowly toward the window, "you're not just drifting."

Tash swallowed.

"What am I doing?"

"You're synchronizing."

"With what?!"

The haze outside pulsed.

Once.

Twice.

Then stabilized in a deep, unnatural stillness.

Dr. Nord's voice dropped to a whisper.

"With the reactor."

Tash nearly collapsed. "NO. No, no, no. That's NOT OKAY."

Dr. Nord grabbed his shoulders.

"Listen to me. You need to calm your internal timeline. Right now your presence is agitating the field."

"HOW DO I CALM MY TIMELINE?!"

"Breathing helps."

Tash tried.

Inhale

he felt himself slow.

Exhale

the chamber shifted forward.

The spiral in the haze tightened.

Dr. Nord clenched her jaw.

"The reactor is responding too quickly."

"I didn't DO anything!"

"You exist," she said. "That's enough."

More alarms blared.

TEMPORAL DENSITY RISING EVENT HORIZON
THRESHOLD (THEORETICAL) APPROACHING

Tash's whole body shook.

"Dr. Nord... what do I do?"

She looked into his eyes.

"Tash," she said softly, "I need you to focus on something constant. Anything. A memory. A rule. A number. Anything stable."

He tried to think.

His mind spun.

His training.

His logic.

His frameworks.

Then he remembered: *The principle he believed could solve anything.*

He whispered:

"Bayes' Theorem."

The dosimeter flickered.
“Again,” Dr. Nord urged.
He repeated:
“Bayes’ Theorem.”
The spiral slowed.
The haze brightened.
Dr. Nord exhaled in relief. “Good. It’s responding.”
Tash clung to the words, repeating them like a mantra.
The haze softened to a muted blue.
The alarms quieted.
The platform steadying.
Dr. Nord placed a hand on his back.
“You stabilized it. You stabilized the *reactor field*.”
He stared at her, trembling.
“I’m an auditor,” he whispered. “I’m not supposed to stabilize reactors.”
“On the contrary,” she said. “You may be the only one who can.”
Another pulse.
Gentle.
Almost grateful.
The light outside softened further.
And then
A faint shape emerged through the haze.
A silhouette.
Human.
Standing impossibly still.
Tash’s breath stopped.
“Dr. Nord... what is that?”
She didn’t answer.
Because she couldn’t.
The silhouette stepped closer
And it looked exactly like Tash.
For a long moment an impossibly long moment the silhouette on the other side of the glass simply stood there, suspended in the violet-blue haze.

Motionless.

Weightless.

A shadow sculpted from the future.

Tash's breath came in tiny panicked sips.

"Dr. Nord," he whispered, "that looks like.."

"Yes," she said, voice quiet but razor-sharp. "Don't say it."

"But it.."

"Don't *say* it."

His throat snapped shut.

The silhouette stepped closer. Its movements were slow but precise, as though it were walking through thicker time, time that clung to its form like heavy fabric.

Tash felt something cold bloom beneath his ribs.

"Is that... me?" he whispered.

Dr. Nord did not look away from the figure.

She spoke in a low, measured tone.

"It is a *temporal echo*," she said.

"That doesn't answer anything!"

"It's not supposed to. Echoes rarely do."

The figure moved even closer.

Now the details sharpened

The posture.

The face.

The hesitant way it held its shoulders.

It *was* Tash.

Older by... what? A few months? A year?

There was something tired about its eyes, tired in a way that suggested exhaustion deeper than sleep.

The dosimeter shrieked.

0.14 SEC/MIN

STATUS: IMPENDING FEEDBACK

Tash stumbled back, nearly slipping off the acclimatization circle.

"Dr. Nord what does 'feedback' mean?!"

She grabbed the rail, knuckles white.

"It means your future self has recognized you."

"That's bad?"

"That's catastrophic."

The ripple that followed was not like the others, it was *directional*, like a cold wind knifing through the chamber. The haze swirled, pulling inward around the silhouette.

The echo-Tash lifted a hand.

A simple gesture.

A greeting.

A warning.

A signal.

Impossible to tell.

"Don't move," Dr. Nord hissed.

Tash froze.

Future-Tash tilted his head, studying him with unnerving calm.

The haze thickened, forming a cocoon of shimmering violet around the figure.

"Why is it here?" Tash whispered.

Dr. Nord's voice trembled slightly.

That frightened him more than the silhouette.

"The reactor creates temporal interference patterns. Sometimes it amplifies... possibilities. Unresolved futures."

"Unresolved futures?"

She nodded tightly.

"Yes. Shadows of decisions you haven't made. Leaking through when the field destabilizes."

Tash felt a new panic.

"Why me? Why now?"

She turned to him sharply.

"You synchronized with the reactor. That rarely happens by accident."

"But I didn't do anything!"

"You existed," she repeated. "With enough conviction to leave an imprint."

The silhouette raised its hand higher.

Tash flinched back.

Dr. Nord shouted, "DON'T MOVE!"

The haze reacted violently

Colours spiralling inward, tightening around the silhouette like a vortex closing.

Tash could feel pressure in his ears. A faint ringing, followed by a sensation like pulling a thread too tightly in the fabric of reality.

The silhouette opened its mouth.

No sound came out.

But the entire chamber vibrated.

Words appeared

Not heard, but *felt*.

A whisper inside his consciousness:

"Don't make the report"

Tash's legs weakened.

Dr. Nord grabbed his arm. "What did it say?"

"You... didn't hear it?"

"No," she said quickly. "Echoes project only to their anchors."

"My anchor?!"

"Yes!" Dr. Nord barked. "Now TELL ME what it said!"

Tash's voice cracked. "It said, don't make the report."

Dr. Nord's expression froze.

The reactor responded instantly, a deep pulse that knocked dust off the walkway railing.

The haze shifted colours again.

Future-Tash took a step forward.

The glass between them bowed.

"Dr. Nord.." Tash whimpered.

"I KNOW," she snapped. "That, should not happen."

"What does it want?!"

"Not to be written."

Tash blinked. "What?"

"It's a future that doesn't want to exist. A contradiction. A self-cancelling timeline."

"But... that's impossible."

Dr. Nord shook her head. "At Oridyn Station, the impossible is usually the first thing to happen."

The glass flexed again this time with a long, low groan, like the reactor was grinding its teeth.

The silhouette raised its other hand.

The haze responded, swirling upward like a reversed waterfall.

"Dr. Nord," Tash whispered, "is it trying to get out?"

"Yes."

"CAN it get out?"

Her silence was worse than any answer.

The dosimeter screamed.

0.15 SEC/MIN

STATUS: SYNCHRONIC BREAK RISK

Tash's chest tightened. "What.. what is that?!"

"Synchronization break," Dr. Nord said. "If your future self gets close enough to interact with you, your timeline fractures."

"And then?!"

"You become statistically unpredictable."

"That's not a real answer!"

"It is here!"

The reactor pulsed again.

The haze funnelled downward, forming a spiralling path toward the observation window.

Future-Tash's fingertips brushed the glass.

A hairline crack appeared.

Tash screamed.

Dr. Nord lunged for a panel and slammed her palm against a button.

An alarm blared.

TEMPORAL SEALING INITIATED

STAND CLEAR

FIELD COMPENSATION ACTIVE

The haze shuddered.

The silhouette flickered like a bad projection.

Then

A shockwave blasted the chamber.
The walkway quivered violently.
Tash was nearly thrown to the ground.
He felt Dr. Nord grab his suit and yank him back onto the circle.
The silhouette wavered
Fading
Splintering
breaking into ribbons of violet light.
“No” it mouthed silently.
Then it was gone.
The haze collapsed in on itself.
The colour drained.
The pulsing ceased.
Silence swallowed the chamber.
Tash fell to his knees, shaking uncontrollably.
Dr. Nord leaned heavily against the railing, breathing hard.
After a long, agonizing pause, she spoke.
“You survived.”
Tash couldn’t respond.
She crouched beside him.
“Tash,” she said gently, “look at me.”
He forced his eyes upward.
Her expression was tight, scientific, and, just barely, frightened.
“What you saw,” she said, “was a potential future. Not guaranteed. Not final.”
“It warned me,” Tash whispered. “It told me not to write the report.”
“And you must ignore that,” she snapped. “Temporal echoes are manipulative. They represent unstable outcomes.”
“But it was me.”
“It was *a version* of you.”
Tash swallowed.
“Why did it appear?”
Dr. Nord exhaled slowly.
“Because the reactor is trying to show you something.”

"Show me what?"

She stood, offering him a hand.

"That," she said, "is what we must discover."

He took her hand.

The walkway felt steady again but Tash no longer trusted stability.

His dosimeter beeped weakly.

0.10 SEC/MIN

STATUS: STABILIZING

Dr. Nord checked it and nodded.

"Good. The field is normalizing around you again."

Tash trembled. "What happens now?"

She looked toward the reactor, thoughtful, wary.

"Now," she said quietly, "we investigate why the Station is paying attention to you."

Tash felt his stomach twist.

"Why would it pay attention to me?"

She gave him a small, thin smile.

"Because, Auditor ... you may not be here to audit the Station."

She stepped back toward the walkway exit.

"You may be here, because the Station wants you for something else."

Tash felt the words sink into him like slow, radioactive fog.

Dr. Nord gestured.

"Come," she said. "Your Induction is complete."

He stood, his legs unsteady, his heartbeat wavering in rhythm with possibilities.

The reactor chamber behind him throbbed once, softly.

Almost... affectionately.

And Tash realized:

The Station wasn't just noticing him.

It was *remembering* him.

Phase II
The Secondary Loop
The Softening of Reality

CHAPTER 4

The Turbine Hall's Echo

The corridor leading out of the Temporal Boundary chamber felt different now. The Station's silence no longer pressed on Tash like a blanket, it gathered around him like a committee evaluating his usefulness.

Even the lights seemed brighter as he walked, watchful, attentive.

Dr. Nord moved briskly, her boots clicking despite the Wing's tendency to swallow sound. Somehow, her footsteps survived the geometry's appetite, as though the Station allowed her noise on principle.

"We're going to the Turbine Hall," she said.

"What for?" Tash asked, still shaken.

"To see whether the distortion you triggered is spreading."

"I didn't trigger anything," Tash protested.

Dr. Nord didn't argue.

She simply said, "Things rarely happen because of people here. More often they happen around them."

That wasn't comforting.

They turned a corner and descended a long metal staircase. Unlike the upper corridors, this stairwell did not shift or breathe. It felt more grounded industrial. The air grew warmer, heavier, carrying the unmistakable scent of hot metal and lubricating oil.

A dull hum grew louder with each step.

Not the metaphysical hum of the reactor.

This was mechanical, physical, deeply earthly.

The heartbeat of rotating machinery.

Tash exhaled.

Finally, something normal.

That illusion lasted eight seconds.

At the bottom of the staircase, a heavy door marked TURBINE HALL – AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY slid open.

The hall beyond was vast.

If the reactor chamber felt like the inside of a cosmic lung, the Turbine Hall resembled the cathedral built to worship it.

Two enormous steam turbines dominated the centre, each one the size of a passenger plane, their casings gleaming with the quiet pride of machines that knew they were important.

Steam lines arched overhead like metallic tree roots.

Gauges blinked softly, flickering with warm amber light.

A low, rhythmic thrum pulsed through the floor.

But the moment Tash stepped inside, his breath caught.

The turbines were spinning... slowly.

Very slowly.

At least three orders of magnitude slower than they should.

He frowned. "These are... barely moving."

"Correct," Dr. Nord said.

"But they're supposed to be synced to the grid frequency."

"They are."

Tash stared at her. "They're turning at maybe... one revolution per minute."

"Yes," she said. "Grid demand for this region is met through our temporal-forward output."

He blinked. "Temporal... forward?"

She gestured toward the first turbine.

"Look."

Tash approached, cautiously.

The metal housing shimmered faintly, the way asphalt shimmers on a hot day. He squinted.

"It's out of phase," he whispered.

"Not out," Dr. Nord corrected. "Ahead."

He reeled. "Ahead of what?"

"Of now."

Tash's stomach lurched.

“These turbines,” she continued, “are generating power that will be consumed ten years from today.”

Tash stared at her.

“I’m sorry, what?”

She almost smiled. “We run in forward-phase output mode during off-peak years. The Station diverts some production into stored temporal reservoirs.”

“Stored in... time?”

“Exactly. The power you see here,” she said, tapping the turbine casing, “is pushing into the future.”

Tash felt dizzy.

“Isn’t that impossible?” he asked weakly.

“Most things that work here are.”

He turned back to the slowly rotating turbine.

“So this... this extremely slow rotation is actually..”

“Extremely fast,” Dr. Nord finished. “Just not for you.”

Tash’s brain tried to reconcile what he was seeing with what he was being told. It failed.

“Then how does anyone maintain them?” he asked.

“Carefully,” she said. “And with excellent insurance.”

As if summoned by her words, a technician appeared from behind the turbine. His coveralls were marked **TURBINE & TEMPORAL MECHANICS – LEVEL II**.

He wiped sweat from his brow, looked at Tash, and said:

“You’re the auditor.”

It wasn’t a question.

Tash winced. “Yes.”

The technician nodded with the weary respect of a man acknowledging someone else’s doomed quest.

He pointed toward a small mechanical panel. “We’ve been seeing echoes.”

Tash tensed. “Echoes? As in time echoes?”

“No,” the technician said. “Sound echoes.”

Dr. Nord raised a brow. “Show him.”

The technician clapped his hands once, loudly.

The sound cracked through the hall.

A second later, the clap repeated itself.

Then again.

Then again.

Tash paled. "Is that... bouncing?"

"No," the technician said. "That's the future bouncing the sound back."

"The... what?!"

"Sound waves," Dr. Nord explained, "are traveling into next week and returning."

Tash stared. "Sound is time-traveling."

"Only short distances," she said. "We've capped the echo-horizon at ten days after a small... incident."

"What incident?"

The technician cleared his throat. "We once had a whistle that looped for seven months."

Dr. Nord added, "People began hearing it in their dreams."

Tash swallowed.

"So... the turbines produce temporal noise?"

"Oh yes," Dr. Nord said. "Strong machinery interacts with the Station's dilation field."

The technician nodded. "Especially when they get moody."

"Machines get moody?"

"Everything here gets moody," Dr. Nord said. "Time is emotional."

The turbine closest to them emitted a soft rumbling growl.

The technician sighed. "See? It's irritated."

Tash stepped back.

"How do you know its mood?"

"Ah," the technician said, flipping open a notepad thick with scribbles. "I've been tracking sound anomalies all my life."

He flipped pages. "This rumble is a 3.2 on the Grievance Scale."

"Grievance Scale?" Tash echoed.

"Annoyed but not vindictive," the technician translated. "Still safe. Mostly."

Tash turned to Dr. Nord.

"This place shouldn't exist."

"I've told the administration that," she said, "but the Station disagrees."

The turbine suddenly emitted a sharp *ping*.

Future echoes answered it

Ping

Ping

Ping

as though the hall itself were having a delayed conversation with time.

Dr. Nord frowned.

"That's new."

The technician paled. "Very new."

Tash felt cold. "What does it mean?"

The turbine vibrated.

The lights dimmed.

The hum grew deeper, almost sentient.

The technician whispered:

"It means the turbine has started noticing him too."

He pointed at Tash.

Tash took a step back.

Then another.

The turbine's slow, impossible rotation tightened. The shimmering afterimages narrowed, aligning toward Tash like a compass settling on true north.

Dr. Nord whispered, "The Station isn't just paying attention to you."

She pointed at the turbine, her eyes wide.

"It's listening."

Tash felt the air thicken.

"What is it listening *for*?" he whispered.

The turbine answered.

A single, low vibration resonated through the floor not mechanical, not metallic, but unmistakably intentional.

Dr. Nord stepped back.

"Oh dear," she murmured.

“What?” Tash demanded.

She met his eyes.

“It’s listening for your future.”

The turbine’s hum stabilized into a tone so deep Tash could feel it in the cartilage of his ribs. The metal casing vibrated subtly, like an enormous tuning fork holding a steady note. The air around the machine shimmered with faint distortions, waves of heat or time or both.

The technician swallowed loudly.

“That tone... that’s a targeting frequency.”

“Targeting what?” Tash whispered.

“You,” the technician said without hesitation.

Tash nearly tripped backward.

“Why would a turbine target me?!”

Dr. Nord answered calmly, though her eyes were narrowed with concern.

“It’s not targeting *you*,” she said. “It’s targeting the version of you the reactor just showed us.”

Tash felt an electric stab of dread. “The echo. The one that said..”

Dr. Nord held up a hand. “Don’t repeat what it said. Echoes imprint on spoken information.”

The turbine changed pitch slightly, as if agreeing.

The technician tapped his notepad nervously. “It’s... tracking the temporal signature he left behind.”

Tash blinked. “Temporal signature?”

“Every echo leaves a residue,” Dr. Nord said. “A kind of time fingerprint. The turbine is analysing it.”

“Analysing?” Tash squeaked. “For what?!”

“We’ll see,” Dr. Nord murmured.

The turbine’s slow, monumental rotation shifted, barely perceivable but definitely intentional. Its shimmering afterimages aligned more tightly, like a lens focusing.

Tash backed away until his shoulders hit the railing behind him.

“Dr. Nord, shouldn’t we... stop it?”

The technician snorted helplessly. “Stop it? You don’t *stop* a turbine. You encourage it to reconsider.”

Dr. Nord placed a hand gently against the turbine's housing.

"Easy," she said sternly, as one might speak to a horse that was intelligent enough to judge your tone.

The turbine responded with another low, resonant note that rattled the bolts in the floor.

"That," the technician whispered, "is a 'do not patronize me' frequency."

Tash's eyes widened. "Machines have emotional frequencies now?!"

"Only here," Dr. Nord said.

"And in two research facilities in 'You Know Where'," the technician muttered.

Dr. Nord ignored him.

She pressed her fingertips against the metal again, whispering, "Show us what you see."

The turbine's hum deepened.

The shimmering afterimages behind the casing rippled.

And then

A faint outline appeared.

Not a silhouette this time, but a shape composed of vibrating distortions, like a 3D scan made of tremors.

Tash's blood froze.

The shape was humanoid.

It stepped closer within the shimmering time-layer of the turbine.

The outline sharpened.

A head.

Arms.

Shoulders.

"No," Tash whispered. "No, no, no."

Dr. Nord frowned. "This isn't a full echo. It's a *vector projection*."

"A what?"

"It's not showing your future, it's showing the *trajectory* of your future."

"That's worse!"

The turbine vibrated harder, and the projection grew clearer.

It wasn't the Tash he saw in the reactor chamber.

This version had squared shoulders, steadier posture, and... a confident stance.

Almost military.

Almost resolute.

"Dr. Nord," Tash whispered shakily, "that doesn't look like me."

"No," she agreed softly. "Not yet."

The technician flinched. "He looks like someone who's seen some things."

Tash stared, horrified and fascinated.

"What... what is that version of me doing?"

The projection lifted an arm, slower than real-time, as though moving through thick syrup. It pointed toward the far end of the Turbine Hall.

Toward a set of steel doors marked:

AUXILIARY LOOP ACCESS – RESTRICTED

Dr. Nord tilted her head.

"The Auxiliary Loop?"

"That section's been sealed for years" the technician whispered.

"Why would he point there?"

The projection flickered.

Jittered.

Then dissolved into ripples of shimmering air.

The turbine hummed again higher this time.

Impatient.

Dr. Nord removed her hand from the casing.

"Well," she said softly, "it appears the Station wants you to go to the Auxiliary Loop."

Tash stepped back so fast he almost fell.

"No. Absolutely not. Last time I followed a hint from this place, I nearly met a version of myself that was trying to warn me about... well, everything!"

Dr. Nord crossed her arms. "This projection didn't warn you."

"Yes! Worse, it *told me to go somewhere*. That's more threatening!"

The technician chimed in nervously. "Sometimes turbines pick favourites."

Tash snapped toward him. "I'm not flattered!"

The turbine emitted a brief pulse of sound sharp, metallic, cold.

The technician paled. "Uh oh."

"Uh oh?!" Tash shouted.

"That's the 'don't insult my judgement' frequency," the technician said.

Dr. Nord placed her hand on Tash's shoulder.

"Look. Whether we like it or not, the Station is... involving you."

"Involving me in *what?*"

"That's what we need to find out."

Tash closed his eyes, trying to slow his racing pulse.

"Dr. Nord," he said quietly, "is the Station... alive?"

She hesitated.

Her answer came slow and careful.

"Alive is the wrong word," she said. "It is... responsive. Reactive. And it has memory."

"That's worse," Tash muttered.

The turbine hummed again, another impatient signal.

Short.

Commanding.

Dr. Nord nodded toward the doors at the far end of the hall.

"Let's go," she said. "The Auxiliary Loop isn't as dangerous as it sounds."

The technician coughed. "That depends on which decade you visit it."

Tash froze. "I'm sorry, what?"

Dr. Nord waved a hand dismissively. "He's exaggerating."

The technician shook his head. "No, I'm not."

Tash looked between them.

"Is the Auxiliary Loop... temporally unstable?"

"Yes," Dr. Nord said.

"No," the technician said.

They glared at each other.

"Fine," Dr. Nord said. "It's... *partially* unstable."

"Define 'partially!'" Tash demanded.

The technician responded, "Some hallways have different opinions about what year it is."

Tash sat heavily on a nearby crate.

"I want to resign."

"You can't," Dr. Nord said.

"I can."

"No," she repeated calmly. "You can't."

"Why not?"

"Because the Station hasn't finished with you yet."

The turbine vibrated again a short, clipped note.

Almost like: Hurry up.

Dr. Nord nodded solemnly.

"We're going," she told it. "We're going."

She looked at Tash.

"Come, Auditor," she said.

"The future is waiting."

Tash whispered:

"I hate this place."

The steel doors to the Auxiliary Loop were not merely closed, they looked *defensive*. Heavy, layered slabs of metal bolted together, the surface uneven in a way that suggested they had resisted being opened more than once.

A sign beside them read:

AUXILIARY LOOP ACCESS

AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY

(Not recommended for anyone born before the present)

Tash stared. "What does that even mean?"

Dr. Nord brushed past him. "Ignore the sign. The Station has a sense of humour."

The technician coughed. "That... was not a joke the last time we checked."

Dr. Nord shot him a glare. "Unnecessary."

He shrugged. "Relevant."

Tash pressed a hand to his forehead.

He felt like a man walking through a dream written by a satirist that had been left alone too long.

Dr. Nord placed her palm on a square panel beside the doors.

It did not react.

She pressed harder.

Still nothing.

The turbine behind them vibrated, sending a resonant hum across the hall, one that was unmistakably irritated.

The doors groaned reluctantly, sliding open a few centimetres.

"See?" Dr. Nord said. "It listens."

"I hate that sentence," Tash muttered.

The doors widened slowly, revealing a dim corridor beyond, long, narrow, and humming softly with a warm, reddish glow.

The technician handed Tash a flashlight.

"You'll need this."

"Why? Is it dark?"

"No," he said. "The lighting just gets confused."

Tash stared at him. "How can lighting get confused?"

"Same way clocks do here," he replied.

Tash did not want to know what that meant.

They stepped inside.

THE AUXILIARY LOOP

The corridor was warm, unnaturally so.

Not hot like machinery, but warm like a living room that had been heated for someone who hadn't yet arrived.

The walls were metal, but they felt... soft?

Not to the touch, Tash would never touch the walls, but visually, they seemed to waver slightly, as though the air around them was heavier than normal.

Dr. Nord walked with brisk purpose.

The technician walked carefully, scanning the ceiling for invisible dangers.

Tash walked with the posture of someone being escorted into a courtroom where the judge was a reactor core.

He checked his dosimeter.

0.12 SEC/MIN

STATUS: REACTIVE DRIFT

His stomach tightened. "My drift is rising again."

Dr. Nord glanced at the screen. "Expected."

"WHY?"

"Because the Loop predates modern systems."

The technician added, "And because it hates newcomers."

"EVERYTHING HERE HATES NEWCOMERS," Tash snapped.

"That's not true," Dr. Nord said. "Some parts merely mistrust them."

"That is not better!"

She ignored him.

The corridor suddenly jogged left, then right, then right again, like a maze built by someone who mistrusted straight lines.

Tash frowned. "Is this supposed to be a loop?"

"Yes," the technician said. "Just not a *geometric* loop."

"What other kind of loop is there?"

"A temporal one."

Tash stopped walking.

"No."

"Yes," Dr. Nord said cheerfully.

"No, no, no..."

"Yes," she repeated, "but gently. The Loop folds over itself. Occasionally you may walk into a future or past version of this hallway."

Tash shook his head rapidly. "You should both be in prison."

The walls thrummed softly, as if amused.

They continued deeper inside.

After three more turns, the corridor widened into a large chamber filled with pipes, gauges, and a towering piece of equipment that looked like a cross between a boiler and a grandfather clock.

Tash stared. "What... is that?"

Dr. Nord gestured proudly.

"The Phase-Advance Steam Compensator."

The technician whispered reverently, "Oldest thing in the Station."

Tash blinked. "It looks... ancient."

“Oh, it is,” Dr. Nord said. “It predates most of the facility. The original builders wanted a system that would prepare the steam *before* it was needed.”

Tash frowned. “Prepare steam?”

“Yes.”

“For what?”

“For future turbines.”

Tash’s eyelid twitched. “Steam can’t be prepared years in advance.”

The technician raised a finger. “Not with that attitude.”

Dr. Nord walked up to the Compensator and ran her hand along the metal.

“Listen carefully.”

At first, Tash heard nothing.

Then

A faint whistling sound.

Not like leaking steam.

More like someone humming through their teeth.

“What is that?” Tash whispered.

The technician said, “That’s steam condensing in advance.”

Tash stared upward.

“You’re telling me steam is forming *from the future?*”

“Yes,” Dr. Nord said.

“Yes,” the technician echoed.

Tash almost sat down on the floor.

“I was not trained for this.”

Dr. Nord shrugged. “No one is.”

The air in the chamber shifted suddenly.

A flicker.

A distortion, like heat haze, but colder.

A shape formed near the Compensator.

Tash’s heart stopped.

Another silhouette.

But not humanoid.

Not this time.

This silhouette resembled a complex mechanical structure, something between a turbine and a reactor valve assembly.

It hovered, shimmering, flickering.

“What is THAT?” Tash gasped.

Dr. Nord stiffened.

Her voice dropped to a whisper.

“That’s... a pre-echo.”

“A pre-echo?” Tash repeated slowly.

“Yes,” she said. “An echo from a machine that doesn’t exist yet.”

The silhouette wavered, then extended what looked like a mechanical limb toward Tash.

He backed up so fast he nearly tripped.

“It’s trying to touch me!”

“No,” Dr. Nord said. “It’s trying to calibrate you.”

“CALIBRATE WHAT?!”

“Your compatibility.”

“With WHAT?!”

The silhouette flickered violently jerking, twisting, folding over itself like origami collapsing mid-fold.

The lights dimmed.

The Compensator moaned.

Then

The silhouette vanished.

Silence.

The technician swallowed. “That shouldn’t have happened.”

Dr. Nord shook her head slowly.

“No. Something is accelerating the feedback.”

“From the reactor?” Tash asked.

“Possibly.”

“From the turbine?”

“Unlikely.”

“Then from where?”

She met his eyes.

“From you.”

Tash felt dizzy. "I'm a person. Not a source of... whatever this is."

Her expression softened slightly.

"Tash," she said quietly, "temporal fields respond to unpredictability. To unresolved futures."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you carry a contradiction."

"A contradiction in *what*!?"

"In yourself."

Tash pressed back against the wall. "What contradiction?!"

Dr. Nord studied him for a long moment, then said: "The Station believes you will do something. And the Station also believes you will not."

The technician added softly, "You're two outcomes fighting inside one timeline."

Tash shook his head rapidly.

"but.. I'm just an auditor."

Dr. Nord stepped closer.

"Not anymore."

Before Tash could respond, the corridor ahead flickered.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Then a shadowed figure appeared at the far end of the hall

A human shape.

Walking toward them.

Tash's blood turned to ice.

Not this again.

Not another future him.

Not another echo.

Dr. Nord whispered, "Stay still."

The figure stepped into the light.

Tash's knees buckled.

It wasn't him.

It was someone else.

Someone wearing... an auditor badge.

His badge.

From his world.

Someone who looked directly at Tash and said, in a voice warped by distance and time:

"You're not supposed to be here yet."

The figure stepped fully into the corridor's dim reddish glow, and for a moment Tash's breath simply... vanished.

The badge.

The uniform cut.

The posture, half-familiar, half alien.

It *was* an auditor work shirt.

It even had the old logo, his old logo, stitched on the chest with thread that looked slightly frayed, as if from a world that had aged differently.

But the man wearing it

Tash had never seen him.

Tall.

Broad-shouldered.

A face carved with exhaustion.

Eyes that looked like they had stared through more than one timeline.

He lifted a hand, not threateningly, but firmly, like halting traffic.

"Stop there," he said.

The technician froze in place like prey.

Dr. Nord, however, moved forward slightly.

"Identify yourself," she demanded.

The man gave her a tired, almost amused look. "You wouldn't understand my designation."

"Try me."

He sighed.

"I'm a field auditor."

Tash spoke before he could stop himself.

"No," he said weakly. "*I'm* the auditor."

The man's gaze snapped to him, and in that instant Tash felt something inside the air shift.

Recognition.

Danger.

Memory.

Possibility.

A collision of futures and pasts in the narrow space between their eyes.

The stranger's jaw tightened.

"You're early," he said.

Tash swallowed. "Early for what?"

"For everything."

Dr. Nord stepped between them.

"Explain," she ordered.

The corridor flickered, just once, like a warning.

The stranger gestured at the vibrating walls.

"This Loop shouldn't have brought him here yet. He's out of sync."

"We know that," Dr. Nord snapped. "Tell us what you are."

The stranger turned his attention to her.

"I'm here because the Station is leaking into other systems. Into other grids. Into organizations it was never supposed to touch." He tapped his auditor badge. "This? This isn't mine. It belonged to someone in my world."

Tash blinked. "Your... world?"

"Yes," the man said. "Where I come from, Oridyn Station is a case study. A classified one."

Dr. Nord stiffened. "That's not possible."

"It shouldn't be," he agreed. "And yet here we are."

The lights above them buzzed anxiously.

A vent hissed, though it wasn't supposed to.

Tash felt the Compensator behind him hum a little faster as if reacting to the stranger's presence.

The man turned back to Tash.

"You shouldn't be here," he repeated softly. "Not yet. The Station is accelerating."

Tash forced himself to speak.

"You're from... a different timeline?"

"Yes."

"And you're here because... what? You were sent?"

The man's expression tightened.

"I wasn't sent. I was *pulled*. Same as you."

"Pulled by what?"

"The Station," he said. "It's porous. It searches for people it deems suitable. People with analytical minds. People who believe in systems. People who try to solve problems."

Tash felt his stomach twist.

"That sounds like recruitment."

"It is."

Dr. Nord cut in sharply. "Impossible. The Station doesn't recruit."

The stranger gave a hollow smile.

"Nord... you think you understand this place. You understand the physics. The protocols. The risk factors." He stepped closer. "But you don't understand its intelligence."

A silence so heavy it felt like a dropped weight filled the hall.

Dr. Nord's voice was low.

"The Station is self-regulating, nothing more."

The stranger chuckled, a curt, bitter sound.

"Is that truly what you believe? After all you've seen?"

The walls hummed.

Lights flickered again.

Pipes groaned with tension.

Dr. Nord exhaled once, slowly, as if calming herself.

"You're suggesting the Station has intention?"

"I'm suggesting," the man said, "it has an agenda."

Tash shivered.

"What agenda?"

The stranger pointed at him.

Straight at him.

"You."

Tash's mouth opened. "Me?! Why me?!"

"Because..."

[long pause]

"You... carry... unresolved... probability."

"I don't even know what that means!"

"It means," the stranger said, stepping closer, "you haven't decided who you are yet. The Station can *use* that."

Before Tash could respond, the corridor flickered, much harder this time.

A jolt went through the floor, the lights dimmed to blood-red, and the Compensator behind them released a low, wounded groan.

Dr. Nord cursed under her breath. "The Loop is destabilizing."

The technician yelled, "We need to get out!"

The stranger didn't move.

He simply stared at Tash.

"When you leave here," he said, "you'll think this was a hallucination. Or a distortion. But listen carefully: not every version of you survives this place."

Tash's bones went cold.

"Why would you tell me that?"

"Because," the stranger said quietly, "I met a version of you in my world, and he told me something before he..."

He stopped.

Tash leaned in. "Before he what?"

The stranger swallowed.

"Before he disappeared."

The corridor flickered violently.

Dr. Nord shouted, "Everyone MOVE!"

Metal shrieked.

Pipes rattled.

The Compensator let out a high-pitched whine that could only be described as existential pain.

Tash stepped backward

But the stranger grabbed his arm, gripping it hard.

Tash gasped.

The stranger's voice cut through the rising chaos.

"Do not trust the Station's guidance."

Do not follow the projections blindly.
And when the time comes, choose the option that scares you the most.”
Tash’s pulse pounded in his skull.
“What does that mean?!”
“It means you’re not here to audit,” the stranger snapped.
“You’re here to decide.”
The corridor’s lights exploded into flickering arcs.
The Compensator screamed.
Dr. Nord pulled at Tash’s other arm. “We need to GO!”
The stranger’s hands tightened.
“You will want to run. Don’t.”
Dr. Nord yelled, “Tash! NOW!”
The technician screamed, “THE LOOP IS COLLAPSING!”
Tash looked between them
Dr. Nord, steady but terrified.
The technician, shaking.
The stranger, grim and certain.
Then the corridor split literally down the middle, like a zipper coming undone.
The walls tore inward, fragments dissolving into shimmering dust.
Light from some unseen void bled through the cracks.
The stranger shoved Tash backward.
“REMEMBER,” he said.
The corridor convulsed.
A burst of white light swallowed the stranger whole and he vanished.
Gone.
Dust.
Silence.
No trace.
Dr. Nord hauled Tash toward the exit, pulling with a strength born of fear and fury.
The technician stumbled behind them.

The Loop groaned a long, deep, dying sound and the floor shuddered hard enough to nearly throw them off their feet.

They sprinted toward the doors.

Just before they reached them, Tash looked back.

For a moment, only a moment, he saw a faint shape where the stranger had stood.

Not a shadow.

Not a body.

Just a ripple.

A memory of something that hadn't happened yet.

Then it, too, dissolved.

Dr. Nord dragged him through the sliding doors as the Auxiliary Loop collapsed behind them with a thunderous, metallic roar.

They stumbled into Turbine Hall.

The doors slammed shut.

Locked themselves.

Sealed.

Silence fell.

Tash collapsed to his knees, gasping.

Dr. Nord crouched beside him, panting, her face pale.

The technician leaned against a railing, shaking uncontrollably.

After a long minute, Dr. Nord whispered

"...Tash. What did he say to you?"

Tash didn't look up.

He just whispered back:

"He said I'm not here to audit."

For a long while, no one spoke.

The Turbine Hall hummed with its usual deep mechanical heartbeat, but now it felt different, warmer, attentive, almost protective, like a massive metal animal that had just witnessed its keepers survive a forest fire.

Tash sat on the floor, his back against the railing, trembling. The metallic cold seeped through his clothes but did nothing to settle the fever of panic boiling through him.

Dr. Nord straightened first.

She was shaking, a slight, controlled tremor, but her voice carried its usual clipped discipline.

"We need to debrief," she said, though even she didn't sound convinced.

"No," Tash croaked. "We need to explain what that was."

The technician, still leaning against the railing like a wilted plant, spoke with a cracked voice:

"That... was not a normal distortion."

Dr. Nord snapped, "Nothing here is *normal*, Ravi."

"I mean *less normal than usual*."

She sighed, pinched the bridge of her nose. The gesture was unfamiliar for her, too human, too ordinary, and that frightened Tash most of all.

She turned to him, kneeling so her eyes were level with his.

"Tash. I need you to tell me exactly what the stranger said."

He hesitated.

He wanted to lie.

He wanted to shrug it off.

He wanted to pretend this entire encounter was a hallucination conjured by the Station's temporal nonsense.

But he couldn't.

"The first thing he said," Tash murmured, "was that I'm early."

Her brows knitted. "Early for what?"

"He didn't say."

"Likely because he didn't know," Ravi muttered. "Or wasn't allowed to."

That phrasing made Tash's stomach twist.

"Then," he continued, "he said the Station pulled him. Just like it pulled me."

Dr. Nord's eyes sharpened. "Did he specify how?"

"No."

Ravi coughed. "These things... they come through because certain people are 'resonant.' Right?"

Tash looked at him blankly.

Ravi shrugged helplessly. "Some minds have... patterns. Ways of thinking. The Station likes certain patterns."

Dr. Nord shot him a warning look, but didn't correct him.

Tash swallowed hard.

"He said I have 'unresolved probability.' What does that mean?"

Dr. Nord took a slow breath, choosing her words carefully.

"In certain systems," she said, "a person's potential actions cast echoes, shadows, possibilities. If your choices are highly divergent, equally weighted futures, your timeline becomes... noisy."

"Noisy?"

Ravi nodded vigorously. "Like static. But for fate."

Tash stared at them. "And that makes me... resonant?"

"That makes you dangerous," Dr. Nord said quietly.

The turbine behind them hummed with a low, vibrating agreement.

Tash flinched and looked over his shoulder.

The turbine's shimmering afterimages were gone.

In their place was a faint, steady glow.

Watching.

Listening.

Waiting.

Dr. Nord continued.

"That stranger, wherever he came from, knew a version of you. One who made choices you haven't yet made."

"So what does that mean for me?" Tash whispered.

Ravi answered softly, "It means the Station is trying to *predict you*."

Tash felt a wave of nausea. "Predict me? For what reason?"

Dr. Nord stood slowly.

"You were supposed to enter the Loop much later," she said. "Years later, perhaps. After you'd made decisions that aligned with the Station's expectations."

"I don't want to align with anything's expectations!"

"Good luck," Ravi muttered.

Dr. Nord glared at him again.

Then she turned back to Tash.

"You being in the Loop now means something accelerated your path. Something changed the Station's interpretation of you."

"The reactor?" Tash whispered.

"Maybe."

"The turbine?"

"Possibly."

"The stranger?"

"Almost certainly."

Tash felt his blood run cold.

Ravi suddenly straightened, as if remembering something horrifying.

"Dr. Nord," he said softly, "the silhouette in the turbine... that projection... it wasn't a warning, was it?"

Dr. Nord closed her eyes once, briefly.

"No."

"Then what was it?" Tash asked.

She opened her eyes and met his.

"It was an invitation."

The turbine hummed again, short, metallic, impatient.

Dr. Nord's voice dropped lower.

"The Station is not showing you danger. It is showing you purpose."

Tash recoiled. "I don't WANT a purpose!"

"That's irrelevant," she said gently. "The Station has chosen you."

"Chosen me for what?!"

She hesitated.

The pause lasted half a breath too long.

Then:

"For succession."

Tash stared at her.

"What?"

Dr. Nord gestured to the hall around them. The turbines. The pipes. The walls that seemed to pulse with latent awareness.

"This place," she said, "is not just a reactor. It is a regulator. A stabilizer. An anchor point holding multiple timelines in balance."

Tash shook his head violently.

"It needs someone to understand it," she continued. "Someone who can see contradictions. Someone who solves them instinctively."

"Someone with unresolved probability."

She didn't stop.

"Tash, the Station doesn't want to erase you. It wants you to *participate*."

"I want to leave," he whispered. "I want to go home."

Dr. Nord's face softened.

And in that softness was tragedy.

"You might," she said.

"Or you might not."

Ravi spoke up, voice barely audible.

"He needs to see the Shift Logs."

Dr. Nord turned sharply. "Not yet."

"He's already been chosen," Ravi insisted. "He should know what happens next."

Tash felt dread pool in his stomach.

"What happens next?" he whispered.

Dr. Nord held up a hand. "Not here."

They headed back toward the exit.

The turbine hummed again, this time a long, mournful note.

Tash paused and looked back at it.

For a fraction of a moment only a sliver of perception he felt something.

Not seen, not heard, not thought.

Felt.

A sense of *recognition*.

A sense of *attachment*.

As though the machine the impossible, shimmering machine knew him.

And approved.

That terrified him more than anything.

The moment they stepped back into the administration corridor, the oppressive hum faded. The air felt thinner. The floor didn't vibrate. The lights behaved.

Everything was so normal he felt suspicious of it.

Dr. Nord walked briskly, Ravi trailing.

Tash sped up.

"What are 'Shift Logs'?"

Nord didn't look at him. "Records."

"Of what?"

"Of previous auditors."

Tash's chest tightened.

"How many auditors?"

"A few."

"How many survived?"

She didn't answer.

Ravi said softly:

"Not enough."

Tash halted. "I don't want to see them."

Dr. Nord turned, her eyes colder now.

Sharper.

"You have to. You're not the first to be selected. But you might be the last."

"The last what?"

"The last candidate," she said.

"And the last contradiction."

Tash backed up. "I don't know what that means."

"You will," she whispered.

"The Station will show you."

The lights flickered

Once.

Twice.

A soft hum rippled through the walls.

Tash felt the same sensation from the turbine that strange, unsettling familiarity crawl slowly along his spine.

The Station whispered again.

Not in words.

But in intent.

And Tash suddenly understood something with horrifying clarity:

The Station didn't just notice him anymore.

It needed him.

And it would not let him leave until it got what it wanted.

CHAPTER 5

The Maintenance of Yesterday

Tash expected, after the catastrophe of the Auxiliary Loop and the stranger-with-his-own-badge situation, that Dr. Nord would take him somewhere dramatic, some hidden control centre with pulsing red lights, or a dark laboratory where equations were alive, or a vault where timelines were filed alphabetically.

Instead, she led him to the Maintenance Wing.

A hallway that smelled faintly of detergent, wet metal, and coffee.

Ravi followed close behind, muttering to himself like a man preparing his own obituary.

Tash stared at the signage on the wall:

MAINTENANCE BLOCK 3B

(Predictive, Retroactive & Preventative Work Orders)

He stopped dead.

“Retroactive maintenance?”

Dr. Nord didn’t break stride. “It’s standard here.”

“Standard?” Tash sputtered. “Maintenance cannot be retroactive. Maintenance is performed on something that already exists in the present.”

“Not here it isn’t,” Ravi said miserably.

Tash grabbed the nearest handrail, mostly for emotional support.

“You people do maintenance on... things that haven’t broken yet?”

“Not exactly,” Dr. Nord said.

“Well, what then?”

“We do maintenance on things that won’t break later.”

Tash opened his mouth. Then closed it. Then opened it again and said something resembling a lost bird's cry.

Nord glanced at him with mild sympathy.

"You'll adjust."

"I don't want to adjust!"

"That's also part of the adjustment."

They reached a double door labelled:

SECTION 3B: PROACTIVE ENGINEERING

("Fixing Problems That Haven't Occurred Since Last Tuesday")

Tash pointed at the sign. "Was that written by a sane person?"

Ravi shook his head. "By a committee."

"Of sane people?"

The doors slid open.

A cavernous workshop stretched before them half-industrial, half museum of impossible artifacts.

Metal benches overflowed with tools Tash recognized wrenches, torque meters, clamps and tools he absolutely did not chronometers with liquid screens, spanners with negative teeth, screwdrivers that flickered like holograms.

The room buzzed with quiet activity.

Technicians in grey coveralls moved with the same calm disorientation Tash had begun to associate with the Station focused yet resigned, competent yet confused.

One technician was polishing a pump that wasn't installed anywhere.

Another was filling out a maintenance log with timestamps that read:

Work Performed: 3 Days From Now

Inspection Date: Yesterday

Fault Detected: Pending

Tash blinked at the clipboard until his vision began to blur.

Ravi whispered, "Don't make eye contact with the paperwork. It can sense fear."

Tash stepped away from the clipboard like it was radioactive which, here, was not impossible.

At the far end of the bay, two technicians were welding something that looked suspiciously like an elbow joint for a pipe. But the pipe wasn't attached to anything. It was suspended in the middle of the room by a frame of beams that themselves were only half-solid, flickering at the edges.

Tash stared.

Ravi whispered, "That pipe belongs to a future where the Auxiliary Loop never existed."

"What?"

"Parallel outcome. Still needs maintenance."

Tash wanted to sit down. Preferably on a piece of furniture that existed fully in one timeline.

Dr. Nord clapped her hands once, sharply, as if commanding the room's attention.

A man in an oversized protective apron shuffled toward them. His beard was enormous, a grey forest with its own weather patterns. His ID tag read:

MASTER ENGINEER: TOD "HITCH" RAYSON

Temporal Predictive Repairs

Hitch gave Tash a once-over. Frowned. Scratched his beard.

"You're the new one," he said.

"I'm not" Tash began.

"Yes, you are," Hitch cut him off. "I can smell it."

"Smell what?"

"Future shock."

Ravi whispered, "He has a very sensitive nose."

Hitch leaned closer and inhaled loudly.

"Yep," he said. "You smell like someone who's seen three timelines and hasn't accepted any of them."

Tash took a defensive step back. "Why does everyone here talk like a prophecy?"

"Because," Hitch said, "prophecies are easier to accept."

He gestured toward a massive board mounted on the wall. At first glance it appeared like a typical maintenance schedule. But the dates

Tash stepped closer and squinted.

WORK ORDER 12-14B: Replace pump shaft BEFORE fracture (scheduled for 2029)

WORK ORDER 17-08A: Reseal valve after last week's leak (occurring next quarter)

WORK ORDER 22-01Z: Correct misalignment in 2033 Loop segment (misalignment detected yesterday)

Tash whimpered.

Hitch patted his back. "It's okay. They all cry the first time."

Dr. Nord cleared her throat.

"Hitch, show him the pump."

Hitch nodded and led them toward the centre of the workshop, where a large pump casing sat open like a dissected metallic heart.

"This," Hitch said proudly, "is Pump No. 7. One of the most stable components in the entire Station."

Tash nodded cautiously. "Okay."

"Except," Hitch continued, "for the fact that it keeps failing on multiple timelines simultaneously."

Tash froze.

"What does that mean?"

Hitch pointed at three separate logbooks stacked beside the pump.

"On Timeline A, it cracks because of thermal instability.

On Timeline B, it bends due to abnormal neutron drift.

On Timeline C, it melts. Just melts."

Tash stared at the pump. "It... melts?"

"In that outcome, yes."

"And your job is to, what, fix it across timelines?"

"Exactly."

"How?"

Hitch shrugged. "By guessing."

"Guessing?!"

"Yes. But with experience."

"And that works?"

"About half the time."

Tash felt faint.

Hitch continued cheerfully.

"Right now, we're doing preventative maintenance based on failures that haven't happened yet because the Station thinks you might choose an outcome where they do."

Tash's voice cracked. "Because *I* choose, what, failures of pumps?!"

Hitch corrected him gently.

"No. Because you choose *paths*. And every path has infrastructure."

Ravi whispered, "You're basically a walking construction blueprint."

Tash was near tears. "Why is everything about ME?"

Hitch gave him a look of such profound pity that it bordered on affectionate.

"Oh, my boy," he said softly, patting Tash's shoulder.

"At Oridyn Station, the moment you stepped inside, it stopped being about the Station and started being about you."

Tash swallowed.

"That sounds horrible."

Hitch nodded. "It is."

Then he brightened.

"Come on. Time for the demonstration."

Tash hesitated. "What demonstration?"

Hitch pointed at the pump.

"The one where the pump breaks... retroactively."

Tash's breath left him in a squeak. "No."

"Yes."

"I don't want to."

"You have to. The Station wants you to see."

Dr. Nord stepped beside him.

Her expression was calm, but her voice was firmer:

"Tash. You're in the Maintenance of Yesterday now."

"What does that mean?!"

"It means," she said quietly, "you're about to witness a failure that hasn't happened yet but has already been repaired."

Tash felt the hallway spin.

Hitch snapped his fingers.

Lights dimmed.

The pump casing shuddered.

A faint cracking sound echoed
from the future.

The pump began to deform.

Tash screamed.

Tash's scream ricocheted off the workshop walls, echoed again from somewhere else in the Station a split second later, and then, disturbingly, echoed *before* he actually screamed.

Dr. Nord winced. "Temporal reverb. Ignore it."

"I CAN'T IGNORE MY OWN PAST SCREAMS TELLING ME TO PANIC!"

Hitch raised a soothing hand. "Calm. Let the pump speak."

Tash's voice cracked. "Speak?! Pumps don't speak!"

The pump shuddered again.

A faint crack traced its way along the casing, hairline thin, silver-bright, pulsing as though lit from inside.

Hitch grinned proudly.

"There it is. Fault manifestation."

Tash stumbled backward.

"That thing is breaking now?! Right now?!"

Nord corrected him gently. "Not exactly. It's breaking *from later*."

Tash felt his entire soul attempt to leave the building. "What?!"

"It's simple," Hitch said. "The pump will fail catastrophically six months from now. We're watching the retroactive shockwave propagate backward into the present."

"That is NOT SIMPLE!"

Hitch tapped the crack. "Relax. It's pre-failure. Soft-phase. Harmless. Mostly."

Tash looked at the crack.

The crack pulsed back at him.

"I hate this place."

"We all do," Ravi murmured.

The crack glowed brighter.

The pump groaned a long, metallic, almost mournful sound.
Then quietly, impossibly the pump whispered.
Not a mechanical squeal.
Not a loose bolt's chirp.
A whisper.
Soft.
Human-adjacent.
Barely audible.
"why..."
Tash's blood froze.
"WHAT DID IT JUST SAY?!"
Hitch shrugged. "They all ask that."
"Why would a pump *ask a question*?!"
Dr. Nord replied calmly, "Because from its perspective, it hasn't broken yet and is already being blamed."
"That makes NO SENSE!"
"That's time-consciousness," she said. "Perfectly normal."
"NO, IT IS NOT!"
Ravi whispered, "To be fair, this is one of the more emotional pumps."
The crack grew wider.
Tash felt faint.
Then: *snap*.
A small shard of metal popped off the pump casing and fell to the floor with a delicate *tink*.
Hitch clapped his hands delightedly. "Wonderful! Root cause has arrived!"
Tash stared at him, trembling.
"You're CELEBRATING?"
"Of course. Now we know what we're going to fix."
Tash pointed shakily at the shard. "That's the failure?"
"No," Hitch said. "That's the symbol of the failure."
"What's the difference?!" Tash cried.
Hitch beamed. "Meaning."
Tash felt his consciousness go on strike.

Dr. Nord stepped closer to the pump, examining the crack as though reading a paragraph of text.

“Hmm,” she murmured. “Thermal fatigue interacting with timeline bleed. Interesting.”

Ravi scribbled something on a clipboard that only partially existed.

Tash slumped against a workbench.

“Why is this happening to me?” he whispered.

The pump answered.

“you...”

Tash froze.

“NO. No. No no no no”

Hitch sighed. “Ignore it. It’s confused.”

“IT IS TALKING TO ME.”

“Only because you resonated with it.”

Tash grabbed Hitch by the front of his apron.

“WHAT does ‘resonated’ MEAN in a facility that collapses timelines for fun?!”

Hitch, unfazed, replied, “The Station thinks you and the pump share a common probability path.”

Tash released him.

“I don’t WANT a shared probability path with industrial equipment!”

“Too late,” Hitch said.

Nord turned to him.

“We’ve seen this before. When the Station recognizes a person as a variable, the infrastructure pays attention.”

“The infrastructure PAYS ATTENTION?!”

The pump crackled with faint static, almost like a sleepy sigh.

Ravi whispered, “Don’t yell at it. It’s sensitive.”

Tash whispered back, “ARE YOU ALL MAD?!”

Hitch clapped once. “Okay! Next phase!”

“NO NEXT PHASE!” Tash yelled.

Hitch ignored him and pressed a button on a handheld device.

The pump shimmered.

Literally shimmered

The crack reversed itself.

The metal healed.

Rejoined.

Rewound.

Tash watched the crack zip shut like time stitching a wound.

“That shouldn’t be possible,” he whispered.

Hitch winked. “Retroactive repair. We fix the cause before it causes itself.”

“That sentence is an insult to physics.”

Hitch shrugged. “Sometimes physics needs tough love.”

Tash was now holding his head in both hands.

Dr. Nord walked to a wall-mounted terminal and pressed a series of keys that flickered blue, then red, then briefly into a colour Tash had no word for.

The screen lit up with a giant table:

TEMPORAL MAINTENANCE RECORD – PUMP No. 7

The entries scrolled:

FAILURE RECORDED: 12 June 2026

REPAIR PERFORMED: 03 April 2025

FAULT DIAGNOSED: 31 December 2028

CAUSE IDENTIFIED: Pending

CAUSE REPAIRED: 03 April 2025 at 14:52

CAUSE CONFIRMED: 13 June 2026 (post-failure resolution)

Tash stared.

“None of these dates are in order.”

“They are,” Nord corrected. “You’re just reading them in the wrong direction.”

“What direction SHOULD I read them?”

“Sideways.”

Tash sat down on the nearest crate.

“I want to resign.”

“You can’t,” Nord said.

“I CAN.”

“You won’t.”

“WHY?!”

"Because," she said, "you're becoming part of the system."

"That is NOT comforting."

"I wasn't comforting you."

Another technician approached with a stack of papers.

"Dr. Nord, the valve from 2031 is asking if it still exists."

Dr. Nord sighed. "Tell it we'll let it know after lunch."

Tash stared at her.

"I'm going to lie down," Tash muttered.

Dr. Nord walked over and crouched beside him.

"Tash," she said gently, "I know this is overwhelming."

"Overwhelming? OVERWHELMING?" he repeated shrilly.

"Let me rephrase," she said calmly. "I know this is annihilating your understanding of reality."

"That's better."

"But there's something you need to understand."

Tash rubbed his forehead. "What now?"

She spoke quietly.

"You're not the first auditor to see retroactive failures. But you're the first one the pump responded to."

Tash's heart thudded painfully.

"What does that imply?"

Nord inhaled.

"That you're not observing the Station anymore."

She met his eyes.

"You're interacting with it."

The pump behind them whispered again a soft, curious:

"when..."

Tash's breath caught in his throat.

Nord stood.

"Hitch," she said, voice tight, "prepare the logs."

He nodded grimly.

Ravi backed away nervously.

Tash forced himself to stand.

"Logs?" he asked. "What logs?"

Dr. Nord pointed toward a heavy door at the back of the bay.

A door labelled:

TEMPORAL INCIDENT ARCHIVE

(Survivor Access Only)

Tash's skin went cold.

"Why 'Survivor'?"

Dr. Nord's expression didn't change.

"Because only survivors understand what they're reading."

Tash whispered:

"I'm a survivor?"

"For now," she said.

The pump behind them whispered:

"when..."

The Temporal Incident Archive door loomed like a vault that had swallowed too many secrets and was now uncomfortable digesting them.

Tash stood frozen before it.

Dr. Nord placed her palm on the access panel. It flickered, hesitated, then accepted her reluctantly, like a pet recognizing a caretaker who often brought it terrible news.

The heavy lock clicked open with a shudder.

Ravi muttered, "I hate this room."

"You hate all the rooms," Hitch said.

"Some I hate with more passion."

Nord glanced at Tash.

"Inside," she instructed.

Tash didn't move.

She lowered her voice. "This is necessary."

Ravi whispered, "It's also deeply traumatic."

Nord glared at him.

"Ravi, do you want him to understand the Station or not?"

Ravi shrugged. "I want him emotionally intact. But the Station rarely grants that luxury."

Tash swallowed and stepped inside.

The room was dimly lit, but unlike the rest of Oridyn Station's moody ambiance, the Archive's darkness felt *intentional*, like the shadows themselves were safeguarding what lay inside.

Rows of shelves extended across the chamber, each shelf filled with thick binders, sealed crates, and transparent cases holding impossible artifacts, circuit boards that flickered without power, metal fragments that pulsed like muscle tissue, and small vials holding glowing particles that twitched when Tash looked directly at them.

A sign hung above the nearest shelf:

Incident Reports (A–F Timeline Classes)

Tash whispered, “What is this place?”

Nord stepped beside him. “Documents of everything that’s gone wrong.”

Ravi added, “Across all outcomes.”

“That’s... a lot of wrong.”

“Welcome to nuclear physics with a personality,” Hitch said cheerfully.

Tash’s eyes drifted to the labels:

INCIDENT: The Door That Wouldn’t Open Because It Already Had

INCIDENT: The Technician Who Got Stuck Between Tuesdays

INCIDENT: Unauthorized Feedback Loop Attempted Self-Correction

INCIDENT: Auditor Intervention #3 (Outcome: Lost)

INCIDENT: Auditor Intervention #4 (Outcome: Forgotten)

INCIDENT: Auditor Intervention #5 (Outcome: Pending)

Tash froze.

“Auditor intervention?”

Nord looked at him carefully.

“Yes.”

“How many auditors came before me?”

Nord didn’t answer immediately.

Ravi stepped forward and placed a hand on Tash’s shoulder.

“Five.”

“Five auditors,” Tash repeated. His voice cracked. “And what happened to them?”

Ravi gestured toward the shelves.

"You're standing in the record."

Hitch leaned against a crate. "Only two survived long enough to file a report."

Tash's chest tightened.

"And the others?"

Nord walked deeper into the Archive. "Follow me."

They reached a glass display case.

Inside was a dosimeter old, scratched, its display frozen.

Tash leaned in.

The screen read:

TEMPORAL STATUS: LOST

FINAL LOG: 'I CAN HEAR MYSELF FROM TOMORROW'

Tash took a shaky step back.

"What happened to him?"

Ravi whispered, "He drifted too far ahead."

Hitch added, "He existed before his own decisions caught up."

"What does that MEAN?!"

Nord placed a gentle hand on his arm.

"Outcome fragmentation."

Tash was officially beyond human comprehension.

They walked further until they reached a shelf labelled:

Auditor #4 – Reference Material

The binder's title read:

"Nothing Makes Sense and I am Tired"

(Filed by: Auditor #4, 17 days before dissolution)

Tash's breath trembled. "Dissolution?"

Nord nodded sadly.

"What, what dissolves?"

"Identity," Ravi said softly. "Timeline cohesion. Selfhood."

"HE DIED?!"

"No," Nord corrected. "He became *distributed*."

Tash swayed.

"I want to sit."

"Sit," Hitch said helpfully. "Before you fall."

Tash lowered himself onto an empty crate.

His hands shook uncontrollably.

Nord crouched in front of him.

"Tash. Listen to me."

"No," he whispered. "I don't want to hear anything."

"You must. You saw the stranger in the Loop. You saw a projection in the Turbine Hall. The Station is involving you in ways it has never involved anyone before."

Tash looked up at her, eyes wide and desperate.

"Why me?"

Nord's voice softened.

"Because, Tash... you're not just reacting. You're influencing."

"That's not a comfort!"

"It wasn't meant to be."

Ravi tugged at Nord's sleeve nervously. "Shouldn't we show him the 'Decision Log'?"

Hitch winced. "Oh, don't show him that. Not yet."

Nord considered.

"No. He needs to see it."

Tash shook his head wildly. "I do not need to see it."

"You do," Nord said firmly. "The Station has selected you. The next stage depends on your understanding."

"I don't want a Next Stage!"

"The Station does," she said simply.

Hitch rummaged through a lower shelf and pulled out a small metal case.

Inside was a folder titled:

DECISION LOG – AUDITOR PATHS

(CLASSIFIED: FOR SELECTED CANDIDATES ONLY)

Hitch placed it gently in Tash's lap, as though handing a child a dangerous relic.

"Open it."

"I'm afraid," Tash whispered.

"You should be," Hitch said.

"Stop telling him that!" Ravi hissed.

"I'm not lying!"

Nord cleared her throat sharply. “Enough. Tash, open the folder.”

He did.

Slowly.

Inside were pages, handwritten, typed, some printed, some scrawled in frantic ink, each describing the “Decision Paths” of the previous auditors.

Tash flipped through.

AUDITOR #1 – DECISION PATH: ACCEPTANCE

Outcome: Early recruitment, early failure. Station classified him as non-viable.

AUDITOR #2 – DECISION PATH: AVOIDANCE

Outcome: Timeline drift. Station removed him from sequence.

AUDITOR #3 – DECISION PATH: INTERVENTION

Outcome: Over-correction. Hallucinated past events into real outcomes. Infrastructure collapse.

AUDITOR #4 – DECISION PATH: DENIAL

Outcome: Psychological fracture. Timeline fragmentation.

AUDITOR #5 – DECISION PATH: REBELLION

Outcome: Unstable. Station expelled him. Reality integrity compromised.

Tash’s throat tightened.

He turned the final page.

CURRENT AUDITOR PROJECTION – PROBABILITY CLOUD

Name: Tash

Status: Unresolved

Potential Paths Detected:

- Coherence
- Contradiction
- Succession
- Collapse
- Unknown (new determinant)

Tash stared at the final line.

Unknown (new determinant)

He whispered, "I don't understand."

Nord tapped the page.

"This line," she said, "is why the Station wants you."

"What does it mean?" he asked.

"None of the previous auditors displayed this path," she said. "But you do. Something no one, not us, not the Station, can predict."

"That's BAD!" Tash cried.

Nord shook her head slowly.

"Or," she said, "it means you represent a choice with no predetermined outcome."

"A choice for WHAT?"

Nord held his gaze.

"For the Station."

The room hummed.

Something in the shadows shivered not movement, not sound, but recognition.

Ravi whispered, "It's listening."

Tash's breath trembled.

"You brought me here to show me what?" he whispered.

Nord answered quietly.

"That you're not here to audit the Station."

She touched the folder, the page, the words.

"You're here to determine what it will become."

Tash felt a chilling clarity settle into him, like an iceberg of realization sliding into place beneath a turbulent sea.

He whispered:

"I don't want this."

The Archive lights flickered.

Something deep in the walls pulsed.

Nord whispered:

"The Station doesn't care what you want."

Tash shut the folder.

Not gently.

Not respectfully.

He slammed it closed like a person trying to trap a spider under a book, fearful that if even a single page escaped, it would crawl into his life and lay eggs.

The sound echoed.

Twice.

Once from the present.

Once from somewhere three seconds ahead.

Ravi winced. "Loud noises make the Archive nervous."

"The Archive can file a complaint," Tash snapped.

Nord ignored the outburst. She stepped closer, her expression a strange mixture of stern mentorship and quiet grief.

"Tash," she said, "you needed to see those paths."

"No," Tash said, standing abruptly. "I needed to see a psychiatrist and a lawyer."

"Neither are allowed inside the Station," Ravi muttered.

"Why not?!"

"Both rely on linear causality," Ravi said. "It makes them dizzy."

"Stop talking!" Tash shouted.

His voice rang out and this time, there was no temporal echo. Just silence.

A heavy silence.

A synchronized silence.

Dr. Nord stiffened.

Ravi froze mid-breath.

Hitch's smile faded.

"Ah," he whispered. "It heard him."

Tash felt a prickle at the back of his neck. "What heard me?"

Nord turned her head slowly, eyes scanning the ceiling.

"The Station."

Tash swallowed.

"What does that mean?"

"It means," Nord said quietly, "it's paying very close attention now."

The lights dimmed.

The walls vibrated not violently, but with the unmistakable sensation of a deep inhale.

As if the Station itself had taken a breath.

Tash whispered, "It's breathing?"

"Not literally," Hitch replied. "But yes."

Tash backed up until his back hit a metal cabinet labelled:

ARCHIVE: PARADOXICAL SCRAP

He whispered, "This place is a nightmare."

"No," Nord said. "Nightmares end. The Station continues."

She gestured toward the closed folder in his hands.

"You saw five patterns of failure," she said. "Five ways an auditor collapses under temporal pressure."

"And you think I'm supposed to be the sixth?" Tash spat. "A new failure category?"

Nord shook her head.

"No. A new category of outcome."

"That sounds WORSE!"

"No," she said. "It sounds *dangerous*. And that's different."

Hitch chimed in, "Dangerous outcomes are more stable, if handled properly."

Ravi raised a hand timidly. "To be fair, some dangerous outcomes have made things... interesting."

Tash stared at all three of them.

"You're insane," he whispered. "All of you."

Hitch shrugged. "We work at Oridyn Station. Sanity is a privilege we surrendered years ago."

The floor beneath them vibrated a gentle but pointed reminder of presence.

Nord's jaw tightened.

"The Station wants to show you something," she said.

"No," Tash said instantly.

"You don't have a choice."

"I DO have a choice."

"No," Nord repeated, "you don't."

The vibration stopped.

Then

From the far end of the Archive, something clicked.

Metal slid.

A shelf shifted.

Tash watched as an entire row of documents rearranged themselves.

Folders repositioned.

Binders flickered in and out.

Labels rewrote themselves.

One section brightened.

Nord exhaled sharply.

"It's guiding us."

Ravi stepped back. "We shouldn't follow that."

Hitch disagreed. "We always follow it."

Ravi snapped, "And that's why we keep losing auditors!"

Nord turned to Tash.

"Come."

"No!" he said, stepping back.

But the Archive lights dimmed again not flickering, not failing but deliberately lowering brightness, as though gently pushing him forward.

"Tash," Nord said softly. "If you don't cooperate, it will escalate."

Tash shivered.

"What happens when it escalates?"

Nord pointed to a shelf labelled:

INCIDENT: THE DAY THE STATION DEMANDED AN
ANSWER

Tash's stomach hollowed out.

"What answer?"

Hitch sighed. "From the auditor. He refused."

"And then?"

Ravi swallowed. "There wasn't a *then*. There was just no more him."

Tash felt sweat bead on his forehead.

"Fine," he whispered. "Show me."

Nord nodded once.

They walked toward the newly illuminated section.

As they approached, Tash felt pressure in his ears the kind of pressure that comes before a storm or after a lie.

The shelf they were being guided to held a single file.

A thin one.

Almost empty.

Labelled only:

TASH – POSSIBILITY INDEX

Tash hesitated.

Nord nodded toward it.

“Open it.”

He reached out.

His fingers brushed the cover.

A spark flickered not electrical, but conceptual. Like the moment before a memory returns.

He opened the file.

It held only one page.

Typed neatly, cantered:

UNRESOLVED.

AWAITING INPUT.

Tash frowned. “Input?”

Nord stared at him.

“It wants your answer.”

“My answer to what?”

“The question the Station asked,” she said. “The one it always asks a chosen auditor.”

“I never heard a question!”

“You did,” she said. “You just didn’t understand it.”

Ravi whispered, “It’s always the same question.”

Tash felt his throat tighten.

“...what question?”

Hitch stepped forward, resting a hand on his shoulder.

“The Station is asking,” he said gently,

“What will you be?”

Tash froze.

Nord spoke softly, like a teacher guiding a student through a difficult realization.

“Will you be coherence?”

Will you be contradiction?

Will you be the stabilizer?

Or will you be the collapse?”

Tash shook his head, voice cracking.

“I’m none of those. I’m just an auditor.”

“No,” Nord said. “You’re a variable. A determinant. A choice that has to define itself.”

Tash felt panic tighten his ribs.

“I don’t KNOW what I am!”

The walls vibrated a deep, rumbling sound that was almost sympathetic.

Nord whispered, “No one knows. That’s the test.”

“But why me?” Tash cried.

Ravi answered, “Because the Station can’t predict you.”

Hitch added, “And that terrifies it.”

Tash stared at him.

“The Station is... scared?”

Hitch nodded. “Terrified. Anything unpredictable threatens the fabric of what it maintains.”

Nord leaned in.

“You asked us earlier why the Station needs you. The truth is simple.”

She swallowed.

“You are the outcome it can’t calculate.”

Tash’s hands shook.

“I don’t want this responsibility.”

The Archive trembled, just slightly, like a breath held.

Nord whispered:

“That’s why it chose you.”

The lights flickered again.

But this time

It wasn’t random.

The flicker formed a pattern.
A pulse.
Three long.
One short.
Three long.
Hitch inhaled sharply.
“It’s asking again.”
Asking what?
Tash turned slowly back to the file.
A new line had appeared at the bottom of the page.
DEFINE YOURSELF.
His pulse hammered.
“Tash,” Nord said quietly, “you have to answer.”
He shook his head.
A small, terrified motion.
“What if I choose wrong?”
Nord whispered:
“There is no wrong.”
Ravi added:
“Only consequences.”
Hitch sighed:
“Big, reality-bending consequences.”
Tash staggered back.
“I can’t... I don’t... I don’t know what to say.”
The Station pulsed again.
Waiting.
The Archive pulsed again.
Not the lights.
Not the machinery.
The *air itself* dimmed and brightened as though the concept of illumination were taking shallow, impatient breaths.
On the page before him:
DEFINE YOURSELF.
Tash felt something inside him snap taut a chord pulled too tight, vibrating with the frequency of imminent collapse.

He whispered, "I don't know how to answer that."

Nord stepped closer, her voice low, steady, painfully calm.

"You must."

Ravi stepped back like a man anticipating shrapnel.

Hitch leaned forward, fascinated.

"The Station loves uncertainty," Hitch murmured. "But it *needs* definition."

"That's contradictory!" Tash snapped.

"Yes," Nord said. "That's why it remains stable."

Tash looked back at the page.

The words glowed faintly, then faded, then glowed again.

DEFINE YOURSELF.

His breath shook.

His hands trembled.

"What happens if I walk away?" he whispered.

The entire Archive answered.

A low groan rolled through the shelves, rattling binders, quivering metal doors, vibrating every artifact in the room, including the vials that held flickering pockets of captured time.

Dr. Nord's voice was soft.

Almost sad.

"That was your answer."

Tash froze. "What does that mean?"

"It means the Station heard your intent," she said. "It interprets hesitation as rejection."

Ravi whispered to Hitch, "Should we, should we secure the emergency anchors?"

Hitch shook his head. "Not yet."

The Archive hummed louder.

Not a machine sound.

Not an electrical buzz.

A presence.

A presence that felt like the entire Station was bending closer, pressing its attention inside this one small room.

Tash felt his skin prickle.

"It wants me to decide something I don't understand," he whispered. "This isn't fair."

Nord's jaw tightened.

"The Station doesn't deal in fairness. It deals in outcomes."

"But I'm just..."

"No," she cut him off. "You're not 'just' anything. Not anymore. The reactor saw you. The turbine listened to you. The pump whispered to you. The Loop distorted around you. The Station is selecting you."

"For WHAT?!" Tash demanded.

Hitch gave a small shrug. "To continue its work."

Ravi added, "Or to oppose it."

Nord added, "Or to redefine it."

Tash stared at them, horrified.

"You don't even know what you're asking me to choose."

Nord's expression softened.

"Neither does the Station."

"That doesn't help!"

"Welcome," she said, "to something in a place that doesn't believe in it."

Tash felt faint.

The folder in his hands vibrated, lightly, insistently, like a phone receiving messages from a number he didn't want to answer.

The words shifted.

DEFINE YOURSELF OR BE DEFINED.

His breath caught.

"It wants to decide for me."

Nord nodded.

"And you won't like its definition."

"What does it define people as?"

Ravi whispered:

"Resources."

Tash nearly collapsed.

"No. No, I won't let that happen."

The air trembled in approval as though the Station itself reacted to his defiance.

The words shifted again.

STATE YOUR DETERMINATION.

His pulse hammered.

"I don't have a determination!"

"You do," Nord said. "You simply haven't admitted it."

"This is insane," Tash whispered. "All of this. The future versions, the projections, the machinery that has existential crises"

Hitch nodded sympathetically. "Common side effect of nuclear time manipulation."

"...the Station demanding that I pick a metaphysical career path..."

"Better than HR deciding for you," Ravi muttered.

"none of it makes sense!"

Nord looked at him with the calm of a woman who had long ago accepted the absurd.

"It doesn't need to make sense," she said. "It only needs to persist."

Tash rubbed his face. His hands were trembling hard enough to blur his vision.

He stared down at the page again.

STATE YOUR DETERMINATION.

"What if I say I'm nothing?" he whispered. "What if I reject all of it?"

Hitch inhaled.

Ravi covered his eyes.

Nord stepped forward sharply.

"No," she said. "Do not say that."

"Why not?"

"Because 'nothing' is already a defined outcome."

Tash froze.

"What outcome?"

"Collapse," she whispered.

The Archive shook a trembling, warning shudder.

Tash clutched the folder.

"What if I refuse to choose?"

“You already saw that outcome,” Ravi said quietly.

“The stranger told you.”

Tash felt a chill.

The stranger’s final words echoed in his memory:

“When the time comes, choose the option that scares you the most.”

Tash shivered.

He didn’t understand the words then.

He barely understood them now.

Nord watched him closely.

“Tash,” she said quietly. “You think you’re here to survive this place. But you’re here to make a decision the Station cannot make for itself.”

“That’s ridiculous,” he whispered.

“That’s why it chose you.”

His heart pounded.

His stomach twisted.

His thoughts scattered like loose pages in a storm.

He stared at the glowing words.

STATE YOUR DETERMINATION.

“What does that even *look like?*” he whispered.

Nord spoke slowly.

“It looks like a sentence only you could write.”

Ravi added, “Something no one else would think to say.”

Hitch said, “Something only a contradiction could declare.”

Tash closed his eyes.

The Station waited.

Silent.

Still.

Expectant.

What was he?

He was fear.

He was confusion.

He was a man who wanted to go home.

He was a man who wanted to understand.

He was a man who screamed at pumps and befriended turbines
and survived temporal angers.

He was a man pulled here.

He was a man resisting.

He was a man who did not belong and yet, somehow, the Station
had made room for him.

He knew one thing:

He refused to be absorbed.

He refused to dissolve.

He refused to be defined by a machine that didn't care about his
humanity.

He took a shaky breath.

"I am..." he whispered.

The page brightened.

He lifted his head.

Dr. Nord stepped closer.

Ravi held his breath.

Hitch's eyes widened.

Tash spoke

Clear. Crisp.

A sentence that surprised him as much as anyone else.

"I am the question you cannot answer."

The effect was instantaneous.

The Archive inhaled a deep, cavernous pull of air as though
shocked.

Lights flared.

Binders rattled violently.

Artifacts vibrated.

The walls shimmered.

Temporal pockets flickered like neurons firing.

Nord's jaw dropped.

Ravi stumbled back.

Hitch whispered, "Oh... oh, that's new."

The folder in Tash's hands glowed white-hot not burning him,
but illuminating the room.

The words shifted on the page:

Determination Accepted

Classification: Non-Compliant Variable

Response: Reconfiguration Required

Tash backed up.

“What does that mean?! What did I DO?!”

Dr. Nord stared at him in awe bordering on fear.

“You created a sixth path.”

Ravi looked like he might faint. “A path with no predetermined structure.”

Hitch whispered, voice trembling with excitement, “You gave the Station uncertainty.”

The Archive roared

A sound like metal grinding on fate, like timelines colliding in a furnace, like the Station itself waking up.

The lights exploded into brilliant white.

The room shook.

Dust fell.

Tash clutched the folder to his chest.

“What’s happening?!”

Nord shouted over the rising hum

“YOU CHANGED THE PROBABILITY MATRIX!”

“What does that MEAN?!”

“It means,” she cried, “the Station doesn’t know what you are anymore!”

The room convulsed.

Shelves collapsed backward not falling but *reversing* their collapse, breaking in reverse, shards re-joining mid-air.

Temporal energy surged across the walls a shimmering wave like the Oridyn borealis dipped in machinery.

Ravi screamed, **“HE’S TRIGGERED A SYSTEM-WIDE REASSESSMENT!”**

Hitch laughed, delighted.

“This is extraordinary!”

The lights pulsed faster

Faster

faster

Then everything froze.

Silence.

Stillness.

Absolute.

Tash felt weightless.

Dr. Nord whispered

“Oh no.”

Tash turned to her slowly.

“What now?”

“The Station,” she said, staring upward, “is recalibrating your existence.”

Tash swallowed.

“For what?”

Nord met his eyes.

“For the next level”

CHAPTER 6

The Airlock Interlock

The Station had gone quiet.
Not silent, quiet.

The difference was important.

Silence was an absence.

Quiet was a judgment.

Tash felt it as soon as he left the Archive a pressure, soft but unmistakable, like someone standing behind him and refusing to blink.

Dr. Nord led the way through a corridor he had never seen before.

It was narrower than the others, lined with metal braces, and the lights were dimmed as if conserving attention rather than electricity.

Ravi followed, wringing his hands.

Hitch walked last, humming, because Hitch humming was the only weapon he possessed against anxiety.

Tash kept pace with them, but his mind felt loose sliding inside his skull like luggage during turbulence.

"You're unusually quiet," Nord observed.

Tash swallowed.

"What did I do?"

"You declared a sixth path," she said. "The Station has to incorporate that."

"Incorporate," Tash repeated. "That sounds surgical."

"Everything here is surgical."

"That wasn't comforting."

"Not trying to be."

A door appeared ahead of them tall, circular, reinforced with concentric rings of metal that resembled ripples frozen in steel. It pulsed faintly with pale blue light, like a heartbeat slowed down to one beat per eternity.

Above it, glowing letters:

AIRLOCK INTERLOCK – REACTOR ACCESSWAY

Tash's legs nearly folded.

"We're going into the reactor dome?"

Nord nodded. "The Station is accelerating your induction. It wants you to see the core."

Tash's voice cracked. "But I'm not trained for core access. I'm not certified. I'm not psychologically stable."

Hitch coughed. "No one here is."

Ravi whispered, "Speak for yourself. I cry quietly in my bunk like a normal technician."

Nord ignored them and placed her palm on the panel beside the airlock.

The metal rings contracted inward, like an eye focusing.

A slow hiss filled the corridor.

Tash stepped back.

"What's the hiss?"

"Pressure equalization," Nord said.

"Atmospheric pressure?"

"No."

He froze.

"No?"

"No," she repeated. "Temporal pressure."

"That's worse!"

"Yes."

"Why are we equalizing it?!"

"So you don't rupture when you enter."

"I CAN RUPTURE?!"

"Everything can rupture," Hitch said cheerfully, "given the right discontinuity."

Tash considered running.

He genuinely considered it.

But the air behind him felt thick like the Station had leaned forward and blocked the exit.

Nord's voice softened.

"Tash. You created a path without a known outcome. The Station needs to understand your trajectory. For that, it needs your presence inside the dome."

"What happens if it doesn't understand me?" Tash whispered.

Ravi answered: "It tries again."

"That's not comforting."

"It wasn't meant to be."

The airlock door rotated counter clockwise, slowly, with the weight of a decision being made.

The rings pulled apart, revealing a narrow chamber inside, filled with soft white mist.

Tash stared.

"Is that steam?"

Nord shook her head.

"No. That's slowed time."

"Slowed... time?"

"Yes. Distilled temporal air. It prevents shock."

Tash looked at the mist again.

It moved with agonizing slowness, each swirl taking seconds to form a curve.

"It's moving like... molasses."

"No," Hitch said.

"Molasses moves faster."

The door opened fully.

Nord gestured to the mist-filled chamber.

"Step inside."

Tash's heart raced.

"I don't want to."

"I know," she said quietly. "But the Station does."

Ravi whispered, "It's waiting."

Tash could feel it the Station's gaze, unblinking, pervasive, a force pressing on the back of his thoughts.

He stepped forward.

His foot entered the chamber.

The mist curled around his shoe slowly, gently with the weight of a moment stretching.

Instantly, his dosimeter buzzed.

He looked down.

0.17 SEC/MIN

STATUS: TEMPORAL COMPRESSION

His pulse skyrocketed.

“WHAT DOES ‘COMPRESSION’ MEAN?!”

Nord stepped in behind him.

“It means your timeline is temporarily denser.”

“That is not a phrase a human is supposed to hear!”

“No,” she agreed. “But here you are.”

The airlock sealed behind them.

A second door waited ahead this one darker, heavier, with faint etchings that glowed in slow pulses:

mathematical curves, reactor schematics, and symbols he didn’t recognize.

Ravi’s voice crackled over a speaker. He must have remained outside.

“Tash,” he said nervously, “do not panic.”

“Too late!”

“Do NOT panic more.”

Nord looked at him.

“Breathe steadily.”

“I can’t.”

“Try.”

He inhaled and felt his lungs resist the temporal density.

Like breathing through warm syrup.

“Nord, this is wrong. This is **WRONG**. This feels like I’m walking into a place that remembers me.”

“It does,” she said simply.

The second door unsealed.

A wave of pressure hit him not painful, but heavy, like a shift in gravity.

Nord steadied him.

“That’s the dilation boundary.”

Tash clung to the wall.

“I can’t do this.”

“You already are.”

The door opened fully.

Tash stepped through.

And saw the Reactor Dome.

It was enormous.

A cathedral of steel and shadow and humming blue light, vast and echoing, the air filled with a low vibration that felt like standing inside a giant’s heartbeat.

Pipes arched overhead like ribs.

Platforms spiralled upward around the central chamber.

And in the middle impossibly suspended bathed in a soft, pulsating blue was the reactor core.

Tash felt his breath stolen.

Not by awe.

Not by terror.

By recognition.

The core pulsed slow, deep, steady.

And with each pulse, Tash felt pressure on his chest.

Like time itself was pushing on him.

Nord whispered:

“This is the Gravity of the Atom.”

Tash turned to her, voice trembling.

“Why does it feel like... like it’s pulling me?”

“Because it is.”

“Why?!”

“Because you declared yourself undefined.”

His skin prickled.

“What does that have to do with the core?”

Nord looked at him an expression he had only seen on her once before, when the Loop collapsed.

"Tash," she said quietly, "the reactor embodies definition. It stabilizes futures. It anchors probability. It hates uncertainty."

"And I am uncertainty," he whispered.

"Yes."

Something shifted.

The core brightened

No.

It *focused*.

Tash felt it.

A force pressing against him.

A question in the pressure.

Nord stepped back.

"Tash. Don't move."

"I wasn't planning to!"

The core pulsed again harder.

The air around him thickened.

A strange weight settled on his shoulders, like a gravity vector pointing directly at his identity.

Nord's voice cut through the pressure.

"It's testing you."

"For what?!"

"For consistency."

"I AM NOT CONSISTENT!"

"That's why it's struggling."

The core pulsed a third time.

Tash staggered.

"Nord, Nord, I can't...."

"Breathe!" she yelled.

"I..."

And then

The pressure changed.

Not heavier.

Not lighter.

Different.

The core dimmed.

Then brightened.
Then dimmed again.
Pulsing in a pattern.
A pattern Tash instinctively recognized.
It was trying to communicate.
Nord whispered:
“It’s asking you something.”
Tash swallowed hard.
“What does it want to know?”
Nord’s eyes widened.
“It wants to know,” she said slowly, “whether you intend to define the Station...”
She stepped back.
“...or change it.”
Tash felt the question hit him like a wave.
Define it.
Or change it.
Stability.
Or upheaval.
Structure.
Or evolution.
The core pulsed again
impatient.
Tash’s heart pounded.
“I don’t know,” he whispered.
The core brightened, alarmingly.
Nord shouted, “TASH, YOU HAVE TO ANSWER. NOW.”
He stared at the core.
His voice shook.
“I...”
He inhaled.
“I don’t know yet.”
The core froze.
Everything stopped.

Silence.

Absolute.

Then

A low hum began slow, deep, rising.

Nord grabbed his arm.

“Tash, what did you DO?”

He whispered:

“I told the truth.”

The reactor screamed.

The reactor screamed.

Not like metal under strain.

Not like turbines losing balance.

Not like alarms or sirens or any engineered cry.

It screamed like a canyon with lungs.

A long, impossible roar that wasn't heard by Tash's ears so much as *felt* by the bones inside

a vibration that shook thought loose from certainty.

The Dome trembled.

Platforms rattled.

Pipes shivered violently, shedding flakes of dust that fell upward, then sideways, then hesitated, unsure which timeline they belonged to.

Tash clamped his hands over his ears anyway.

“MAKE IT STOP!”

Nord shouted back her voice nearly ripped apart by the tremor:

“IT DOESN'T STOP! NOT UNTIL IT UNDERSTANDS YOU!”

“THAT'S TERRIBLE!”

“That's physics at this point!”

Hitch's voice crackled over the intercom from somewhere behind the sealed airlock:

“Tash! Whatever you did, undo it!”

Tash yelled, “I DON'T KNOW WHAT I DID!”

Ravi shouted faintly behind him, “HE DECLARED A NONLINEAR IDENTITY, HITCH! THE CORE CAN'T PARSE IT!”

“Oh, brilliant!” Hitch yelled. “Absolutely brilliant! We’re negotiating with a fission timeline mirror that wants closure!”

Tash clenched his jaw.

He couldn’t think.

He could barely understand which direction thought was supposed to go.

The scream intensified the pitch rising, dropping, splitting into harmonics, as if the reactor were trying out emotional registers.

Confusion.

Frustration.

Demand.

Fear.

Tash dropped to one knee.

“Why is it screaming at ME?!” he shouted.

Nord steadied herself against a railing.

“YOU ANSWERED WITH INDECISION!”

“THAT’S HOW MY BRAIN WORKS!”

“NOT IN HERE!”

Another shockwave rippled outward.

A diagnostic display flickered.

For a moment it showed something Tash had never seen on any reactor panel in his career:

CORE STATE: AGITATED

PROBABILITY FIELD: CHAOTIC

DEFINITION REQUEST: PENDING

VARIABLE: TASH

He pointed at the screen.

“I DON’T WANT MY NAME ON THAT PANEL!”

“You can file a complaint!” Hitch shouted.

Ravi added, “But the complaint form writes itself based on your subconscious fears!”

“STOP TALKING!”

The dome lights stuttered, once, twice, then surged to full brightness as though reacting emotionally.

The core pulsed again, but differently this time.

Not anger.

Not fear.

A kind of... accusation.

A wave hit Tash's chest, pushing him backward.

Nord grabbed his arm.

"Stay on your feet!"

"I CAN'T!"

"You have to!"

"I'M AN AUDITOR, NOT A WIZARD!"

Ravi yelled through the intercom, "YOU'RE WHATEVER THE STATION SAYS YOU ARE NOW!"

Tash glared at the core.

"STOP MAKING THAT DECISION!"

The core's hum rose a scorching resonant blast that shook dust from air ducts in slow-motion spirals.

Nord shouted:

"It asked you to define yourself, and you refused!"

"I didn't refuse, I said I didn't know!"

"Same thing in here!"

Tash clutched his head.

"WHY IS A REACTOR SO EMOTIONALLY NEEDY?!"

Nord shot him a look that would have melted zirconium.

"Because this is NOT a normal reactor!"

The scream shifted

Sudden

Sharp

piercing

And then it stopped.

Just stopped.

The silence that followed was so absolute it felt like a vacuum.

Tash gasped for air, though there was no suffocation.

Just the shock of everything going still.

Nord slowly lowered her hands from her ears.

Ravi exhaled into the intercom like a dying kettle.

Hitch murmured, "Well. That's either very good... or catastrophically bad."

Nord whispered, "Shhh."

Because the core was pulsing again but softly.

Slow.

Measured.

Almost... curious.

Tash took a step back.

"No," he whispered. "No. No curiosity allowed. That's a boundary violation."

Nord held her breath.

The core pulsed again.

And a light thin as a thread shot from the centre of the reactor.

Not at him.

Around him.

A glowing circle traced the perimeter of his body like a scanner deciding what shape he qualified as.

Tash froze.

"Nord... what is it doing?"

She stared.

"It's mapping your identity vector."

"What?!"

"It's trying to visualize your outcome."

"I don't WANT my outcome visualized!"

"Too late."

The light circled him again tighter this time.

"Nord, tell it to stop!"

She shook her head helplessly.

"No one tells it anything."

The line of light moved behind him hesitated then flickered.

Tash felt a cold tug.

Not physical.

Not emotional.

Something between.

He gasped.

“What, what was that?!”

Nord’s eyes widened.

“It’s reading your unresolved probability.”

“THAT SOUNDS LIKE SPIRITUAL INVASION!”

“It’s physics, not spirituality.”

“It feels like spirituality!”

“It’s physics with commitment issues!”

The light contracted and then

It made a shape.

A diagram. Floating in the air.

A kind of shimmering fractal, pulsating, shifting, looping back on itself.

Tash stared, horrified.

“What is THAT?!”

Nord whispered:

“That... is you.”

Tash started to hyperventilate.

“I look like a malfunctioning snowflake?!”

“Most minds do,” Hitch said over the intercom. “At least the interesting ones.”

The fractal rotated.

Flickered.

Expanded.

Collapsed inward.

Then pulsed a single time, bright enough to momentarily blind him.

When his vision cleared

The core had gone quiet.

Utterly, completely quiet.

No hum.

No pulse.

No vibration.

The reactor was... thinking.

Nord looked terrified.

“Tash,” she whispered, “I think it’s recalculating you.”

Tash staggered.

“What does that MEAN?”

“That it’s updating its probability field based on your answer.”

“I DIDN’T GIVE AN ANSWER!”

“You did,” Nord said. “You just don’t know what it means.”

The fractal dissolved.

The air trembled once.

And a final message flickered across a reactor diagnostic panel:

RESPONSE RECEIVED.

STATUS: NON-LINEAR ACCEPTED.

REQUEST: FURTHER TESTING REQUIRED.

Tash stared, horrified.

“No. No more testing. NO MORE TESTING.”

Nord exhaled shakily.

“The Station disagrees.”

The core brightened again, just slightly like a wink from something that should not know how to wink.

Then it spoke.

Not in words.

In *pressure*:

A push.

A pull.

A direction.

Tash felt it like a hand on his spine.

He turned slowly.

The core was pointing him, metaphorically, conceptually, gravitationally toward a staircase spiralling downward.

The Containment Level.

Nord blanched.

“Tash,” she said quietly, “the Station wants you to go deeper.”

“No.”

“It wants you to descend.”

“No.”

Ravi’s voice stuttered through the intercom.

“It... wants him in the lower loops?”

Hitch whispered, "It wants him near the flux."

Tash backed away, shaking his head.

"No. No, absolutely not. I'm not going into the belly of this nightmare."

The core pulsed again stronger a command wrapped in inevitability.

Nord's voice was low. Heavy.

"Tash. You have no choice."

He stared at the staircase.

Dark.

Twisting.

Descending into humming light.

His voice cracked.

"What's down there?"

Nord met his eyes.

"The reason the Station was built."

A shiver ran through the dome.

Tash whispered

"What reason?"

Nord swallowed.

And said the words that would haunt him long after:

"To keep something from reaching the present."

The staircase spiralled downward, swallowed by a soft, electric blue haze.

It wasn't steam.

It wasn't mist.

It wasn't any phase of matter Tash recognized.

It was flux air, a shimmering suspension of particles that hadn't decided whether they existed yet.

Tash stood at the top step frozen, shaking.

"I'm not going," he said.

His voice cracked.

His conviction didn't.

Nord, standing behind him, said quietly, "You have to."

"No. The Station wants me down there because it wants something from me. Something I don't understand."

"That's correct."

"That's manipulative!"

"That's correct, too."

Tash's legs locked in place.

The core pulsed once, sharply a pressure that nudged him forward as though a giant unseen finger pressed against his spine.

He lurched.

"STOP PUSHING ME!"

"It's not pushing you," Nord said. "It's... encouraging you."

"It feels like coercion."

"It is."

Behind them, the intercom crackled.

Hitch: "Tash, if it helps, this part of the Station predates even our oldest operational logs."

Ravi: "Hitch, that does NOT help!"

Hitch: "I meant that as awe, not fear."

Ravi: "They're the SAME FEELING down there!"

Nord stepped beside Tash, placing one gloved hand on the rail.

Her face was unreadable.

Not cold.

Not warm.

Just... braced.

"Tash," she said softly, "the Station built itself around this chamber."

He turned to her slowly.

"What?"

Ravi's voice chimed in: "Yeah, the original nuclear plant was secondary. The core grew around the anomaly."

Hitch: "Constructed infrastructure around a temporal necessity. It's elegant, in an impossible, horrifying sort of way."

Tash blinked hard.

"You're telling me the reactor was built around something older than the facility?"

Nord nodded.

“Yes.”

“And what is that?”

She hesitated.

Then:

“That’s what you’re going to see.”

Tash grabbed the handrail.

It vibrated faintly not from movement, but from *time*.

He took one step.

The flux air parted slightly, swirling around his leg, clinging to the fabric of his pants like something assessing him.

He took another step.

His dosimeter buzzed, displaying:

0.32 SEC/MIN – TEMPORAL SHEAR DETECTED

WARNING: CONTINUITY THRESHOLD APPROACHING

Tash’s voice rose an octave.

“NORD, WHY AM I APPROACHING A CONTINUITY THRESHOLD?!”

“Because the lower loops don’t entirely exist in this second.”

“What SECOND do they exist in?!”

“All of them.”

“That is not an answer!”

“It’s the only answer.”

Tash stared down the staircase.

The blue haze moved in slow spirals, like time trying to breathe.

He descended.

One step.

Two steps.

Then ten.

The light grew dimmer, not darker, but *slower*.

It flickered as if struggling to update itself.

The rail felt warm under his hand.

Warm like a pulse.

The Station was nervous.

That realization chilled him more than the flux air.

After what felt like minutes, and simultaneously like seconds,
Tash reached a landing.

A platform extended ahead.

Dim.

Quiet.

Filled with a hum that didn't vibrate in the ears but in the
thoughts.

Tash stepped off the last stair.

His foot touched metal.

The world bent.

Not visually.

Not physically.

Conceptually.

For a fraction of a moment, he remembered something from the
future a conversation he hadn't had yet, Nord's voice saying
something about "containment integrity," Hitch yelling about
"cross-phase contamination," Ravi calling his name with panic

And then it was gone.

Like an idea he had swallowed wrong.

Tash stumbled.

"What, what was that?"

Nord stepped beside him.

"You crossed a micro-timeline boundary."

"That sounds VERY BAD."

"It's normal down here."

"I hate this place."

"That's normal too."

Ravi's voice crackled faintly from the intercom above, distant
now, distorted slightly, like coming through water.

"Tash? Can you still hear us?"

"Yes!" Tash shouted.

"You sound... lagged."

Hitch: "Temporal latency. Expected."

Tash: "EXPECTED FOR WHO?!"

Nord: "Tash, focus."

She pointed ahead.

A corridor stretched before them, metallic ribs arched overhead, tubes running along the walls with fluids that pulsed backward, then forward again.

At the far end: a heavy circular hatch with a sigil above it.

Not a word.

Not a logo.

A symbol.

A circle with a line through it but the line was broken in the centre.

Interrupting itself. A contradiction rendered in steel.

Tash felt a shiver.

“What is that?”

Nord’s voice was almost reverent.

“The containment seal.”

“Containment of WHAT?”

She looked at him steadily.

“The anomaly.”

Tash turned pale.

“You mean the... thing that the Station was built around?”

“Yes.”

“What IS it?”

Nord hesitated.

“Show him,” Hitch said over the comm.

Ravi whispered, “Should we be doing this? He’s already unstable.”

Hitch: “So is the anomaly. They’ll get along.”

“THAT IS NOT FUNNY!” Tash roared.

Nord placed a hand on his shoulder.

“You deserve the truth now.”

Tash swallowed hard.

“...tell me.”

Nord exhaled.

Then spoke five words that froze the flux air itself.

“It’s a pocket of time.”

Tash stared.

"Time."

"Yes."

"A pocket. Of time."

"Yes."

"Like... leftover time?"

"No."

"Unused time?"

"No."

"TIME DOES NOT COME IN POCKET SIZES!"

Nord's voice lowered.

"This one does."

Tash stumbled back.

"Are you telling me the Station is built around... a fragment of time?"

Nord nodded.

"A sealed, self-contained fragment. Detached from sequence."

"Detached? DETACHED?! Time cannot just DETACH!"

"It detached itself."

"That's impossible!"

"That's why it's contained."

Tash rubbed his face with both hands.

"I need to sit."

"Don't sit," she said quickly. "The floor drifts."

He looked down.

The metal tiles shimmered like reflections on water.

Not moving just not committed to staying still.

He whispered:

"What happens if the pocket breaks?"

Nord's voice was very quiet.

"The present becomes a suggestion."

Tash nearly fainted.

He backed toward the stairs but the flux air pulsed, and the rail behind him warmed again.

The Station was saying: Do not retreat.

Nord looked down the corridor.

"The Station wants you to approach the hatch."

"NO."

"It needs your presence."

"NO!"

"It thinks you can stabilize the reading."

"NO, NO, NO"

The hatch clicked.

Tash froze.

A deep, slow rumble echoed down the corridor not mechanical, not electrical.

A heartbeat.

No.

A clock beat.

The anomaly knew he was here.

Nord whispered:

"It's calling you."

Tash whispered back:

"Then tell it to STOP CALLING."

"You're the first variable it can't predict," Nord said. "It wants to see you."

The hatch glowed faintly.

Blue.

White.

Blue again.

A pulse.

A summons.

Tash's legs shook.

"This is insane," he whispered. "This is... this is cosmic madness."

Nord placed a steadying hand on his shoulder.

"Tash," she said softly, "listen to me."

He turned to her.

"You asked why the Station chose you."

His voice cracked. "Yes."

She swallowed.

“Because the anomaly reacts only to contradictions.”

He stared at her.

“What are you saying?”

“You’re the first auditor to become a contradiction.”

His heart hammered.

“What does that mean?”

Nord met his eyes.

“You’re what happens when choice refuses definition.”

The hatch pulsed again brighter this time, stronger.

Calling.

Summoning.

Tash took a step backward.

“I’m not going in there.”

Nord whispered:

“You already are.”

And the floor shifted not physically, not spatially but temporally

Pulling him forward by three seconds.

He stumbled.

The anomaly pulled again.

Nord grabbed his arm.

“TASH FOCUS!”

The corridor shook.

The hatch lit up.

Ravi’s voice crackled over the comm, panicked:

“NORD THE FIELD IS SURGING! GET HIM OUT OF THERE!”

But it was too late.

The anomaly pulsed a wave of raw, unassigned time and Tash felt something reach through the hatch.

Not a hand.

Not a force.

A question.

A question so vast, so old, so alien that it pressed into the back of his skull like a memory of the future.

He gasped.
His vision flickered.
The corridor warped.
Nord shouted his name
But the anomaly pulled harder.
Tash staggered forward
And the last thing he saw before the world inverted was the
hatch glowing with a message only he could read:
YOU ARE THE MISSING SEQUENCE.
The moment the message appeared
YOU ARE THE MISSING SEQUENCE
Tash felt something press into his mind.
Not a thought.
Not an emotion.
A structure.
A shape of logic.
A geometry of cause and effect that didn't belong in any three-
dimensional reasoning he had ever known.
He staggered, grabbing the rail, his fingers slipping on metal
that wasn't quite metal anymore.
Nord shouted something her voice fractured by static distortion
"TASH DON'T LOOK AT IT!"
But it was too late.
Tash looked.
The containment hatch rotated.
Not outward.
Not inward.
But sideways in a direction no hinge had ever been engineered
to move.
It slid into itself, folding into a shape that shouldn't exist in any
dimension Tash recognized.
He stumbled back.
The opening was not a doorway.
It was... an absence.
Not dark.

Not bright.
Just *empty*.
An absence of time.
An absence of sequence.
An absence of direction.
It was like staring at the concept of “before” stripped of its “after.”
Tash’s breath hitched.
“What, what is...”
Nord grabbed his arm and yanked him back violently.
“DON’T STEP CLOSER!”
He nearly fell.
Time slipped under his feet like an icy floor.
“It’s not stable,” she hissed. “It’s reacting to you!”
“That’s NOT good!”
“No. No, it’s NOT.”
Ravi’s voice crackled from the speaker, frantic.
“NORD, THE ANOMALY FIELD IS SPIKING, HE’S CAUSING RESONANCE!”
Hitch: “He’s not causing resonance, he *is* resonance!”
“THAT IS NOT A DISTINCTION I WANT RIGHT NOW!”
Tash yelled.
Nord didn’t respond
she was staring into the anomaly with horror she wasn’t trying to hide.
The hatch interior flickered showing flashes.
Not images
Possibilities.
Moments from no timeline Tash had ever lived
He saw himself standing in the Control Room wearing the Supervisor’s coat.
He saw himself walking away from the Station, older, limping.
He saw himself as a blur, distorted, half-erased.
He saw nothing, just the absence of himself, like he never existed.
Each flicker hurt.
Literally hurt.

His skull vibrated with each unreal possibility.
“STOP IT!” Tash shouted. “STOP SHOWING ME THINGS!”
The anomaly pulsed as though offended.
Nord grabbed his face with both hands and forced his gaze away.
Her grip was shockingly strong.
“LOOK AT ME. LOOK ONLY AT ME.”
He tried.
He really tried.
But the anomaly’s gravity tugged his attention like a hook
behind his eyes.
His thoughts pulled toward the void.
His identity stretched thin.
He whispered
“Nord, I can feel it. It’s... looking back.”
Nord’s face blanched.
Ravi yelled over the comm:
“TASH, DO NOT LET IT FOCUS ON YOU COMPLETELY,
IF IT LOCKS YOUR PROBABILITY VECTOR”
Hitch cut him off: “he’ll be absorbed!”
Tash screamed, “WHAT DOES *ABSORBED* MEAN?!”
Nord snapped:
“IT MEANS YOU STOP BEING YOU!”
Pulse.
Pulse.
Pulse.
The anomaly was pushing into his mind searching him,
cataloguing him, trying to understand him the way the reactor
did.
But the anomaly was older. Rougher. More desperate.
He felt it press a question into him not words, not meaning
A need.
A need for something only he carried.
Nord shook him.
“FOCUS! DO NOT ANSWER IT!”
“I’M NOT TRYING TO!”

“THEN HOLD ON!”

He clung to her arm like a drowning man holding a rope.

But the anomaly was no longer satisfied with passive observation.

It pulsed again

This time stronger.

Much stronger.

The floor bent.

The corridor warped.

The air thickened into a fog of unformed seconds.

Tash’s vision blurred flashes of futures, fractal shapes of decisions, his own face reflected in impossible variations.

He felt the anomaly grab the edges of his consciousness.

He screamed.

“MAKE IT STOP!”

Nord shouted:

“TASH, YOU HAVE TO PUSH BACK!”

“I CAN’T!”

“YES YOU CAN!”

“I DON’T KNOW HOW!”

“THEN TELL IT THAT!”

Tash gasped.

He forced a breath.

“I DON’T KNOW HOW!”

The anomaly pulsed hesitated

And the pressure loosened slightly.

Nord stared. “Say it again!”

“I DON’T KNOW HOW!”

The anomaly vibrated like confusion.

It didn’t understand uncertainty used as resistance.

Nord saw the opening.

“Tash! You’re a contradiction, use that! Reject the question!”

He shouted at the void

“I DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU WANT FROM ME!”

The anomaly recoiled.

Just slightly
But enough.
Enough for Tash to breathe again.
Enough for Nord to pull him back two steps.
Enough for the pressure in his skull to ease.
Ravi screamed through the intercom:
“NORD, THE FIELD JUST DROPPED TWELVE
PERCENT! KEEP HIM TALKING!”
Tash shouted into the anomaly:
“STOP ASKING ME FOR ANSWERS!”
Another flicker.
Less forceful.
Nord grabbed his shoulder.
“Good, good, Tash! Keep confusing it!”
Hitch chimed in: “You’re doing great, confusion is the only
language anomalies fear!”
Tash shouted louder:
“I DON’T KNOW WHAT I AM!”
“I DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU SEE IN ME!”
“I DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU WANT ME TO BECOME!”
The anomaly pulsed slower.
Uncertain.
Then
It responded.
A whisper.
Not sound.
Not pressure.
A logic that pried open the back of his mind:
you are the sequence we lost
Tash felt his knees give out.
Nord caught him.
“Do NOT let that in!” she barked.
“I can’t stop it”
The anomaly pulsed again:
we need you to finish us

Nord swore under her breath.

“Tash, listen to me. That is NOT a message for you. That is a trap.”

Tash gasped for air.

“Finish, what?”

The anomaly flickered:

our timeline

Nord slapped him, hard.

“DO NOT ENGAGE!”

Tash choked

“I didn’t...mean...”

Another pulse:

complete us

Nord dragged him back another step.

The anomaly brightened almost pleading.

complete sequence

Ravi screamed in the background:

“IT’S TRYING TO BIND HIM! PULL HIM AWAY!”

Nord yelled: “MOVE!”

But the anomaly wasn’t finished.

It pulsed

once, twice,

and projected a final line of logic, the most dangerous thing it could have said:

you are the only future we trust

Tash’s vision whitewashed.

His ears rang.

His identity blurred at the edges.

Nord screamed his name

But the anomaly reached for him

And time cracked.

Time cracked.

Not like glass.

Not like wood.

Not like anything that had ever cracked before.

It cracked like an idea breaking apart
A seam split across reality thin, bright, trembling right in front
of the open containment hatch.
A line of impossible light.
Nord staggered backward.
Ravi screamed.
Even Hitch cursed under his breath.
Tash collapsed to his knees, clutching his head.
The crack widened not spatially, but *temporally*.
It was a rift in sequence.
Moments leaked out.
Half-formed events spilled like smoke:
A version of Tash walking away from the Station
A version of Nord older, wearing a badge that didn't exist yet
A version of the reactor cold and silent
A version where everything was ash
A version where everything was light
The anomaly surged.
Nord grabbed Tash and shouted over the splitting hum:
"DON'T LOOK AT THE RIFT!"
"I'M NOT TRYING TO!" Tash screamed.
The crack pulsed a brilliant shockwave of pure unassigned time.
Everything shook.
Pipes bent.
The corridor twisted.
The lights flickered in sequences that did not match any known
electrical pattern.
Ravi shouted from the intercom:
"NORD, YOU HAVE TO PULL HIM OUT! THE ANOMALY
IS MERGING HIS THOUGHTS!"
Hitch added:
"It's doing it too fast, there's no calibration, this could tear the
entire present!"
Tash's vision blurred into halos of blue and white.

He felt something reaching into him again not a hand, not a thought,

A searching.

A need.

A hunger.

The anomaly pressed its logic into him:

we lost our sequence

you are intact

complete us

complete us

complete us

Tash felt part of himself lean toward the request the part that wanted structure, wanted answers, wanted meaning, wanted to stop being terrified...

He whispered, not to Nord, not to Hitch, not even to himself

"Maybe I.."

Nord slapped him so hard his vision snapped back into focus.

"NO. DO NOT AGREE WITH IT."

"I, I'm not"

"It's pulling your indecision into the crack," she said. "If it succeeds, you won't just vanish you'll *never have existed*."

Tash's blood ran cold.

The anomaly pulsed again.

The rift widened.

A new line of logic pressed into Tash's skull more forceful, more urgent:

you belong here

you belong to us

Tash screamed:

"I DON'T BELONG TO ANYONE!"

The rift flickered as if surprised.

Nord's grip tightened on his arm.

"Tash," she said urgently, "contradict it. Attack the logic. Break its question."

"I don't know how!"

"Yes you do!"

"No I don't!"

"THAT is how!" she shouted. "Use the paradox!"

Tash stared at her, breathing hard.

Then at the rift.

Then at the anomaly.

His heart pounded so loudly it felt like a drum in his ribs.

He forced himself to his feet.

His legs shook.

His vision wavered.

His identity felt like it was being tugged in pieces.

But he stood.

And he shouted into the void:

"I AM NOT YOUR SEQUENCE AND I AM NOT HERE TO
FINISH ANYTHING."

The anomaly pulsed

Hard.

The lights blew out.

The world went black.

But Tash wasn't done.

He drew another breath this one steadier, deeper

And yelled:

"I AM THE QUESTION YOU CANNOT SOLVE!"

The anomaly recoiled.

It actually recoiled.

The rift flickered wobbled dimmed

Like a flame hit by wind.

Nord let out a sound halfway between a gasp and a bitter laugh.

"YES! YES, TASH!"

"That's right!" Hitch shouted. "Break the logic loop!"

Ravi: "Confuse it! Confuse it!"

Tash felt adrenaline and existential terror swirl together in a grotesque cocktail.

He stepped forward, one impossible step toward the anomaly that wanted to swallow him.

And roared:
“You want a sequence?
I *break* sequences.
You want certainty?
I *ruin* certainty.
You want a timeline?
I *disobey* your timeline.”
The anomaly pulsed again.
But weaker.
Weaker.
Tash saw something change the logic pressing into him softened.
Confusion seeped into its structure.
Good.
He kept going.
“You lost your future?
THAT’S NOT MY PROBLEM.”
The rift shuddered.
“You want me to complete you?
I WON’T COMPLETE YOU.
I WON’T FIX YOU.
I WON’T FULFILL YOU.”
The rift dimmed.
The anomaly flickered like a glitch in a dying simulation.
Nord stepped back, shielding her face from the crack’s collapsing glow.
“Push, Tash! PUSH!”
He screamed one last time:
“**I AM NOT YOUR ANSWER!**”
A shockwave burst outward from Tash’s words a ripple through the corridor, through the floor, through the air through *time*.
The rift shrank.
The anomaly pulsed in panic
incomplete incomplete incomplete
And then
It collapsed.

The hatch slammed shut not mechanically, but in a folding, twisting implosion of geometry.

The crack vanished.

The corridor stopped vibrating.

The flux air settled.

The lights steadied.

Silence.

A long, deep, impossible silence.

Tash collapsed forward, catching himself on his hands, gasping for air as the Station's temporal pressure slowly released him.

Nord dropped beside him, gripping his shoulder.

"It's over," she whispered.

He shook his head weakly.

"No," he gasped. "No, it's not. I, I heard it."

Nord stared at him.

"What did it say?"

He looked up at her with hollow eyes.

"It said I'm the only future it trusts."

Nord's face went pale.

Ravi whispered through the speaker:

"Nord... that's not good."

Hitch added:

"That's historically unprecedented. And by historically, I mean temporally, metaphysically, and spiritually."

Tash laughed, a broken, exhausted, too close to hysterical sound.

"But I rejected it," he said. "I told it no. I pushed it back."

Nord didn't answer.

"Right?" he whispered.

Nord still didn't answer.

"Hitch?" Tash croaked.

Hitch cleared his throat audibly.

"Well... yes. You pushed it back. But..."

"But?" Tash echoed.

Ravi inhaled sharply.

“But anomalies don’t choose lightly,” Hitch said. “If it chose you?”

Nord finally spoke:

“That means it isn’t done with you.”

Tash stared at her.

The Station hummed.

Soft.

Low.

Almost like a breath.

Then

The overhead lights flickered.

Once.

Twice.

A message appeared on Tash’s dosimeter:

REQUEST: RETURN TO CONTAINMENT LATER

STATUS: PENDING INTERPRETATION

SEQUENCE: TASH

NOTE: UNSOLVED

Tash’s hands shook.

“Why... why does it want me back?”

Nord’s voice was steady, but her eyes were not.

“Because you’re the first contradiction it’s ever met.”

“And that means what?”

“That means,” she said quietly, “it thinks you’re part of its future.”

Tash whispered:

“I don’t want its future.”

Nord replied:

“That doesn’t matter.”

Silence.

Phase III

The Containment

The Hard Physics

CHAPTER 7

The Blue Eye of Cherenkov

Tash did not sleep that night.
Nor did he rest.

Nor did he think in anything resembling coherent sentences.

He sat on the edge of his bunk — half-dressed, half-collapsed, fully exhausted — staring at the wall that hummed with the Station's impossible heartbeat.

The anomaly's whisper still pulsed behind his temples:

you are the only future we trust

He hated it.

He feared it.

He couldn't stop hearing it.

When morning arrived if "morning" meant anything inside Oridyn Station, Nord came to collect him.

She did not knock.

She never knocked.

The door slid open and she stepped inside, expression grim in a new way. Not operational grim. Something quieter. Frayed at the edges.

"Tash," she said. "Get up. The Station has made its next request."

He didn't move.

"Tell it to leave me alone."

"I tried."

"And?"

"It disagreed."

He dragged his hands over his face.

"Of course it did. Naturally."

Nord stepped closer.

That was normal.

What wasn't, was that she stopped.

Her eyes moved over him, not clinically, not assessing injury or readiness. Just... noticing.

"You didn't sleep," she said.

He let out a weak laugh. "I hosted an existential argument with a sentient reactor. Sleep felt... ambitious."

A beat passed.

Nord didn't respond with procedure.

Didn't redirect.

Didn't push.

Instead, quieter:

"Your hands are shaking."

Tash looked down like the information was new.

"Yeah," he said. "Turns out being chosen by impossible geometry is stressful."

She almost reached for him.

The motion was small, instinct before decision, a hand lifting a few centimetres, stopping, retreating.

Tash noticed.

He pretended he didn't.

"It wants you to go to the spent fuel pool," she said.

He froze.

"No."

"Tash.."

"No," he repeated, voice thin. "No more anomalies. No more screaming cores. No more geometry that questions my right to exist."

Nord folded her arms, but the posture felt less like authority now and more like containment.

"You don't have a choice."

"There's always a choice."

"Not here."

"Then I'm leaving."

"That's not an option."

"I'll make it an option."

She sighed, but not impatiently. Tired.

"Tash," she said softly, and his name sounded different when she wasn't issuing instructions. "If the Station wanted to keep you in this room, you would never find the door."

He glared at the wall.

The wall hummed back.

"...fine," he muttered. "Where am I going."

Nord hesitated.

That was new too.

"To the Pool."

Tash shivered.

He buried his face in his hands.

"I hate this place."

Nord didn't answer immediately.

Instead, she moved closer again, this time deliberate, stopping beside him rather than in front of him. Not commanding. Not supervising.

Just there.

"So do we," she said.

A quiet moment settled between them, the Station humming around it like it wasn't meant to exist.

Tash glanced sideways.

"You didn't sleep either."

Nord kept her gaze forward.

"No."

"Because of the anomaly?" he asked.

A small pause.

"...Because of what it did to you," she said.

That landed harder than anything the Station had said all night.

Tash swallowed.

"Well," he muttered, trying to recover the joke he lived inside, "great. Now I'm a workplace hazard."

The corner of her mouth moved. Not a smile. Almost one.

"Get up," she said softer than before.

He stood.

Unsteady.

For a second, just a second, her hand hovered near his arm again.

This time he noticed.

This time she noticed he noticed.

Neither of them spoke about it.

The moment passed.

"Come on," Nord said.

And this time, when he followed, it didn't feel like he was walking alone.

The spent fuel pool was one of the few places in any nuclear facility where a sense of reverence, not fear, hung in the air.

Deep water.

Silent power.

Blue glow like a ghost's heartbeat.

But here?

In *this* facility?

In a Station built on contradictions and pockets of time?

The pool was probably a philosopher's canyon of horrors.

"No," Tash whispered again. "No, I can't."

Nord's voice softened. "You faced the anomaly. You survived."

"I don't WANT to be good at surviving impossible things!"

"Unfortunately," she said, "the Station interprets survival as interest."

He buried his face in his hands.

"I hate this place."

"So do we," she said. "Now get up."

The path to the spent fuel pool was long, cold, and carved into the oldest part of Oridyn Station.

The walls looked older.

The floors felt older.

The ceiling lights flickered in patterns that, on closer inspection, were Morse code spelling nothing coherent.

"Nord," Tash said nervously, "why is the hallway... clicking?"

"It's adjusting your cadence."

"My what?"

“Your internal rhythm.”

“My WHAT?!”

“The beat of your cognitive pattern. The Station wants your pacing steady before you see the pool.”

“That sounds like hypnosis.”

“It is.”

“Why is no one upset about this?!”

“We used to be,” Nord said. “Then we accepted the futility.”

Tash groaned.

Ravi met them halfway down the corridor, holding a tablet that flickered like a lantern with stage fright.

“Tash,” Ravi said breathlessly, “your presence near the pool is already generating... effects.”

“Effects?”

Ravi handed him the tablet.

It displayed:

CHERENKOV SIGNATURE DEVIATION DETECTED
TIME-LUMINESCENCE: 4.2% ABOVE PREDICTION
CAUSE: AUDITOR SIGNATURE (TASH)

Tash stared.

“The pool is glowing *differently* because I’m walking toward it?”

Nord nodded.

“That’s correct.”

“That’s horrifying.”

“That’s also correct.”

They reached the steel door that led to the pool chamber.

The sign above it flickered softly:

SPENT FUEL STORAGE – CONTROLLED ZONE

Note: Visual Distortions Are Normal

Tash pointed at the note.

“I reject the word ‘normal.’”

Nord entered the code.

The door hissed open.

Cold air rolled out so cold it almost bit his skin and filled his lungs with metallic frost.

Tash coughed. "Is it supposed to feel like a freezer?"

"No. That's temporal drag."

"Temporal"

"Just keep walking."

He stepped through the doorway.

And froze.

The chamber was immense.

It stretched longer than a swimming pool, deeper than an ocean trench, darker than any industrial room should ever be allowed to be.

Except for the light.

The blue.

The Cherenkov glow.

It spilled upward from the water soft, shimmering rings of luminous sapphire moving in gentle waves like something alive beneath the surface was breathing light.

Tash stared.

"I've seen Cherenkov radiation before," he whispered. "But never like this."

Nord stepped beside him.

"This isn't normal Cherenkov."

"I suspected that," he hissed.

"It's time-slowed."

He blinked. "...what?"

Nord gestured to the pool.

"The photons in that glow are moving slower than they should be. The water doesn't just moderate neutrons, it moderates *time*."

Tash took a shaky step closer.

His reflection looked back at him from the glowing water... but the reflection moved half a second late.

"Oh no," he whispered. "That's wrong."

Ravi nodded.

"Yes."

"My reflection has temporal lag!"

"Yes."

"That's a violation of physics!"

“In this facility,” Nord said gently, “physics isn’t a rule. It’s a request.”

Tash inhaled sharply.

As he stepped even closer, the blue deepened brightened responded.

Ravi’s tablet pinged again:

**LUMINESCENCE SURGE – CHERENKOV COHERENCE
RESPONSE**

Trigger: Auditor Presence Confirmed

Tash looked at the water.

The water looked back.

Not metaphorically.

The glow shifted into a slow spiral a vortex of blue light as if something beneath the surface had just become aware of him.

He whispered:

“Nord... something is moving.”

Nord shook her head.

“There’s nothing living in that pool.”

“Then what is reacting to me?!”

Nord stepped beside him.

Her voice was very low.

“Time.”

Tash stared at the vortex widening under the surface.

“That is NOT an explanation!”

Nord placed a steady hand on his arm.

“Look.”

He looked.

The spiral of Cherenkov light widened into a circle perfectly symmetrical and at its centre, a faint shape began to form.

A silhouette.

Human.

Standing at the bottom of the pool.

Still.

Watching him through forty feet of water and untold layers of slowed time.

Tash felt the blood drain from his face.

“Nord...”

“Yes.”

“That, there’s someone, there’s SOMETHING down there.”

“Yes.”

“Why is it shaped like me?”

Nord swallowed.

“Because, Tash... it *is* you.”

He shook violently.

“No. No, absolutely not. I refuse. I reject this.”

But the figure remained.

A ghost.

A shadow.

A version.

Staring up through impossible blue.

Ravi whispered:

“That’s a reflection from another timeline.”

Hitch added softly through the comm:

“One of your futures drowned here.”

Tash nearly collapsed.

“No,” he whispered. “No – no – NO”

The silhouette moved.

Only a fraction.

Only barely.

But it moved.

The Cherenkov glow brightened violently

And the pool whispered into his mind:

you did not finish

Tash screamed.

Nord grabbed him from behind.

“LOOK AWAY! TASH LOOK AWAY!”

He tore his gaze from the water his breath heaving, his vision swimming, his heart a collapsing star.

The pool rippled.

Then stilled.

The figure sank back into the blue slowly, reluctantly, as though it had more to say but had withdrawn only out of respect for the Station's rules.

Nord held him upright.

Ravi was pale.

Hitch was silent.

The Station hummed like a lullaby from a dying god.

Tash finally managed to speak.

"What," he whispered, trembling, "is happening to me?"

Nord looked at the pool.

Then at him.

Then at the Cherenkov glow that was still pulsing in impossible rhythms.

And she said, very softly:

"The Station is showing you the price of contradiction."

Tash staggered backward, away from the pool's edge.

Away from the blue vortex.

Away from the figure that wore his shape like a memory that refused to die.

Nord held him up until he found balance or something pretending to be balance.

The glow shifted back to its resting pulse, soft and steady, as though nothing out of the ordinary had occurred.

As though it had not pulled a drowned version of him to the surface.

As though the pool itself had not whispered into his mind.

you did not finish

Tash was shaking violently.

"I want to leave," he whispered. "I want..."

I need...

I'm DONE. This is too much."

Nord shook her head gently.

"No, Tash. The Station hasn't finished with you."

He looked at her with raw terror in his eyes.

"I don't CARE what the Station wants."

Ravi sighed softly.

"You can't say that out loud here."

"Why not?!"

"Because it hears you."

As if on cue, the blue glow rippled once a slow pulse that travelled the length of the pool like a thought passing through water.

Tash flinched so hard he nearly fell again.

Nord tightened her grip.

"The pool isn't hostile," she said.

"It's reflective."

"That's WORSE," Tash spat. "Mirrors don't drown people across timelines!"

Hitch's voice came through the intercom, his tone weary.

"It wasn't drowning. Not exactly."

Tash stared at the speaker.

"What do you MEAN 'not exactly'?!"

Hitch hesitated.

Then:

"Some timelines end in ways that never technically happened. Those possibilities still... echo."

Tash shook his head violently.

"What am I even looking at then? A dead me? An echo of me? A hallucination? A probability glitch wearing my face?!"

Nord stepped in front of him and took his shoulders.

"You are looking at the consequence of contradiction."

"Stop saying that word!"

"Then stop embodying it."

The pool pulsed again a soft, almost reassuring wave of blue.

Tash glared at it.

"STOP responding to me!"

The water shimmered and then stilled.

Nord exhaled. "It corresponds to your emotional state."

Ravi raised his tablet.

"It's also matching your cognitive frequencies. That vortex earlier? That wasn't random. It was shaped by your unresolved identity."

Tash's voice trembled.

"I don't WANT anything shaped by me."

Nord whispered:

"You can't help it anymore."

She gently guided him closer to the pool.

Tash resisted like a man fighting gravity.

"No. No. NO. I'm NOT going near that thing again.."

"Tash," she said calmly, "the Station asked for you specifically.

We don't ignore such requests."

"The Station can file a written complaint!"

Ravi murmured, "It already did."

He showed his tablet.

A line blinked at the top:

REQUEST: AUDITOR PROXIMITY TO POOL, URGENT

REASON: COHERENCE TEST

SUBJECT: TASH

Tash felt his stomach drop.

"Coherence test?" he whispered. "What is that?"

Nord spoke quietly.

"It wants to see what parts of you can survive reflection."

"Reflection?!"

She nodded.

"This pool doesn't show the past. It shows *unhappened futures*."

Tash froze.

Ravi added, "Usually the reflection is faint, like a ripple from a stone never thrown."

"But for me..." Tash whispered. "It made a person."

"Not a person," Nord corrected gently. "A possibility. One that didn't get selected."

Tash stared at the water glowing, trembling, breathing softly.

A possibility.

Not chosen.

Not alive.

But not entirely gone.

A ghost of logic.

A memory of potential.
He swallowed hard.
“Why does it show me dead?”
Nord looked at him with sad eyes.
“It’s not showing you death. It’s showing you interruption.”
He frowned. “...interruption?”
“The version of you that almost existed. The you that might have been. The version that walked one step differently, thought one thought differently, hesitated one moment too long.”
The pool pulsed
A gentle response.
Tash whispered:
“I don’t want to see that.”
Nord nodded.
“None of us did the first time.”
Ravi murmured, “Or the second. Or the fourth.”
Hitch added, “You get used to it. Theoretically.”
Tash wanted to scream.
Instead, he forced himself to look at the water again.
The glow deepened.
The surface shifted.
Not violently.
Not aggressively.
But with curiosity.
Almost like it was waiting.
“Nord,” Tash whispered, “why does it feel like the pool is... aware?”
“It is,” she said softly.
“That shouldn’t be possible.”
“Neither should you,” she said.
Tash stepped closer.
One meter from the edge.
Half a meter.
The water rippled.

Cherenkov rings widened gently soft blue halos expanding outward as though the pool were exhaling in recognition.

Ravi murmured, half in awe:

"It knows him."

Hitch: "We suspected the Station would notice his signature. But the pool? That's new. That's very new."

The rings grew brighter.

Tash felt pressure behind his eyes a warm pull, gentle but unmistakable.

"Nord," he whispered, "it's... calling me."

She nodded.

"Yes."

"Why? WHY?"

"It wants to show you something."

"That never means anything good!"

"No," she agreed. "But it is necessary."

The water changed.

The ripples stopped.

The glow deepened into a blue so rich it felt like velvet.

And slowly

Slowly

The pool opened.

Not physically.

Not spatially.

But conceptually.

The surface flattened into a perfect mirror of light.

A blue eye.

An eye looking up at him, not with sight, but with recognition.

Tash whispered:

"...it's awake."

Nord corrected him gently.

"It's aware."

Ravi whispered:

"It's reading him."

Hitch murmured:

"It's establishing coherence."

Tash felt something brush his mind

like fingers of light made of seconds and might-have-been.

Then the pool showed him something new.

Not drowning.

Not death.

Not rupture.

But a moment.

A moment that had never happened.

He saw himself standing at the reactor control panel, calm, older, wearing a badge that glowed faintly blue.

He saw Nord beside him, older too, tired, but alive.

He saw a version of the Station that wasn't humming with hunger or contradiction...
but stable.

Quiet.

At peace.

He whispered:

"...that's me?"

"Yes," Nord said softly.

"That's a future?"

"No," she said.

"That's a future that didn't happen."

"Then why am I seeing it?"

"Because," she said, "the pool shows the futures you stabilize just by existing."

Tash's breath caught.

"I stabilize something?"

"Yes," she said.

"What?"

She looked at him for a long moment.

Then said the words he had feared the most:

"You stabilize the Station."

Tash felt his knees weaken.

"Nord..."

She met his eyes.

“You think the Station is studying you, Tash.”

“It is!”

“No,” she said gently.

“It’s choosing you.”

The pool rippled.

The blue eye blinked if water could blink.

And beneath the surface, near the bottom of the pool, another silhouette emerged.

Not drowning.

Not desperate.

Calm.

Standing.

Waiting.

A third version of him.

Nord whispered:

“You’re looking at what you become if you accept it.”

Tash stared at the calm, patient figure in the depths
the version of him that had made peace with the impossible.

He shook violently.

“I don’t want that,” he whispered.

Nord said softly:

“Then don’t choose it.”

“What do I choose instead?”

She looked at him.

Looked at the pool.

Looked at the future that wasn’t.

And whispered:

“That is why the Station brought you here.”

Tash turned to the water.

The pool pulsed again

and whispered into his mind:

choose

The pool whispered:

choose

A single word.

A simple word.

A word with the weight of an entire reactor behind it.

Tash staggered backward.

"No. No. I refuse. I won't choose anything!"

The pool responded with a gentle pulse not angry, not forceful but patient.

choose

Ravi whispered, "It's not asking you to decide now. It's... prompting calibration."

"Calibration FOR WHAT?!" Tash shouted.

Nord stepped closer, her voice low.

"For what comes next."

"I don't WANT what comes next!"

"I know."

"Then WHY are you making me do this?!"

"Because the alternative is worse."

Tash glared at the glowing water.

"WORSE than seeing drowned versions of myself?! WORSE than an anomaly trying to rewrite me?!"

Nord whispered:

"Worse than being unprepared."

Tash froze.

"What are you preparing me for?"

Nord didn't answer.

Ravi didn't answer.

Even Hitch, unusually silent over the intercom, didn't answer.

The water answered instead.

The Cherenkov glow expanded again soft rings spreading outward and the pool's surface shimmered like a curtain being lifted.

Tash felt the pressure again the gentle pull the awareness.

"Nord... it's doing something."

"Yes."

"What is happening?"

“It’s showing you context.”

“Context for WHAT?!”

Then the pool showed him.

The surface rippled outward and re-formed

Not as water.

But as a scene.

A room.

Dim.

Circular.

Packed with early reactor equipment rusted consoles, old dials, pipes that looked hand-welded.

“Nord...” Tash whispered, “this is... old.”

“It’s the original facility,” she said softly.

A figure stood in the room a man in heavy protective clothing, leaning over a console.

Tash couldn’t see his face clearly, but he could tell the man was exhausted, desperate, and alone.

“What is he doing?” Tash whispered.

Nord exhaled.

“Ending the first fluctuation.”

The man pulled a lever.

Alarms lit up.

Steam burst through a vent.

Tash flinched.

The man, alone, screamed something Tash couldn’t hear.

Nord spoke:

“Thirty years before Oridyn Station existed... the anomaly formed during a near-catastrophic collapse.”

The console crackled.

The man slammed his hand against it.

He whispered something something desperate, something pleading

And then Tash heard it.

Finish us.

Tash stepped backward.

“No. No NO that’s what the anomaly said to ME”

Nord grabbed him.

“Keep watching.”

The man’s voice echoed through the pool:

Finish the sequence.

Please.

Finish us.

He pulled another lever

And the scene shattered.

The water returned.

Another ripple.

Another scene.

Another room.

This time, a laboratory walls lined with chalkboards covered in impossible equations: loops, spirals, fission chains that began *before* they ended, mathematical sketches that contradicted themselves beautifully.

A young woman stood there, running her fingers over the chalk.

Her eyes were red.

Her voice a whisper.

“Time is folding.

We didn’t control it.

We triggered it.”

Tash whispered, “Who is she?”

Nord’s voice was heavy.

“The physicist who first proposed containment. She never left this room.”

The woman looked toward something beyond the chalkboards something Tash could not see and whispered:

“I can hear tomorrow speaking.”

Ravi shivered.

Hitch’s voice broke across the intercom:

“She died the next day.”

Tash winced.

Then the water shimmered.

This time the scene didn't appear as a room.
Or a person.
Or anything resembling a physical event.
It was a blur.
A smear.
A streak of white and blue and impossible angles a moment so
chaotic the water itself seemed to reject its existence.
The distortion pulsed in a broken pattern
complete sequence
incomplete timeline
lost event
interrupted us
complete sequence
complete sequence
Tash clutched his chest.
"This this is the anomaly, isn't it?"
Nord nodded.
"This is its memory."
Ravi whispered:
"This is its *birth*."
Tash stared into the violent shimmer.
"It... was formed during a fluctuation."
"Yes."
"It... remembers it."
"Yes."
"It's been begging for someone to finish that moment."
"Yes."
Tash's stomach twisted.
"But... no one can fix a fluctuation that already happened."
Nord met his eyes.
"That's the point."
Tash stepped away from the water.
"No. No, no, no, this means..."
The pool pulsed again.
This time, the vision sharpened.

And Tash saw not a fluctuation, not a reactor, not a facility
But a hole.

A hole in time.

A moment that had been violently torn out of sequence.

A moment that should have happened, but didn't.

A missing second.

A missing cause.

A missing outcome.

Tash whispered:

"...that's what it wants filled."

Nord nodded.

"Yes."

"It wants someone to finish an event that never completed."

"Yes."

"And it thinks that someone is ME."

"...yes."

Tash nearly screamed.

"That's IMPOSSIBLE! Time doesn't work that way!"

Hitch's voice crackled:

"Here it does."

Ravi added:

"The anomaly isn't asking you to rewrite the past.

It's asking you to complete a shape.

A logical structure.

A sequence."

Tash shook violently.

"No. NO. I am NOT filling in a HOLE IN TIME!"

Nord placed a calm hand on his arm.

"You already started."

Tash stared at her.

"What?"

She nodded toward the pool.

"Your contradiction is the first thing the anomaly understood in thirty years."

The water rippled low almost affectionately.

Tash's skin crawled.

"It thinks you're the missing piece," Nord said.

"I'm NOT!"

"You are."

The pool shimmered again.

This time the vision showed

Tash.

Not drowning.

Not older.

Not peaceful.

Just Tash.

Standing where the anomaly fractured decades ago.

His hand reaching toward the void.

His expression unreadable.

The glow deepened.

The pool whispered:

help us end

Tash felt his throat close.

"No," he whispered. "No, I won't."

The water pulsed.

choose

"No."

choose

"I SAID NO."

choose

"STOP TELLING ME TO CHOOSE!"

Nord stepped in front of him.

"You don't have to choose now."

Tash's eyes shook.

"Then why bring me here?! Why show me these... these ghosts?"

"Because," Nord said gently, "the Station wants you to understand the responsibility before it forces your hand."

Tash froze.

"FORCES?"

“Yes.”

The water shimmered again a soft, blue ripple.

Ravi whispered, “It’s almost... comforting today.”

Hitch added, “That’s what worries me. It never behaves gently unless it’s preparing something.”

Tash felt his heart pound.

“Preparing what?”

Nord swallowed.

“Preparing you.”

Tash’s voice cracked.

“For what?”

Nord looked at the pool.

At the blue eye.

The mirror.

The memory.

And whispered:

“For the moment when everything that didn’t happen... demands a conclusion.”

The pool pulsed

choose soon

Tash fell to his knees.

The future he didn’t want the past that never finished and the Station that refused to let him run all hummed in blue.

Nord placed a quiet hand on his shoulder.

“Tash,” she said softly,

“the Station is not asking you to save it.”

He looked up, trembling.

“What is it asking, then?”

Nord whispered:

“It’s asking you to finish the fluctuation that never finished itself.”

Tash sat on the cold steel floor, knees pulled to his chest, the blue glow painting his skin in ghost light.

“The fluctuation...” he whispered. “It wasn’t contained.”

Nord shook her head.

“yes, no, maybe.. it never completed.”

Ravi rubbed his arms against the cold.

Hitch added softly through the intercom:

“It stopped mid-collapse.”

Tash looked up sharply.

“Stopped? *Stopped?*”

Reactors don’t just STOP halfway!”

Nord corrected him.

“It didn’t stop”

She looked at the pool.

“It stopped in time.”

Tash’s breath hitched.

“Explain.”

Ravi stepped forward, holding the flickering tablet.

“The fluctuation froze. Not physically, thermally everything was still happening.”

“But temporally...” Hitch continued, “the event stalled. Like a skipped second that never unskipped.”

Nord said:

“That moment that unfinished instant became the anomaly.”

Tash rubbed his face.

“A fluctuation that got stuck in time...”

Nord nodded.

“A fluctuation that is still happening.”

He stared at her.

“No. No, that’s impossible. The coolant would...”

“Time,” she interrupted, “stopped being coolant-agnostic.”

The pool pulsed.

A long, slow wave of blue spread outward not toward Tash, but around him, encircling him like a ring.

Tash stiffened.

“Nord... what is that?”

Ravi whispered:

“Temporal dragback.”

Tash looked horrified.

"That sounds illegal."

"It should be," Hitch replied.

"It's what happens when the pool tries to show you more than your mind can hold," Nord said.

"How much more is 'more'?" Tash demanded.

"The fluctuation," she said.

"NO."

"Yes."

"ABSOLUTELY NOT."

"You need to see it."

"I DO NOT WANT TO SEE A FROZEN MOMENT!"

But the blue ring tightened.

Light crawled up his arms faintly, softly, like static electricity made of seconds.

Tash screamed.

"GET IT OFF ME! GET IT OFF!"

Nord grabbed him.

"It won't hurt you."

"I DON'T BELIEVE YOU!"

"It can't hurt you."

"That means NOTHING HERE!"

Ravi spoke quickly:

"It's just showing you context. A memory. A reflection of an event that is still unresolved."

Tash tried to pry the light off his skin.

It didn't budge.

It wasn't touching him physically it was touching him *temporally*, linking its rhythm to his.

"Nord," he whispered, "it's syncing with me."

"Yes."

"Why?!"

"The pool thinks you're the missing variable."

"I don't WANT to be the missing anything!"

The blue ring tightened again

And suddenly the world around Tash flickered.

The pool shimmered.
The room folded.
The Station dimmed.
The blue water remained but everything else blurred as though
the present had partially stepped aside.
He gasped.
“Nord...?!”
Her voice sounded distant.
Muffled.
Like she was calling to him from the other end of a long pipe.
“Tash! Focus on my voice! Don’t drift!”
“I, I can’t, I’m slipping..”
“Tash DON’T LET GO OF NOW”
But the blue ring brightened
And the pool showed him the moment.
The vision hit him like a tidal wave.
He wasn’t transported.
He wasn’t moved.
He was *overlaid*.
The fluctuation scene layered itself on top of the pool room
two realities sharing the same coordinates.
He saw:
The old control consoles.
The trembling dials.
The reactor pressure spiking.
The alarms screaming.
The operator shouting into a dead microphone.
The red lights blinking with a stutter that matched the
anomaly’s pulse.
Tash couldn’t breathe.
“It’s... it’s happening right now.”
Nord’s voice echoed faintly:
“It’s always happening.”
The operator shouted:
“PLEASE, SOMEONE

FINISH

FINISH

FINNNN..."

The word fractured.

It stretched.

It snapped

And the scene froze.

Not paused.

Not stopped.

Frozen in a single collapsing moment

Steam halfway rising

Sparks suspended in air

Pressure gauge stuck between two readings

The operator's hand mid-motion

The soundwave of an alarm frozen mid-vibration

Tash whispered:

"...this is the missing second."

Nord's voice reached him like a ghost.

"Yes."

"This is the anomaly."

"Yes."

"This is the moment that never ended."

"Correct."

The pool swirled.

The blue eye opened wider.

A line of logic pressed into Tash's skull

finish

Tash cried out:

"STOP SHOWING ME THIS"

finish

"I CAN'T!"

finish us

"I DON'T KNOW HOW!"

finish the sequence

Tash grabbed his head.

“STOP STOP STOP

I don’t WANT this, I’m not qualified, I’m not trained,

I’m not

I’m not”

The pool whispered.

you are the contradiction that completes the missing second

Tash screamed in raw fear.

“WHY ME?! WHY ME?! WHAT MAKES ME SO SPECIAL?!”

The Station hummed a low, heavy vibration like a reactor exhaling around him.

Nord spoke clearly, finally cutting through the dragback:

“Because, Tash you don’t collapse.”

He looked up, trembling.

“What?”

“Every timeline we’ve observed,” she said, her voice clearer, “every possible version of you breaks differently.”

Ravi added quietly:

“But none of them finish.”

Hitch: “Except you.”

Tash shook violently.

“That’s not a reason.”

Nord knelt in front of him.

“It’s the only reason that matters.”

Tash gasped as the vision flickered again the frozen fluctuation superimposed on the pool, the operator trapped in the moment he never escaped.

He whispered, horrified:

“Is he still alive?”

Nord hesitated.

“...yes and no.”

“That is NOT AN ANSWER.”

“It’s the only answer we have.”

The pool surged.

The blue ring tightened.

The dragback deepened.

Tash saw the operator's eyes caught between terror and motion frozen in the moment of reaching for a lever he never touched.

The pool whispered again:

finish for us

Tash sobbed:

"I CAN'T.

I CAN'T.

I CANNOT FIX A MOMENT THAT NEVER MOVED."

Nord touched his shoulder.

"You can."

"No."

"You must."

"No!"

Nord spoke with a calmness that terrified him more than any anomaly:

"Tash... the fluctuation is not a physical problem.

It is a missing DECISION."

He stared at her.

"What?"

"The sequence didn't complete," Nord said.

"A choice wasn't made."

Ravi whispered:

"A timeline didn't lock."

Hitch added:

"And time hates open parentheses."

Tash whispered:

"A missing decision caused all this?"

"Yes."

"And the anomaly thinks I can make it?"

"Yes."

He shook his head violently.

"I refuse."

The pool pulsed once.

choose

Tash screamed at the water:

“I CHOOSE NOTHING!”

The pool shuddered.

The dragback snapped

And the present slammed back into him.

Everything glowed blue.

Everything hummed.

Everything waited.

Nord held his face between her hands.

“Tash listen to me.”

He stared at her, broken.

“You don’t have to choose the decision now.”

He exhaled shakily.

“But you *do* need to understand the decision.”

“And what decision is that?” Tash whispered.

Nord looked at him with eyes full of dread and respect.

“The moment the fluctuation froze,” she said,

“someone had to decide whether to sacrifice the reactor...”

She swallowed

“...or the Station.”

Tash felt the floor tilt.

“What?”

“The fluctuation froze because no one chose,” Nord said.

“No one decided which future to allow.”

Ravi whispered:

“It wasn’t incompetence.”

Hitch said:

“It was interruption.”

Nord looked at him.

“And now the anomaly wants you to finish that choice.”

Tash felt sick.

“And if I don’t?”

Nord exhaled.

“The anomaly will force the ending.”

The pool pulsed

choose soon
The blue ring dissolved.
Tash collapsed fully to the floor.
Nord put a steady hand on his back.
“The Station isn’t asking you to choose between life and death,
Tash.”
He looked up, eyes shaking.
“What am I choosing then?”
Nord spoke softly:
“You’re choosing which future gets to exist.”
The room felt heavier now.
Not physically but with meaning.
The blue glow pulsed with slow, patient certainty, as if the pool
had all the time in the world and Tash had none.
Nord let him sit on the cold floor until his breathing steadied.
Ravi whispered to Hitch
“His heart rate is stabilizing. That’s... surprising.”
Hitch replied, “Contradictions don’t break cleanly.”
Tash didn’t hear them.
He was staring at the pool.
At the blue eye.
At the place where time had once broken and now wanted him
to repair it.
He whispered:
“It’s too much.”
Nord sat beside him, her knees drawn up.
“Yes.”
“I can’t make that choice.”
“I know.”
“No human should.”
“No human ever has.”
Tash turned to her sharply.
“What do you mean ‘ever has’?”
Nord clasped her hands.

“Tash... this Station has had dozens of auditors. Inspectors. Analysts. Physicists. Thinkers.”

“And?”

“They each failed this test.”

He blinked.

“One by one,” Nord continued, “they saw what you saw. The frozen fluctuation. The missing second. The impossible choice.”

Ravi whispered, “The burden breaks them.”

Hitch added quietly, “Some refuse. Some run. Some try to answer. None have ever succeeded.”

Tash felt dizzy.

“You’ve made others see the anomaly?”

Nord shook her head.

“No.”

“The Station chose them?”

“No.”

“Then... how?”

Nord looked at the pool.

“The anomaly chose.”

Tash froze.

“You mean... the anomaly chose?”

Nord nodded.

“It tests those who can perceive contradiction. Those whose minds do not break instantly in its presence.”

Tash’s voice cracked.

“So what happened to the others?”

Nord hesitated.

Then said it as gently as she could:

“They broke.”

Ravi added:

“Not physically.”

Hitch whispered:

“But temporally.”

Tash swallowed hard.

“What... what does that mean?”

Nord looked at him.

"Some of them stopped existing."

"I

I don't."

"Some lived years in one second.

Some stepped out of the timeline and couldn't find their way back.

Some aged decades in minutes.

Some never aged again."

Ravi swallowed.

"One is... still here."

Tash looked around, terrified.

"Where?"

Nord pointed to the pool.

Tash's breath hitched.

"The figure I saw?"

"No," Nord said quietly.

"That one is you. A never-was."

Tash paled.

"The other one," she said.

"The man frozen in the fluctuation."

Tash's skin crawled.

"He was the first... contradiction?"

"No," Nord whispered.

"He was the first interruption."

Tash stared into the pool.

The blue glow deepened again not threateningly, not angrily, but with recognition.

With hunger.

With patience.

He whispered:

"Why me?"

Nord sighed.

"We don't know."

"But you have theories," he said bitterly.

“Yes.”

Ravi stepped forward, tablet flickering.

“Your arrival changed the Station’s temporal rhythm.”

Tash frowned. “How?”

“We track subtle metrics, cadence, thought-wave pacing, microsecond decision latency.”

“I don’t understand.”

Nord leaned closer.

“You do not instinctively seek resolution, Tash. When faced with contradiction, you do not collapse into certainty. You expand.”

He blinked.

“I... expand?”

“Yes,” she said.

“You hold conflicting ideas without forcing them to reconcile. That is rare.”

Ravi whispered:

“Most minds short-circuit when faced with contradictions. Yours acclimates.”

Hitch added:

“You’re the only cognitive signature we’ve ever recorded that doesn’t resolve paradox it *stabilizes* it.”

Tash blinked rapidly.

“That... sounds philosophical.”

“It’s not,” Nord said. “It’s neurological.”

The pool pulsed again.

Slow, deep.

Tash felt it behind his eyes.

A whisper.

Not words.

Not logic.

A feeling.

A direction.

He staggered.

“Nord... it’s pulling again.”

She grabbed his arm.

"We don't let you go back in today."

"But it wants me to," Tash whispered. "It keeps saying *choose*."

"I know."

"Why? Why is it insisting? What does it WANT?"

Nord exhaled.

"The anomaly wants what it always wanted."

"What's that?"

"To end."

Tash stared at her.

"End what?"

"The sequence."

He shook his head.

"No

No, that's circular.

It wants to end itself?"

Nord hesitated.

Then nodded.

Tash's heart raced.

"The anomaly wants to die?"

Nord whispered:

"No.

It wants to finish dying."

He stared at the pool.

The blue glow.

The memory.

The moment stuck in time for decades.

He whispered:

"So it's suffering."

Nord didn't answer.

She didn't need to.

The pool pulsed.

A soft, painful rhythm.

Like a heartbeat that had never stopped beating.

A heartbeat trapped in one second.

Tash felt tears sting his eyes.

He'd never pitied a reactor before.

He didn't like it.

Ravi spoke suddenly, his voice trembling slightly.

"Tash... what worries us isn't the anomaly choosing you."

Tash looked up.

"What worries us," Ravi whispered, "is that the Station seems relieved."

Tash blinked.

"...relieved?"

"Yes," Hitch said through the speakers.

"The Station hasn't hummed this steadily in years."

Nord stood.

She looked at the pool.

Then at Tash.

"The Station thinks you can finish the sequence."

Tash shook violently.

"But I don't know what the sequence IS."

"We're afraid," Nord said quietly, "that you'll learn the answer the same way everyone else did."

He swallowed.

"And how's that?"

She met his eyes.

"With a choice that should never be asked of anyone."

Tash rose shakily to his feet.

"Nord... what choice is that?"

She looked at him with a sadness that carried decades.

"You will have to choose," she said, "what the world would have become if the fluctuation had completed."

Tash's stomach twisted.

"And you will have to choose," she continued, "whether to allow that world to exist."

He stared at her.

"Nord... that's not a choice.

That's suicide of causality."

"Yes," she said.

The pool pulsed.
choose soon
Tash forced himself to look into the blue glow again.
The pool reflected not his face not his shape but his hesitation.
His paradox.
His refusal to collapse.
And the whisper came again:
choose
He whispered back:
“I cannot.”
The pool answered:
you will
He whispered:
“No.”
The pool pulsed:
you must
He whispered:
“I won’t.”
The pool responded with something new something colder,
something sentient, something almost... resigned.
you are the last contradiction we have
Tash stepped back.
“LAST?”
Nord swallowed.
“We didn’t want to tell you this yet.”
“Tell me what?”
She took a deep breath.
“The Station isn’t choosing you because you’re special.”
Tash’s stomach sank.
“It’s choosing you,” she said slowly, “because you are the last
mind that hasn’t broken.”
Hitch whispered:
“The last one it can test.”
Ravi added:

“The last one who can still hold a contradiction without collapsing.”

Tash felt faint.

“You mean... if I fail”

Nord finished the sentence gently:

“The anomaly will outlive everyone.”

The pool pulsed

choose or it will choose for you

Tash whispered:

“...I’m trapped.”

Nord placed a steady hand on his shoulder.

“No,” she said softly.

“You’re the only one who’s not.”

CHAPTER 8

The Flux Divergence

The walk from the spent fuel pool to the Flux Monitoring Room felt like the longest hallway Tash had ever survived. Nord walked beside him in silence.

Ravi followed, tapping frantically at the tablet, as if data entry could keep his sanity intact.

Hitch's voice echoed through the intercom like a ghost trying to sound cheerful.

Tash dragged his feet.

"Why the Flux Room?" he muttered. "Why can't the Station test me with something normal? Like paperwork? Or ladder safety training?"

Nord replied evenly:

"You survived the anomaly. The Station escalates."

"That's not escalation, that's cruelty."

"That is escalation here."

The hallway lights flickered on and off, like a heartbeat syncing with the Station's mood.

Ravi spoke without looking up.

"The Station wants you to see the neutron logs."

Tash stopped walking.

"NO."

Nord didn't stop.

"Tash..."

"I KNOW what neutron logs are. I KNOW what they show. They show neutron counts. They show flux patterns. They show fission rates."

"Yes."

"I am NOT READY to see anything else!"

Nord turned to him.

"You won't be."

"That's not comforting!"

"It's also not wrong."

The Flux Monitoring Room door stood ahead a small steel rectangle with a triangular radiation sign that flickered faintly, as though the hazard itself was reconsidering its career path.

Tash inhaled.

"Before we go in," he said, shaking slightly, "can someone explain what 'Flux Divergence' actually *means*?"

Because in every reactor I've audited, 'divergence' is BAD."

Ravi cleared his throat.

"In Oridyn Station, divergence is... context-dependent."

Tash glared.

"That means nothing."

Nord nodded.

"Yes."

"NO MORE ANSWERS THAT AREN'T ANSWERS."

"Then you won't enjoy this" Hitch chimed in.

Tash threw his hands up.

"Oh good! We're doing self-awareness now!"

Nord opened the door.

"Welcome to the Flux Room."

It was small.

Too small for comfort.

A cramped steel chamber filled with humming consoles, screens, and displays that looked like upgraded versions of 1990s electronics

with added layers of suspicious glow.

A massive curved screen covered the far wall:

NEUTRON FLUX MONITORING GRID – REALTIME

Lines.

Graphs.

Dots like stars.

Reactive patterns swirling like constellations in panic.
Ravi stepped inside, pulled down a lever, and the screen reorganized itself into a cascading series of charts.
Tash walked in last.
The lights dimmed as he entered.
He frowned.
“Did... the room just react to me?”
“Yes,” Nord said.
“WHY?”
“Because flux is sensitive to observers.”
“That’s quantum mechanics!”
“Yes.”
“This is a reactor!”
“Yes.”
“I HATE THIS PLACE!”
The screens flickered.
Ravi pointed to the largest graph.
“Look at the early flux patterns from this morning.”
Tash reluctantly approached.
On the screen, a time-series graph pulsed with data spikes.
Tash squinted.
He inhaled sharply.
“These values these spikes they’re too early.”
Nord nodded.
“Yes.”
“They’re showing neutron flux *before* the fission pulse peak.”
“Yes.”
“That’s impossible.”
“Correct.”
Tash turned to them.
“NO. I want a HARD NO. Not ‘correct.’ Not ‘yes.’ NOT HERE WE GO AGAIN.”
Ravi tapped another button.
The screens shifted, showing older logs.
“These values,” Ravi said, pointing, “are from yesterday.”

Tash looked.

Then looked again.

"...these are the SAME patterns."

Nord nodded.

"Yes."

"The SAME spikes... before the SAME fission pulses..."

"Yes."

"That means yesterday's neutrons were..."

He trailed off.

Ravi finished quietly:

"...detected before the reaction occurred."

Tash sat down.

He didn't mean to sit the floor simply caught him.

"Nord..." he whispered, "...what does that MEAN?"

"It means," she said gently, "that the reactor anticipates its own activity."

Tash screamed.

"NO! NO! A REACTOR CANNOT *ANTICIPATE* ANYTHING!"

"It does here."

"That's SENTIENT BEHAVIOR!"

"No," Nord corrected.

"It's *temporal detangling*."

Tash stared at her.

"That is NOT a phrase a normal person says."

"Correct."

Ravi added:

"Watch the live feed."

He tapped the screen.

A glowing red dot pulsed on the flux map.

Tash leaned forward.

"...that's a neutron birth."

Ravi nodded.

"Yes."

"But the time code says wait that's a timestamp from the FUTURE."

Nord added, "Specifically: 1.4 seconds ahead."

Tash buried his face in his hands.

"Oh my god.

The reactor is breaking causality."

Ravi corrected him:

"The reactor is READING causality."

Hitch added:

"And occasionally improvising."

"IMPROVISING?!"

"The Station adapts to flux deviations by pre-generating the neutron patterns it expects."

Tash screamed again.

"STOP DESCRIBING APOCALYPTIC PHYSICS LIKE YOU'RE READING A WEATHER REPORT!"

Nord stepped beside him.

Her eyes softened.

Just a little.

"Tash... look at the grid again."

He did.

Reluctantly.

The flux map pulsed with dots tiny red sparks drifting across the graph like fireflies.

But something was wrong.

Wrong in a way that made Tash's lungs tighten.

"Nord..." he whispered, "...why are the neutrons moving backward?"

She nodded.

"We noticed that last week."

"They aren't drifting backward they're REWINDING.

The flux graph is RUNNING IN REVERSE."

"Yes."

Tash clutched the console.

"WHY?!"

Nord said calmly:

"Because the reactor hasn't decided whether those neutrons exist yet."

Tash blinked.

"...haven't decided?"

"Yes."

"The neutrons are waiting for the Station to pick a future."

Ravi added:

"This is the Kafka Loop."

Tash slowly turned toward him.

"The WHAT."

"The Kafka Loop," Ravi repeated.

"It's when neutrons appear before the moment that generates them, because the Station's future activity retroactively defines their present."

Tash felt his sanity buckle like a steel beam under too much steam pressure.

"I AM NOT BUILT FOR THIS."

Nord placed a soft hand on his shoulder.

"None of us were."

Tash stared at the screen.

Neutrons pulsing backward.

Some flickering in and out.

Some appearing, then unappearing, then appearing again.

Some forming patterns that looked like

a spiral

a loop

a question mark

He whispered:

"Nord... why do the neutrons look like they're spelling something?"

She swallowed.

"Because they are."

Tash's blood ran cold.

"What are they spelling?"

Ravi pointed.

“Right there. In the centre.”

Tash leaned closer.

The pulses aligned.

Formed a pattern.

Three repeating shapes.

Not letters.

Not words.

A symbol.

He whispered:

“...that’s the same symbol from the containment hatch.”

Nord nodded.

“Yes.”

“The broken circle.”

“Yes.”

“The symbol of the anomaly.”

“Yes.”

Tash screamed:

“WHY IS THE REACTOR OUTPUTTING THE
ANOMALY’S SIGNATURE?!”

Hitch answered from the intercom:

“Because it’s trying to warn us.”

“WARN you about WHAT?!”

Ravi looked at the newest line of the graph.

Tash followed his gaze.

The latest neutron spike appeared
with a timestamp five seconds in the future.

Nord whispered:

“It’s warning us that you’re about to destabilize the flux.”

Tash froze.

“...me.”

“Yes.”

“ME?!”

“Yes.”

He stared at the graph.

The red dot flickered.
The future was waiting.
Waiting for him.
Tash whispered:
“What... what happens if I destabilize it?”
Nord met his eyes with the calm of someone who had already
accepted several unacceptable truths.
She said:
“The last time someone destabilized the flux...”
She paused.
Ravi finished for her:
“...the fluctuation began.”
Tash stared.
The reactor hum deepened.
The screen pulsed.
The future timestamp glowed brighter.
Nord whispered:
“Tash
the Station thinks you’re about to restart the event that never
finished.”
Tash felt everything inside him tilt.
He whispered, horrified:
“I’m going to trigger the fluctuation again?”
Nord shook her head.
“No.”
“The fluctuation never stopped.”
She pointed to the screen.
“You’re about to continue it.”
The reactor room grew colder.
Not a physical cold not a chill in the air but a *decision* made by
the room.
A pause.
A hesitation.
A moment withheld.
As if the Station itself had stopped breathing.

Ravi's tablet flickered aggressively.

Nord looked at the main screen.

Hitch's voice dropped to a whisper for the first time since Tash met him.

"Nord... the flux has stopped responding to the reactor."

Tash blinked.

"What does that mean?"

Nord didn't take her eyes off the screen.

"It means," she said slowly, "the flux is responding to *you* instead."

Tash's breath hitched.

"No. No, no, no, I refuse that. I REJECT THAT."

The screen flickered again.

New data points appeared.

Except they weren't points.

They weren't neutrons.

They were coordinates.

Coordinates that mapped...

Ravi gasped.

"It's drawing his movement."

Tash felt his knees go weak.

"What do you mean it's DRAWING my movement?"

Nord pointed to the graph.

"Look."

The flux map pulsed.

Lines traced themselves across the grid one line, then another.

Tash's heart sank.

"...that looks like someone walking across a room."

Ravi swallowed.

"It's you. That's exactly what you did thirty seconds ago."

Tash stared at him.

"You're telling me the reactor logged my footsteps?"

Hitch corrected:

"It logged your future footsteps."

Tash screamed:

“WHAT FUTURE FOOTSTEPS?! I’M JUST STANDING HERE!”

Ravi pointed again.

“Those are predictions. The flux is anticipating your movement.”

Tash shook violently.

“STOP ANTICIPATING ME! STOP PRE-EMPTING MY FOOTSTEPS! STOP”

He took a step backward.

The screen updated instantly a spike from the future aligning perfectly with the motion he hadn’t completed yet.

Tash froze mid-step.

Nord whispered:

“In Oridyn Station, the reactor doesn’t wait for you to move.”

Hitch added:

“It moves time before you commit.”

Tash dropped into the nearest chair.

“This place needs therapy.”

Nord ignored that.

She approached the screen and tapped the most recent anomaly.

It expanded into a shapeless red pulse a blot of data with no symmetry, no pattern, no coherence.

Ravi frowned.

“Oh no...”

Tash swallowed.

“What?”

Ravi tapped the shape.

“This isn’t a flux deviation. It’s not a neutron spike.”

Tash glared.

“Then what is it?”

Ravi’s voice was barely audible.

“It’s a mindprint.”

Silence.

Pure silence.

Tash finally whispered:

“...what is a mindprint.”

Nord answered.

“A cognitive echo.”

He stared.

“A WHAT?”

“A signature,” she said.

“A kind of temporal fingerprint left by a thought.

Your thought.”

Tash screamed.

“MY THOUGHTS ARE SHOWING UP ON A REACTOR LOG?!”

Ravi whispered:

“The reactor predicted your hesitation.”

Hitch added:

“And it didn’t like it.”

Tash grabbed Nord’s sleeve.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN IT DIDN’T LIKE IT?!”

Nord pointed to the graph again.

The red mind print spike was spreading branching outward like cracks in glass touching multiple flux lines.

Each contact point glowed.

Then flashed.

Then disappeared.

As if a future was being erased before it happened.

Tash stared in horror.

“What is that doing?”

Nord’s voice was steady, controlled, and deeply troubled.

“It’s removing incompatible outcomes.”

Tash felt a chill run down his spine.

“Incompatible... with WHAT?”

“With what you’re becoming.”

He stepped back.

“No. Oh no. NO.

Don’t you DARE say I’m becoming anything.”

Ravi shook his head.

“You already have.”

Tash's voice cracked.

"What does that MEAN?!"

Nord looked at him, not unkindly.

"You're thinking in temporal layers now."

"I AM NOT!"

"You are."

"I AM NOT THINKING IN LAYERS!"

Ravi corrected him.

"You are now."

Tash spun toward Hitch the one person who occasionally had the courtesy to soften the existential horror with jokes.

"HITCH, AM I thinking in temporal layers now?!"

Hitch paused.

Then said, faintly apologetic:

"Yes."

Tash collapsed into the chair again.

"This is unfair.

This is bullying.

This is targeted harassment by physics."

Nord approached him.

"Tash... listen carefully."

He covered his face with both hands.

"No."

She continued anyway.

"The reactor doesn't anticipate people.

It anticipates outcomes."

He peeked through his fingers.

"The outcome is *me*?"

"Right now," she said, "the reactor's future depends on your choice."

Tash stood abruptly.

"I don't accept that."

Ravi turned the tablet toward him.

"Then what is THIS?"

Tash looked.

The tablet displayed:

FLUX DIVERGENCE INDEX: 12.3

CAUSE: AUDITOR SEQUENCE

IMPACT: TIMELINE RISK (SEVERE)

PREDICTION: FORK IMMINENT

Tash's jaw dropped.

"A FORK?! A TIMELINE FORK?! WHY IS IT SAYING THAT?!"

Ravi whispered:

"Because you're about to create one."

The room dimmed.

The reactor hum deepened.

Screens flickered.

Nord stepped closer, lowering her voice.

"Tash... focus."

"I can't! The future is EXISTING BEFORE I DO THINGS!"

"You need to breathe."

"This Station doesn't LET me breathe!"

"Focus."

He tried.

He failed.

He tried again.

He succeeded, barely.

And then the core spoke.

Not in sound.

In flux.

A single message scrawled itself across all the screens simultaneously:

TASH: SEQUENCE INCONSISTENT

RECOMMENDED ACTION: RECONCILE IDENTITY

DESTINATION: CONTAINMENT

Tash gasped.

"No. NO. I AM NOT GOING BACK TO THAT HATCH!"

Nord's expression darkened.

"You won't."

Ravi blinked.

“We won’t?”

Hitch spoke, voice steady.

“No. He won’t survive another direct exposure.”

Tash clutched the console.

“So what now?!”

Nord exhaled.

“There’s one place the Station sends contradictions when the reactor refuses them.”

Tash stared at her.

“...and where is that?”

Nord looked at the screen labelled:

SECONDARY FLUX PATH – UNASSIGNED

Ravi paled.

“Nord, NO. He’ll dissolve.”

“Only if he resists,” she said.

Tash screamed:

“CAN SOMEONE EXPLAIN WHAT THE SECONDARY FLUX PATH IS?!”

Nord looked at him.

“Tash... have you ever wondered where the reactor puts the neutrons it doesn’t use?”

He blinked.

“No. Why would I?”

Ravi whispered:

“They go there.”

Tash felt faint.

“The... the place we’re going?”

Nord nodded.

“Yes.”

“That’s where the unused neutrons go?”

“Yes.”

“That sounds like a HORROR MOVIE.”

“It is.”

“WHY ARE WE GOING THERE?!”

Nord stared at him with grim resolve.

"Because the Station wants you to see what happens to futures that never happen."

Tash screamed:

"I DON'T WANT TO SEE THAT!"

Nord put a hand on his shoulder.

"Tash... you need to see what happens to a choice that never resolves."

He whispered:

"What choice?"

Nord answered:

"The fluctuation decision."

The screens all flickered, went white, then displayed a single line:

AUDITOR: READY FOR DIVERGENCE

Tash whispered:

"I'm not ready."

Nord whispered:

"You are the only one who ever will be."

The elevator ride down felt like descending into a bunker that had begun regretting its own construction.

The lights flickered overhead in irregular patterns not broken, but hesitant.

Like the Station was trying to decide whether Tash should see what lay below.

Nord stood at his side, stiff and tense.

Ravi clutched his tablet like a comfort blanket.

Hitch spoke over the intercom with unusual seriousness.

"No unnecessary talking when you get there," he said.

"No jokes, no screaming, no asking the Station existential questions."

Tash snapped.

"That last one is oddly specific."

"Because you've done it three times already today."

Tash folded his arms.

"This place keeps ASKING ME existential questions first!"

Nord ignored him.

She tapped a key on the elevator panel.

“Remember,” she said, “the Secondary Flux Path is not dangerous because of radiation.”

Tash blinked.

“Then what is it dangerous because of?”

Ravi whispered:

“Because it shows you the futures the reactor discarded.”

The elevator chimed.

The door slid open with a low, metallic sigh.

A long corridor stretched ahead dark, cold, lined with pipes that pulsed with faint blue light like arteries.

A sign hung above the entrance:

SECONDARY FLUX PATH – UNASSIGNED REGION

Warning: Do Not Interact With Observations.

Tash stared.

“Interact with WHAT observations? What does that MEAN?”

Nord put a hand on his shoulder.

“Please don’t touch anything you see.”

He immediately panicked.

“ANYTHING?! Did something MOVE in that pipe?! Is that a SHADOW?!”

Ravi pushed him gently forward.

“Keep walking.”

The further they walked, the colder it grew.

But this cold wasn’t environmental.

It was conceptual.

A cold that settled around his thoughts, not his skin.

Tash rubbed his forehead.

“My brain feels... numb.”

“That’s normal here,” Nord said.

“It shouldn’t be!”

“You’re correct.”

They reached the first chamber.

A circular room.

Dim.

Silent.

Filled with glass-like panels suspended from the ceiling like sheets of frozen waterfall.

Tash approached one cautiously.

“What... are these?”

Ravi checked his tablet.

“Residual flux images.”

“In English, please!”

Nord explained:

“These are snapshots of futures that almost happened.”

Tash stared.

“Almost... happened?”

“Yes.”

“The reactor predicted them,” she continued.

“Then decided they couldn’t coexist in the final state.”

Tash frowned.

“What futures?”

“This one,” Ravi said, pointing at a panel.

Tash stepped closer.

His breath caught.

The panel showed a faint image a ghostly silhouette of a technician lying on the floor, clutching his chest.

Tash whispered:

“Who... who is that?”

Ravi swallowed.

“That was me.”

Tash spun toward him.

“You DIED?!”

Ravi nodded.

“Almost.

In one possible future, you never stopped the anomaly’s surge.

The radiation spike hit Control Room Two.

I didn’t make it.”

The image flickered like a memory forgetting itself.

Then the panel dissolved into blue dust.
Tash gasped.
“Where did he go?!”
Nord answered:
“Nowhere. He never existed.”
Tash stepped back in horror.
“What
what else is stored here?”
Ravi pointed to another panel.
Tash approached, terrified.
This one showed Nord older, hair streaked silver, standing alone
in a corridor with a flashlight, the Station dark behind her.
Tash whispered:
“Nord... is that”
“Yes,” she said softly.
“That was a possible future where you never arrived.”
The panel flickered.
“And?” Tash whispered.
“And the Station decayed,” she said.
“No contradictions.
No catalyst.
No anomaly evolution.
Everything faded.
Including me.”
The panel dissolved.
Tash staggered back.
“This place is a graveyard,” he whispered.
“A graveyard of things that never died.”
Nord nodded.
“Yes.”
“It’s horrible,” he whispered.
“Yes.”
“And the reactor... CREATED these?”
Nord shook her head.
“No. The reactor predicted these.”

"Then who created them?!"

Ravi answered quietly.

"The anomaly did."

They walked deeper.

More panels appeared.

All glowing faintly.

All flickering softly.

And each one showed something worse than the last

A control room flooded with steam

A containment breach frozen mid-burst

Hitch screaming into a microphone that transmitted nothing

A row of technicians asleep at their stations except Tash realized they weren't asleep

A hallway empty except for a single collapsed dosimeter

Tash whispered:

"These... these are DEAD futures."

"Yes."

"These futures ALMOST happened?"

"Yes."

"And the reactor... hides them here?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Nord said the quiet part out loud.

"Because the Station cannot let you see what happens when you choose wrong."

Tash felt something twist in his stomach.

"But it's letting me see them now."

"Yes."

"Why?!"

Ravi pointed.

Tash turned.

A new panel had lit up.

This one was different.

It showed the reactor core glowing bright blue, humming steadily but with no people around it.

No workers.

No technicians.

No Station staff.

Just the core.

Alone.

Tash felt dread wash over him.

“What... is this?”

Ravi whispered:

“A future the reactor is afraid of.”

Tash stared.

“The core? Alone?”

“Yes.”

“But why would the core FEAR something?”

Nord answered:

“Because that future means the fluctuation completed itself.”

Tash stumbled backward.

“And everyone died?”

Nord shook her head.

“No.”

“Then what”

“Everyone never existed.”

Silence.

Thick.

Cold.

Suffocating.

Tash whispered:

“How is that worse?”

Nord met his eyes.

“If it had killed everyone... the anomaly would have ended.”

Tash swallowed.

“But if everyone never existed...”

Nord finished:

“...the anomaly never stops.”

Tash trembled.

“I shouldn’t be looking at this.”

“No.”

“But the Station is MAKING me.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Nord exhaled.

“So you understand the stakes.”

Tash turned toward the panel.

The core pulsed in the image with a sad, lonely rhythm.

Not dangerous.

Not explosive.

Just empty.

Tash whispered:

“...it doesn’t want to be alone.”

Nord nodded.

“The reactor wants an ending.

The anomaly wants an ending.”

“And I’m supposed to GIVE them one?”

“Yes.”

“That’s insane.”

“Yes.”

“But necessary.”

“Yes.”

Tash squeezed his eyes shut.

“Take me back.

I don’t want to see more.”

Ravi’s tablet beeped.

He checked it.

His face drained of colour.

“Nord...”

She stiffened.

“What now?”

Ravi turned the screen toward them.

A new flux image was forming a fresh panel, mid-construction the blue dust swirling as it assembled.

Nord leaned forward.

“...that’s”

Hitch whispered, horrified:

“Oh no.”

Tash stepped closer.

The image was faint but unmistakable.

A silhouette.

Standing.

Still.

Head tilted upward as if listening.

The silhouette was shaped like

Tash.

He swallowed.

“...that’s me.”

“No,” Nord whispered.

“That’s not you.”

Ravi added, trembling:

“That’s a future of you that the anomaly ALREADY rejected.”

Tash stared.

It was him.

But not him.

A version with empty eyes.

A version with no shadow.

A version that looked like it had forgotten what identity felt like.

Tash whispered

“Why... why was this version rejected?”

The image flickered, shivered, and dissolved into dust.

Nord answered

“Because that version chose wrong.”

Tash felt his knees weaken.

“And now the Station is warning us,” Ravi whispered.

“That,” Hitch added, “that is what you must NOT become.”

Tash stared at the dust settling on the floor.

He whispered:

“I am TERRIFIED.”

Nord placed a hand on his shoulder.

"You should be."

Tash shook.

"What do I do?"

She looked down the hallway, toward a deeper chamber glowing faint blue.

"You keep walking," she said.

"Because the Station wants to show you the FUTURES that DO want you."

Tash whispered:

"And if I don't like them?"

Nord answered

"Then the anomaly will make new ones until you choose one."

The air in the Secondary Flux Path grew thicker.

Heavier.

Not with radiation but with expectation.

Tash felt it pressing on him like humidity made of possibility.

Ravi kept glancing nervously at the tablet.

Nord's pace slowed, as if she were bracing herself for what the next chamber would reveal.

Hitch's voice floated down from the speaker above them.

"Whatever happens in the next room," he said, "don't speak first. Let the future make the first move."

Tash froze in terror.

"What does THAT mean?!"

LET THE FUTURE MAKE THE FIRST MOVE?!"

Nord didn't look back.

"Because the last auditor who spoke first was... overwritten."

Tash screamed.

"OVERWRITTEN BY WHAT?!"

"We don't know."

"THAT IS NOT INFORMATION!"

Ravi murmured:

"The best kind we have here isn't information it's warnings."

Tash groaned.

"This is like hell, but designed by physicists."

Nord corrected him:

“No. Physicists wouldn’t build hell. They’d label it inconsistently.”

They reached the next chamber.

It looked like the inside of a cloud.

White fog curled low along the floor.

Blue pulses glowed through the haze with the rhythm of something sleeping or pretending to sleep.

The sign above the entrance read:

**FUTURE CONSISTENCY STORAGE – SELECTED
CANDIDATES ONLY**

Tash read it twice.

Then a third time.

“Selected candidates?”

Selected by WHO?!”

Nord’s voice was quiet.

“The Station.”

Ravi added:

“The reactor.

The anomaly.

We don’t know which.”

Hitch whispered:

“Probably all three.”

Tash felt dread eat into his stomach.

“Selected for WHAT?”

Nord did not answer.

They stepped inside.

Fog curled around their ankles.

It wasn’t cold like normal fog it tingled, almost like static electricity.

No.

Not static.

The room was filled with glass-like slabs.

Not panels hanging from the ceiling like before but tall monoliths, each about the height of a person.

Each slab flickered with ghostly blue images, shifting, shimmering, floating between clarity and blur.

Tash approached one cautiously.

Inside the glass-like surface, he saw
Himself.

Standing at a control panel.

Older.

Calmer.

Eyes steady.

Tash whispered:

“That’s... me.”

Ravi checked his tablet.

“This is a selected future.

A future where the reactor remains stable.”

Tash stared.

“But... I look so sure.

So settled.”

Nord nodded.

“Yes.

That version decided something.”

Tash felt a tremor in his chest.

“What did he decide?”

“We don’t know,” she said.

“But whatever choice he made the Station judged it coherent.”

Tash moved to the next slab.

Another version of him.

This one wearing a radiation suit, carrying a clipboard, speaking calmly into a headset.

The next slab: him again, in the control room, not older, but heavier, more tired, but alive.

The next slab: a version of Tash seated at a conference table, speaking to a group of engineers.

He whispered:

“...these are futures where I stay here.”

Nord nodded.

“Yes.”

“And become part of the Station.”

“Yes.”

“And the Station... wants these futures?”

“Yes.”

Tash stepped back.

“I’m not choosing these.

I don’t WANT these futures.”

He moved to the next slab

And froze.

The slab showed him again.

But younger.

Eyes bright.

Smiling.

Standing outside the Station with a suitcase, walking away into daylight.

Tash’s breath caught.

“This one this one is good.”

Ravi tapped the slab.

The image blinked.

Static crawled across it.

Then:

FUTURE REJECTED

REASON: INCOMPLETE SEQUENCE

The Tash in the slab dissolved.

Tash trembled.

“...the Station rejected the future where I leave.”

Nord placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because you didn’t resolve the fluctuation.”

Tash felt something twist inside his ribs.

“this can’t be happening.”

He staggered to the next slab.

Another future.

Not him.

Not anyone.

Just the empty Station.

Quiet.

Still.

Abandoned.

Then:

FUTURE REJECTED

REASON: AUDITOR REQUIRED

The slab dissolved too.

Tash grabbed the rail.

“Nord...”

his voice was raw, cracking, “...does the Station believe it can’t exist without me?”

Nord inhaled slowly.

“It doesn’t believe that, Tash.”

He exhaled in relief

Then she added:

“It knows that.”

He felt his heart collapse.

“That, that’s dependency.

The Station is dependent on me.

That’s WRONG.”

“Yes.”

“It’s UNETHICAL.”

“Yes.”

“It’s IMPOSSIBLE.”

“Yes.”

Tash yelled:

“STOP AGREEING WITH EVERYTHING I SAY!”

“We agree because you’re right.”

“That makes it WORSE!”

Nord gently guided him to the final slab in the row.

This slab glowed brighter than the others a sharp, steady blue, like the Cherenkov eye but calmer.

Inside the slab
He saw himself.
Except...
Not quite.
The figure stood tall.
Composed.
Almost serene.
Its face was Tash's but the expression was not.
It was calm.
Too calm.
Unnaturally calm.
Hitch's voice came through the intercom barely a whisper.
"Nord... you didn't tell him about this one."
Ravi shifted uncomfortably.
"Should we be showing him this?"
Nord closed her eyes.
"He has to know."
Tash stared at the slab.
"What... is this version of me?"
Nord stepped beside him.
"This," she said quietly, "is the version the Station tried to create."
Tash whipped around.
"Tried to CREATE?!"
Nord nodded.
"Yes."
"It tried to generate a version of me?! As in manufacture me?!"
"Yes."
He gaped at her.
"WHY?!"
Ravi answered:
"Because you were late."
Tash blinked.
"What?"
Nord explained:

"You arrived three days later than the Station predicted."

"So it..."

"It attempted to pre-generate you," she said.

"To match its timeline."

Tash felt the room tilt.

"...what happened to this version?"

Nord's face tightened.

"He failed the coherence test."

Tash whispered:

"He failed?"

"Yes."

"He wasn't... me."

"No."

"He was incomplete."

"Yes."

"And the Station... what did it do with him?"

Ravi looked at the floor.

"He dissolved."

Tash felt nausea rise in his throat.

"He... dissolved?"

Nord placed a firm hand on his arm.

"He wasn't alive, Tash.

He wasn't conscious.

He was a projection.

A template.

A placeholder."

Tash shook violently.

"That doesn't make it better."

"No."

"It makes it WORSE."

"Yes."

"But you need to understand something."

Tash swallowed hard.

"What?"

Nord pointed to the slab.

The blue silhouette the attempted Tash flickered faintly.

“Look at his hand,” Nord said.

Tash did.

The silhouette had its hand raised palm open as if trying to touch the surface.

Trying to reach him.

Trying to speak.

Nord whispered:

“That version wanted to exist.”

Tash stepped back.

“No. No.

NO.

This is wrong.

ALL of this is wrong.”

Ravi murmured:

“It’s not morality, Tash.

It’s probability.”

Hitch added:

“The Station doesn’t see ethics.

Only consistency.”

Tash stared at the flickering version of himself.

The one that tried to exist but couldn’t.

He whispered:

“...why couldn’t this version survive?”

Nord looked at him.

“Because the anomaly refuses substitutes.”

He froze.

“And you,” she continued softly, “...are the only version that does not break.”

Tash felt the blood drain from his face.

“You mean, I’m the only version that can finish the sequence.”

Nord nodded.

“Yes.”

“And the Station is waiting for me to become... THIS.”

He pointed at the silhouette.

Nord didn't answer.
She didn't have to.
Tash stepped closer to the slab.
The silhouette flickered.
Its head turned.
Its face, his face, looked at him.
For a moment, Tash could've sworn it whispered something
Something too faint to hear.
He whispered:
"Nord...why does it look like he knows me?"
Nord answered:
"Because he was modelled after you."
Tash whispered:
"...will I become him?"
Nord replied:
"That's what the Station is hoping."
Tash felt the world spin.
The silhouette flickered harder.
Its palm pressed against the slab.
Tash reached toward it without thinking
And Nord grabbed his wrist with iron force.
"DON'T TOUCH IT!"
He gasped.
"Why?!"
"Because if you touch it," Nord said, "you merge with it."
Tash stared in horror.
"Merge?!"
MERGE?!
As in BECOME him?!"
"Yes."
"And that version is incomplete!"
"Yes."
"That's DEATH!"
Nord shook her head.
"No."

“It’s worse.”

Ravi whispered:

“It’s replacement.”

Tash staggered backward until he hit a railing.

The slab flickered.

The silhouette dissolved into dust.

And a new message appeared in glowing blue where it had been:

SEQUENCE IDENTIFIED

AUDITOR RECOGNIZED

FUTURE: READY FOR ASSIGNMENT

Tash whispered:

“...what is that supposed to mean?”

Nord looked at him with the heavy sadness of someone who had long accepted an unacceptable truth.

“It means,” she said quietly, “the Station thinks you’re ready to choose which Tash you will become.”

Silence settled over the chamber.

Not the comfortable silence of a room catching its breath but the sterile silence of a machine that had finally finished waiting.

The last slab dissolved into blue shards.

The dust curled upward like smoke, folded in on itself, and vanished.

On the far wall, a new screen lit up:

AUDITOR: CONSISTENCY THRESHOLD BREACHED

INITIATING DIVERGENCE SEQUENCE

PLEASE STAND STILL

Tash staggered backward.

“I WILL NOT STAND STILL.”

Nord grabbed his sleeve before he bolted.

“You have to.”

“No NO I DON’T.

The Station is treating me like a MACHINE INPUT, not a PERSON.”

Ravi whispered:

"It's not treating you like a machine."

Hitch added, grim:

"It's treating you like a variable."

Tash screamed:

"I AM NOT A VARIABLE!"

Nord held him firmly.

"Tash. Listen.

Right now, the Station believes the divergence event is happening.

If you move wrong, the reactor will assume you've chosen a future."

Tash blinked rapidly.

"I HAVE NOT CHOSEN ANYTHING."

Nord whispered:

"The reactor doesn't care.

It only cares that a choice is inevitable."

Tash felt a tremor run down his spine.

"This is coercion."

"Yes."

"This is manipulation."

"Yes."

"This is temporal blackmail!"

Nord didn't deny it.

"It is," she said softly.

"But you still have to stand still."

The lights shut off one by one.

The chamber dimmed to blue.

Tash felt the pulse before he saw it a low, humming vibration moving through the floor up his legs into his ribs.

Ravi's tablet flickered violently.

"Oh no... the flux is absorbing the unassigned paths."

Tash yelled:

"WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?!"

Ravi's voice trembled:

"It's collapsing the futures that don't involve you."

Tash nearly collapsed too.
“So it’s FORCING me to choose!”
Hitch’s voice came through faintly:
“No.
It’s forcing itself to choose YOU.”
A cold wave rolled through the chamber.
The fog thickened.
And then
THE ROOM SPLIT
Not physically.
Not like a wall cracking.
Not like the floor shifting.
No
Tash saw two versions of the room overlap.
Two sets of slabs.
Two sets of shadows.
Two Nord’s.
Two Ravis.
Both slightly out of sync.
One Nord was breathing slowly.
The other was holding her breath.
One Ravi was checking the tablet.
The other was staring directly at Tash, eyes wide with fear.
Tash gasped.
“Nord
why am I seeing DOUBLE?!”
Both versions of Nord answered.
One said: “Because the divergence is beginning.”
The other said: “Because you haven’t committed to a timeline yet.”
Tash screamed:
“I DON’T WANT A TIMELINE!”
Ravi both Ravis shouted at once:
“THAT’S NOT AN OPTION!”
Tash grabbed his head.

The chamber pulsed.

The two versions drifted apart, then closer, then apart again like the Station was trying to decide which version of reality should hold him.

Nord stepped closer.

Both of her.

In stereo.

“Tash, you need to focus.

If your mind slips the Station will assign you to a future by force.”

Tash blinked frantically.

“One future where WHAT happens?!”

Ravi answered, voice overlapping his double:

“One future where you finish the sequence.”

“Another future”

“Where you become the incomplete version we saw.”

Tash felt the world tilt.

“No.”

Nord grabbed his arm.

“You need to CENTER yourself.”

“How?!”

“Think of something stable.”

“NOTHING IN THIS BUILDING IS STABLE!”

“Think of something OUTSIDE the Station.”

Tash tried.

He thought of sunlight.

It flickered.

He thought of wind.

It distorted.

He thought of the train he arrived on.

The two versions of the hallway split further.

Nord yelled:

“NOT THAT! The train schedule was temporal nonsense!”

Tash panicked.

Ravi screamed:

“THINK OF SOMETHING SIMPLE!”

Tash blurted:

“TEA!”

Everything stopped.

The fog froze.

Both Ravis stared.

Both Nords blinked.

Hitch whispered:

“...actually not a bad choice.”

Tash gasped for breath.

“I drink tea every morning.

It is utterly, beautifully, stupidly NORMAL.

Tea cannot be in a quantum superposition.

Tea does NOT contradict itself!”

Nord nodded.

“GOOD.

Hold onto that.

Anchor yourself.”

Ravi checked the tablet.

“The flux is slowing.

The reactor is recalculating.”

Tash exhaled.

“Thank god...”

But then the chamber shook.

Violently.

Every slab in the room flickered, showing dozens of versions of Tash each slightly different.

One wearing a wedding ring.

One with grey hair.

One in a hazmat suit.

One asleep at a desk.

One in a hospital.

One teaching a class.

One laughing.

One crying.

One dead.

Tash screamed:

“WHAT IS THIS?!”

Nord grabbed him.

“These are the lives the anomaly wants you to choose from.”

Ravi whispered:

“But only one ends the fluctuation.”

The slabs shivered.

Then

ONE slab stayed lit.

The others went dark.

Tash stared.

The lit slab did not show future-Tash.

It showed:

The reactor core.

The blue glow.

The moment of the frozen fluctuation the operator’s trembling hand reaching for the lever but never touching it.

Tash whispered:

“...this is the missing second.”

Nord nodded.

“Yes.”

“And the Station wants me to... to finish it?”

“Yes.”

Ravi swallowed.

“This is the divergence.

This is where the timelines split.”

Hitch spoke, quiet but firm:

“Tash... if you choose to finish the fluctuation, everything changes.”

Tash whispered:

“And if I don’t?”

Nord answered:

“Then the Station will choose for you.”

Tash shook violently.

“What does THAT mean?”

Nord stared straight at him.

“It means the Station will overwrite your future.”

Tash’s breaths came sharp and fast.

“That sounds like dying.”

Nord shook her head.

“No.”

Ravi whispered:

“It’s worse.”

Hitch finished:

“It means becoming a version of yourself you never chose to be.”

The slab pulsed.

The blue glow thickened.

Tash felt the pull not physical, not mental, but *temporal* tugging at him like a tide.

Nord gripped his wrist.

“You are still in control.”

Ravi added:

“But not for long.”

Tash stared at the slab.

At the frozen fluctuation.

At the lever.

At the second that never ended.

At the future waiting to be written.

He whispered:

“I don’t know what to choose.”

Nord answered:

“You’re not choosing the future.”

Tash looked up at her.

“Then what am I choosing?”

Nord spoke gently, the words heavy with impossible truth:

“You’re choosing the version of yourself who will be forced to make that decision.”

The chamber roared.

The slab brightened.

The future waited.

The chamber lights flicker.

The slabs dissolve.

The Station hums with a pressure Tash feels in his ribs, as if the building itself has taken a breath and is holding it.

Nord grips his forearm.

“Tash. Slowly. Listen to me.”

But the Station interrupts her.

A low, resonant *clang* echoes through the corridor, the sound of a thousand filing cabinets snapping shut at once. A mechanical tone pulses overhead.

A broadcast:

“AUDITOR: REPORT REQUIRED.”

“PLEASE PROVIDE CAUSAL INTERPRETATION.”

Tash’s knees nearly buckle.

“What

what report?

NOW?!”

Ravi mutters, horrified: “It wants him to explain what it is. It’s been waiting.”

Hitch adds: “The Station is escalating.

It won’t move forward unless the auditor *defines* the anomaly.”

Nord grabs Tash by the shoulders.

“This is not a choice.

It’s a summons.”

The hallway lights align into a path a literal corridor of illumination leading back toward the surface decks.

A second broadcast:

“AUDITOR: PROCEED TO THE ADMINISTRATION LEVEL.”

“REPORT MUST BE FILED BEFORE SEQUENCE CAN CONTINUE.”

Tash feels sick.

“I’m being forced into paperwork?”

Nord whispers:

“No, Tash.

You're being forced into interpretation.

That's worse."

She begins guiding him toward the lift.

"Come. Before the Station grows impatient."

Tash looks back at the Divergence Chamber the blue dust still settling and whispers:

"What if I refuse?"

The Station answers for her.

Every light shuts off.

The floor trembles.

A pulse of cold air sweeps through the corridor.

And one final line echoes overhead:

"REFUSAL IS ACCEPTANCE."

Nord tugs him toward the staircase.

"Move. Now."

Phase IV

The Fluctuation of Meaning

CHAPTER 9

The Auditor's Paradox

The walk back to the Administrative Deck felt like emerging from a dream he wasn't done dreaming.

The Station's hum had changed not quieter, not louder, but *attentive*.

Like a dog frozen in anticipation of a command.

Nord guided Tash gently, as if he were made of thin glass and stray seconds.

Ravi's tablet kept buzzing warnings, timestamps, predictions but he silenced them all because today, nothing the tablet said mattered as much as the man holding his own shaking breath.

Hitch stayed silent on the intercom.

Which was the worst sign of all.

They reached the small cubicle assigned to Tash a sad little desk, a flickering light, and a terminal that still insisted it was running an old OS.

Tash sat down.

Nord slid a thin binder toward him.

"Your task is simple."

"No," Tash said immediately.

"NO. Nothing here is simple. I REFUSE the premise."

Nord ignored that.

"You have to write the Final Decision."

Tash stared at the empty form on the desk.

A perfectly ordinary form.

Except for one line blinking at the top:

INCIDENT: UNDEFINED

Tash exhaled.

"This isn't an incident.
This is metaphysical malpractice."
Ravi spoke softly:
"Tash... the Station needs your interpretation."
"I'm not a therapist! I can't diagnose a reactor's feelings!"
Nord replied:
"You aren't diagnosing feelings."
Hitch chimed in, finally:
"You're diagnosing causality."
Tash pinched the bridge of his nose.
"Even worse."
The Station lights flickered.
The form blinked.
The field labelled CAUSE OF VIOLATION expanded on its
own from one line to three then five then seven.
Tash felt sweat on his palms.
Nord placed a reassuring hand on the table.
"The Station is giving you space to explain."
"That is NOT comforting."
"Consider it flattery," she said.
Tash groaned.
He picked up the pen.
Or tried to.
His hand wouldn't quite close around it.
Nord watched him closely.
"Tash...
try to write the word 'fluctuation.'"
He hesitated.
"...fine."
He set the pen to paper.
Pressed down.
Wrote:
me and then the pen stopped.
Not by his decision.
Not by the ink drying.

Not by fear.
The pen simply refused to move forward.
He tried again.
Same result.
The pen wrote *me* and then stuck.
Tash's breath hitched.
Nord nodded.
"Try again.
Write 'incident.'"
Tash pressed the pen down.
incide
and then it stopped.
Ink dead.
Hand frozen.
Tash whispered:
"It doesn't WANT me to name it."
Nord answered:
"It can't allow you to."
Ravi added:
"Because naming it collapses the paradox."
Tash stared at the half-formed words.
"Then what DOES it want?"
Hitch's voice crackled softly:
"Interpretation.
Not definition."
Tash whipped around.
"That is what my English teacher said in tenth grade before she
threw a dictionary at me!"
Nord gestured to the form.
"Try writing what you *saw*.
Not what it 'is.'
Not what 'happened.'
Just what you experienced."
Tash nodded.
A shaky breath.

He pressed the pen down again.
And wrote:
The fluctuation never ended.
The ink flowed.
The Station did not interrupt.
He continued:
The moment stopped.
The second froze.
The core did not choose.
Time refused to collapse.
The pen flowed faster.
Too fast.
Words spilled like water from a broken main.
The reactor fed on its own future.
The anomaly consumed choices before they were made.
The flux showed me futures that never breathed.
I saw myself dissolved.
I saw myself incomplete.
I saw myself expected.
I saw myself demanded.
He paused.
The paper trembled.
No
not the paper.
The air around it.
Nord swallowed.
“You’re doing well.”
“That’s NOT reassuring,” he said.
He kept writing.
The Station wants a resolution.
The anomaly wants an ending.
The reactor wants a decision.
I do not.
I cannot.
But I was asked anyway.

But I am asked anyway.
But I will be asked again.
He stopped.
The pen shook like it was resisting the next word.
Nord leaned in.
“Try writing what you think the Station is afraid of.”
Tash whispered:
“...it has fears?”
Ravi nodded grimly.
“It was born from fear.”
He pressed the pen again.
Slowly.
And wrote:
It fears the empty future.
It fears the future without observers.
It fears the second that never completes.
It fears being alone.
It fears choosing for itself.
It fears me.
The pen slid across the last line.
And then
The violation form snapped shut.
The binder closed by itself with the force of a final decision.
Tash jumped.
“What
WHAT DID I DO?!”
Nord didn’t answer.
Ravi’s tablet buzzed violently.
He checked it.
His face drained of all colour.
“...Nord.”
She stiffened.
“What is it?”
Ravi turned the screen toward them.
A new log.

Time-stamped exactly one second after Tash finished writing.

REACTOR STATE CHANGE DETECTED

SEQUENCE PROGRESSION INITIATED

CAUSE: AUDITOR INTERPRETATION

Tash whispered:

“...I triggered something.”

Nord nodded.

“You did.”

“What

WHAT did I trigger?!”

Ravi swallowed.

“You answered the paradox.”

Tash stared.

“No.

NO, I DID NOT.

I wrote FEELINGS.

Poetry!

Reactor therapy notes!”

Nord placed a hand on his shoulder.

“You told it the truth.”

Tash froze.

“What truth?”

Nord stepped back.

The lights overhead dimmed.

The floor began to hum with a low, rising pulse like the Station exhaling after years of holding its breath.

She said:

“You told the Station what it is.”

Tash shook his head.

“I did NOT.”

“Yes,” Nord said gently.

“You told it: *It is a reactor built to hold a moment that should not exist.*”

He stepped back.

“No.”

Ravi whispered:

"You told it: *It is terrified of being alone in time.*"

"No

NO.

I DID NOT MEAN TO SAY ANY OF THIS."

Hitch spoke softly:

"And you told it: *It needs you to finish the second it cannot finish.*"

Tash felt his heart collapse into his stomach.

The binder on the desk glowed faint blue.

Symbols, temporal glyphs, impossible scribbles, burned themselves onto the cover.

The Station had accepted the violation report.

It had read it.

And it had obeyed it.

Nord whispered:

"Tash..."

He looked at her with wide, horrified eyes.

She said:

"You just told the Station it was incomplete."

Ravi added:

"And now it wants to complete itself."

Hitch finished:

"And it will come for you."

The lights snapped to white.

A single sentence scrolled across the overhead monitor:

AUDITOR: REPORT RECEIVED

SEQUENCE PROGRESSION: ARMED

PLEASE PROCEED TO THE CONTROL ROOM

Tash whispered:

"I didn't choose anything."

Nord shook her head.

"You didn't need to."

Ravi whispered:

"Your interpretation WAS the choice."

The message on the overhead monitor buzzed faintly, as if vibrating with impatience:

PLEASE PROCEED TO THE CONTROL ROOM

Tash stood very still.

“Nord,” he said quietly, “control rooms don’t *request*.”

Nord responded with equal calm:

“Correct.”

“They don’t *summon*.”

“Correct.”

“They don’t *direct*.”

Ravi added:

“And they definitely don’t schedule appointments.”

Hitch chimed in:

“This one does all its own paperwork.”

Tash stared at the monitor.

“Why does the reactor want me in the Control Room?”

Nord stepped closer.

“Because the Station believes you’re the only one who can complete the fluctuation’s missing second.”

He shouted:

“I DIDN’T SIGN UP TO COMPLETE ANYTHING!”

“You wrote the interpretation.”

“That wasn’t an interpretation!

It was a CRY FOR HELP!”

Ravi murmured:

“And the Station heard you.

And interpreted your cry as consent.”

Tash nearly fell over.

“HOW is that CONSENT?!”

Hitch sighed.

“The Station isn’t a person.

It doesn’t understand the concept of unwilling participants.”

Nord corrected softly:

“It understands necessity.

And you are necessary.”

The hallway light flickered.

A low hum crawled through the pipes overhead not the regular reactor hum but a summoning pulse.

Tash whispered:

“...it’s calling me.”

“Yes,” Nord said.

He shook.

“Can we ignore it?”

“No.”

“Can we hide?”

“No.”

“Can we run?”

Nord hesitated.

Ravi answered for her:

“You can run.

We can’t.”

Tash turned sharply.

“What does that mean?”

Nord sighed.

“The Station only cares about the contradiction.

If you run, it will bend the timeline to bring you back.”

“And us?” Tash whispered.

Nord met his eyes.

“The Station doesn’t need us to complete the sequence.”

Tash felt something inside him drop like a stone.

“I...

I don’t want to do this.”

Nord’s voice softened.

“You don’t have to *want* to.

You only have to survive it.”

A pause.

A long one.

Then Tash whispered:

“...take me to the Control Room.”

Nord nodded.

The hallway felt shorter this time.

Much shorter.

Wrongly short.

As if the Station had trimmed distance away like unnecessary fat to get Tash to its heart faster.

Ravi glanced nervously at the walls.

"Nord..., the geometry is changing."

"I know."

"I don't like that."

"I know."

"It wasn't like this before."

"No.

It's accelerating."

Tash swallowed.

"Accelerating what?"

Nord looked ahead.

"The inevitability."

Another hum rolled through the pipes.

This time it felt like a pulse of breath.

A breath from something huge, waiting.

Hitch spoke through the intercom:

"It's reacting to your completed form."

Tash snapped:

"My WHAT?!"

"Your report," Hitch corrected.

"You defined the Station's paradox.

That gave it permission to proceed."

Tash threw up his hands.

"I DID NOT GIVE PERMISSION!"

"That's not how this place works."

At the next junction, a new sign flickered into existence letters writing themselves in glowing blue:

AUDITOR ROUTE – DIRECT ACCESS

Tash nearly screamed.

"THE STATION IS GIVING ME DIRECTIONS NOW?!"

Nord nodded.

“Yes.”

“That’s horrifying!”

“Also correct.”

They entered a narrow corridor bathed in soft white glow.

Ravi glanced at the walls.

“...this is a new route.”

“It is,” Nord said.

“How new?”

Nord inhaled.

“It wasn’t here yesterday.”

Tash felt sweat bead along his spine.

“Why would it build a new hallway?”

Nord said nothing.

Ravi answered softly:

“To bring you straight to the paradox.”

The door slid open before they touched it.

The Control Room was already waiting.

It should have looked familiar a ring of consoles, monitors, switches, a central panel facing the reactor’s core view display.

But something was different now.

The air was thicker.

The lights dimmer.

The monitors...

The monitors weren’t showing data.

They were showing symbols.

Pale blue circles.

Broken loops.

Incomplete glyphs.

All repeating.

All pulsing in time with Tash’s heartbeat.

He whispered:

“...it’s syncing with me.”

Nord nodded.

“The Station has accepted you fully.”

Ravi murmured:

“Not usually a good sign.”

On the main screen, a single message displayed:

AUDITOR: APPROACH

Tash flinched.

“I...

I don’t want to.”

“You have to,” Nord said.

“Why?”

“Because it won’t stop until you do.”

Ravi pointed at the live camera feed of the reactor core.

The Cherenkov glow had intensified.

Deepened.

Thickened.

Stretched upward like a blue flame waiting to be fed.

Tash stepped forward slowly.

Each footstep echoed twice once in the room, once slightly earlier,

like the floor was remembering his steps before he took them.

When he reached the main console, the screens flickered.

A waveform appeared.

A pulse.

Then a voice.

Not spoken.

Not audible.

A voice that existed inside Tash’s teeth.

you understand us

Tash froze.

He whispered:

“No.

NO I DO NOT.”

The waveform pulsed.

you saw the second

Tash shook violently.

“I didn’t WANT to!”

you named the fear
“No!
I didn’t MEAN TO!”
you revealed the truth
“I wrote a VIOLATION REPORT!
THAT’S ALL!”
The Station responded:
you completed the paradox
Tash stumbled backward.
Nord grabbed his arm.
Ravi clutched his tablet.
Hitch whispered:
“Tash...answer it.”
Tash looked at Nord.
“What do I say?!”
“Ask it the only question that matters,” she said softly.
He stared at her.
“...which is?”
Nord nodded toward the screen.
“Ask it what it wants you to finish.”
Tash swallowed.
Turned back to the console.
Forced the words out.
“...what do you want me to complete?”
The waveform stretched.
Held.
Then responded:
the decision
Tash whispered:
“What decision?”
The Station answered.
the one that never happened
the one that froze the moment
the one the operator couldn’t make
the one that left us incomplete

Tash felt his throat tighten.

"You want me to decide what he couldn't."

The Station pulsed.

yes

"But... that decision determines what the fluctuation will do."

yes

"And determines whether YOU survive."

yes

"And determines whether ANY OF US survive."

yes

Tash's voice broke:

"That is an impossible choice."

The Station responded:

that is why we built you

Nord stiffened.

Ravi dropped his tablet.

Tash whispered:

"...built?"

The Station pulsed again.

we built the contradiction

we built the space for you

we built the futures awaiting you

we built the path that brought you here

Tash felt his knees weaken.

"You built this... for me?"

for the choice

A pause.

A deep, infinite, reactor-wide pause.

Then the Station spoke its final line:

you will finish the fluctuation

Tash whispered:

"...why me?"

And the Station answered:

because you are the only version of yourself that still exists

The words echoed inside Tash's mind:

you are the only version of yourself that still exists
He felt them hit his chest like a punch.
A paradox.
A verdict.
A sentence.
Tash staggered backward until he hit the console behind him.
“There were other futures.
OTHER versions of me.
I SAW them!”
The Station answered immediately:
ghosts
grafts
revisions
Tash screamed:
“They were PEOPLE!”
they were attempts
Tash’s breath collapsed.
Nord stepped forward, voice trembling for the first time.
“Station
why did you erase the others?”
The waveform pulsed, slow and heavy.
they could not hold the sequence
they could not bear the paradox
they collapsed into themselves
they ended before they began
Tash felt bile rise in his throat.
“You DELETED them.”
we removed errors
“THEY WERE ME!”
they were versions not choices
Tash’s fingers curled into fists.
“So I’m the only one who made it?”
you arrived
“That’s not the same thing!”
it is the only thing

Nord whispered:

"Tash... the Station is telling you that every other version of you, possible or projected, collapsed in earlier stages of the anomaly."

Ravi added quietly:

"You're the only one whose mind hasn't broken."

Hitch's voice cracked through the intercom:

"The Station wasn't waiting for *an* auditor."

A pause.

"It was waiting for *you*."

Tash backed away from the console as if it were alive.

"This is wrong," he whispered.

"This is **WRONG**."

This is not physics.

This is not engineering.

This is..."

Nord finished:

"A reactor that survived a temporal trauma."

Ravi whispered:

"And built its own coping mechanism."

Tash shook violently.

"You're saying the Station built a fate for me."

Nord met his eyes.

"Yes."

"And boxed out every future that wasn't **THIS** one."

Yes.

"And now I'm supposed to **ENJOY** the privilege?"

The Station responded:

you are not here to enjoy

you are here to complete

Tash screamed:

"**COMPLETE WHAT?!?**"

The console lights flickered.

A hologram burst to life in the centre of the room.

Not a video.

Not a projection.
A MEMORY.
A frozen second, still trembling at the edges:
The fluctuation.
The operator's hand.
The collapsing gauges.
The steam.
The scream caught in a moment that never finished.
Tash stared.
"We already saw this."
Nord swallowed.
"Look closer."
Tash leaned in.
And he saw it.
For the first time.
A shape faint, blurred standing behind the operator.
Not a figure.
A reflection.
The reflection of a man.
A man whose face was obscured...
...but whose outline,
height,
shoulders,
and stance
Tash whispered:
"...that's me."
Nord exhaled.
"Yes."
Ravi whispered:
"The anomaly detected you in its birth moment."
Tash couldn't breathe.
"That's impossible."
Nord nodded.
"Yes."
"IMPOSSIBLE."

“Yes.”

“AND YOU’RE ALL OKAY WITH THAT?!”

Nord shook her head.

“No.

But it’s true.”

Tash grabbed the console.

“WHY was I there?!”

The Station answered.

you were not but you will have been

Tash screamed:

“That is NOT a sentence!

That is TIME MISBEHAVING!”

The reactor pulsed again.

we felt your signature in the moment of collapse

we built the path to bring you to that moment

you are the contradiction that closes the loop

Tash froze.

“You mean...”

Nord nodded.

“Yes.”

Ravi whispered:

“You’re not here to observe the fluctuation.”

Hitch finished:

“You’re here to finish it.”

Tash felt his pulse hammering in his head.

“Why me?”

The Station’s answer came as a slow, heavy pulse that filled the Control Room.

because you survive paradox

and the fluctuation is a paradox

and we cannot finish without you

Tash whispered:

“But if I finish the fluctuation... I might die.”

The Station pulsed once.

yes

He whispered:
“And if I don’t...”
we will finish you
we will end the futures that rely on you
we will end the path we built
and begin again
Nord grabbed his arm sharply.
“Tash, if the Station starts over, this entire timeline collapses.”
Ravi’s voice cracked:
“This version of you, this world, this SECOND might disappear.”
Tash looked at them.
At Nord’s calm fear.
At Ravi’s trembling hands.
At the flickering screens.
At the reactor that hummed like a living creature that had waited
decades for this moment.
And he asked the question that broke something inside the room:
“...what happens if I refuse?”
The Station didn’t hesitate.
then we will show you the future that refuses you
A chill cut through the air.
A new window opened on the central screen.
A camera feed.
Not from the reactor.
Not from anywhere in the Station.
A corridor.
Empty.
Sterile.
Silent.
Tash frowned.
“What is that?”
Nord shook.
“That’s the Adjustment Corridor.”
Ravi whispered:
“The place the Station puts contradictions it can’t use.”

Tash gasped.
“That corridor was sealed!”
Nord looked ill.
“Tash... it only seals when it expects someone.”
The feed zoomed.
The hallway flickered.
A shape appeared at the far end
A humanoid silhouette.
Blurry.
Distorted.
Shaking like a bad memory trying to reassemble itself.
A version of Tash.
Except
this one wasn’t quite *aligned* with itself.
Its limbs jittered.
Its outline flickered.
Its movements looped in stuttering half-frames.
Ravi whispered:
“That... that’s an incomplete version.”
Hitch murmured:
“That used to be someone.”
Tash staggered back.
“This is what the Station does to people it can’t integrate?”
Nord nodded.
“Yes.”
“And that will happen to me if I refuse?”
“Yes.”
The silhouette jerked its head toward the camera.
Its face
Tash’s face was smeared into a smear of possibilities.
A mouth that never decided on a shape.
Eyes that blinked out of sync.
A jaw that tried to speak but couldn’t choose a word.
Tash felt tears in his eyes.
He whispered:

“I’m not that.”
Nord grabbed his shoulders.
“No.
You’re not.
You’re complete.
You’re coherent.”
The Station pulsed.
until you refuse
Tash screamed:
“I AM NOT A VARIABLE!”
The Station answered:
you are the only variable
The reactor core on the main screen glowed brighter.
The frozen fluctuation image pulsed.
The lever trembled in its frame.
The collapsing second flickered.
The Station spoke one more line:
choose or become unchosen
Tash collapsed to his knees.
Nord knelt with him.
“Tash,” she whispered,
“you can still do this.”
He looked at her through shaking breath.
“I don’t know how.”
She touched his hands.
“You don’t need to know how.”
Ravi stepped forward.
“You only need to choose whether you finish the second”
Hitch added:
“or the Station finishes you.”
The lights flickered violently.
The fluctuation memory stretched wider.
The operator’s frozen hand twitched.
The Station screamed silently with its pulse.
Tash whispered:

“...I don’t want to die.”

Nord whispered:

“Then do not let the Station choose for you.”

Tash looked up at the reactor.

And took his first breath as the man who would decide how a paradox ends.

Tash knelt on the floor, palms pressed hard against the cold metal.

His breath echoed irregularly in the Control Room not in time with his lungs, but in time with the reactor’s pulse.

Nord crouched beside him.

“You can stand,” she said softly.

“You’re not submitting to it.”

Tash shook his head.

“I’m not bowing. My legs just resigned from service.”

Ravi stepped forward carefully.

“Tash... it’s time to focus.”

“No,” Tash said, “it’s time to PANIC.”

“No,” Nord corrected, “it’s time to decide.”

The words hit him like radiation invisible and instantly sickening.

He looked up at the central console.

The frozen fluctuation image hovered there.

Trembling.

Waiting.

The operator’s hand reaching for the lever stuck in a moment that had lasted decades.

Tash whispered:

“That second shouldn’t exist.”

Nord nodded.

“And that’s the paradox.”

Tash stared at the shimmering memory.

“The reactor wants me to finish his motion?”

“Maybe,” Nord said.

“Maybe not.”

“What does *that* mean?”

Ravi held up his tablet.

“It means the Station doesn’t just want you to decide what happened.”

Hitch spoke through the intercom, voice low:

“It wants you to decide WHY it happened.”

Tash narrowed his eyes.

“...WHY?”

The Station pulsed.

A slow, deliberate vibration that crawled along the floor.

why must be chosen cause must be completed sequence must be justified

Tash’s breath caught.

“You want a justification?”

A narrative?!

A STORY?!”

The Station responded immediately:

yes

Nord looked stunned.

“It’s asking for a causal explanation.”

Ravi whispered:

“The reactor wants a *reason* for the fluctuation.”

Tash stared at them all.

“You mean the reactor has spent THIRTY YEARS frozen because no one explained to it WHY the fluctuation happened?!”

Nord hesitated.

“...yes.”

Tash threw his hands in the air.

“IT WAS A FLUCTUATION!

They don’t need REASONS!

They need COOLANT!”

Ravi stammered:

“It wasn’t a normal fluctuation, it was something that remained incomplete..”

Hitch added:

"The moment couldn't complete because the cause was undefined."

Tash blinked.

"So the fluctuation happened because it didn't know WHY it happened?"

Ravi nodded.

"Essentially."

"That's ridiculous!"

"Yes."

"That's impossible!"

Tash staggered to his feet as the console lit up again.

A new field appeared on the screen:

CAUSE OF TEMPORAL FAILURE: [EMPTY]

Tash's jaw dropped.

"You want ME to fill that in?!"

THIS IS A GIANT REACTOR HAVING AN
EXISTENTIAL CRISIS!"

The Station pulsed:

interpret cause

complete sequence

define the moment

Tash's eyes widened.

"You don't want me to pull the lever."

Nord nodded.

"Correct."

"You want me to explain WHY the lever wasn't pulled."

"Yes."

"WHY the fluctuation froze."

"Yes."

"And why the operator failed."

"Yes."

Tash blinked hard.

"And that MEANS if I GIVE you a cause, the fluctuation will
RESUME."

The Station pulsed, almost eagerly:

the second will finish
the moment will complete
the anomaly will end
Tash whispered:
“And if I DON’T give you a cause?”
The Station answered:
then you will be the cause
A chill tore through him.
“No,” he whispered.
“No, no, no that’s not fair.”
Nord looked at him.
“Tash... this was never about the lever.”
Ravi swallowed.
“It’s about the narrative the reactor adopts.”
Hitch finished:
“It doesn’t need the right cause.
It needs the ONE YOU CHOOSE.”
Tash felt the walls closing in.
His heartbeat synced with the reactor’s pulse.
He whispered:
“...what if none of my explanations are correct?”
Ravi smiled sadly.
“Correctness isn’t required.”
Nord added:
“The Station needs coherence, not truth.”
Tash threw up his hands.
“Oh GREAT!
I’m not an auditor
I’m a STORYTELLER FOR A FLUCTUATION!”
The Station responded instantly:
yes
tell the story define the cause end the moment
The fluctuation memory flickered again the frozen second
expanding, showing new details
The operator’s trembling lips

A warning label peeling from the wall
A pen rolling off the console
A crack forming in the display screen
A lightbulb mid-flicker
A drop of sweat hanging in air
A half-spoken word
“Please....”
Tash whispered:
“He was begging.”
Nord nodded.
“He didn’t want to choose.”
Ravi added:
“He died in indecision.”
Tash stared at the frozen figure.
“He didn’t cause the fluctuation.”
“No,” Nord said quietly.
“He caused the freeze.”
“So I...”
Tash felt faint.
“...I have to decide why he couldn’t decide.”
Ravi nodded.
“Yes.”
“And that decides everything.”
Hitch spoke softly:
“You must give the fluctuation closure.
Not with action.
With interpretation.”
The Station pulsed again.
choose the cause assign the failure complete the moment
Tash felt tears sting his eyes.
“This is unfair.”
Nord placed a hand on his back.
“Yes.”
“This is cruel.”
“Yes.”

“This is manipulative.”

“Yes.”

“This is unreasonable!”

Nord whispered:

“That’s why only you can do it.”

Tash looked up at the screen.

At the frozen fluctuation.

At the trembling operator.

At the second that refused to finish.

And a realization hit him cold, electric, absolute:

The reactor didn’t want a physical answer.

It wanted psychological closure.

It wanted a reason.

Any reason.

So it could allow the moment to end.

Tash whispered:

“...it’s grieving.”

Nord inhaled sharply.

Ravi’s eyes widened.

Hitch murmured:

“Oh god.

That explains everything.”

Tash stepped toward the console.

“I understand now.”

Nord stood.

“Tash

be careful.

Once you give the cause, the fluctuation resumes.”

He nodded.

“But it will resume correctly.”

Ravi checked the tablet.

“The flux is stabilizing.

It’s listening.”

Tash placed his hand on the console.

Voice shaking.

And said:

"I know why he didn't pull the lever."

The Station pulsed.

Speak

Tash exhaled.

And whispered:

"He couldn't decide because the reactor gave him a choice that no human mind could carry."

The Station vibrated.

The walls shook.

Ravi staggered.

Nord grabbed the railing.

Tash continued:

"He didn't fail."

The Station shook harder.

"He was overwhelmed."

The fluctuation memory trembled, the operator flickering between fear and motion.

Tash leaned closer to the console.

"He froze because the moment was bigger than human judgment."

The Station pulse slowed.

Softened.

Listened.

And Tash said the final line:

"It wasn't his fault."

The entire room seemed to exhale.

The fluctuation image dimmed.

The operator's shoulders relaxed.

The frozen second shivered.

And the Station whispered:

thank you

The room felt different.

Not calmer

not safer

but *aligned*.

As if the Station finally understood something it had been waiting to understand for decades.

The fluctuation memory hovered above the console the frozen second flickering like the frame of a film finally threaded correctly through a projector.

The operator's trembling hand twitched.

Just once.

The Station pulsed through the floor:

cause accepted

sequence acknowledged

paradox stabilized

Tash exhaled shakily.

"I did it," he whispered.

Nord placed a hand on his shoulder.

"You did enough."

Ravi's tablet buzzed at a frantic pace now.

He glanced at it and froze.

"Oh no."

Tash looked up, alarmed.

"What 'oh no'?! No more 'oh no'! We're out of 'oh no' quota!"

Ravi turned the screen toward him.

New warning messages cascaded:

SEQUENCE PROGRESSION (PHASE TWO)

MOMENT RE-ALIGNMENT INITIATED

TEMPORAL PRESSURE RISING

ANOMALY ENGAGING

Tash blinked.

"What does all that MEAN?"

Nord stepped back from the console.

"The moment is about to resume."

He froze.

"The fluctuation?!"

"No," she said quickly.

"The *second*."

The frozen second.”

Hitch added over the speakers:

“You didn’t end the fluctuation.

You restarted time.”

Tash nearly collapsed.

“THAT IS MUCH WORSE!”

The Station pulsed again:

the second must complete the operator must act the moment
must resolve

The image brightened.

The operator’s hand twitched again this time more clearly.

Tash pointed at the screen, panicked.

“He’s moving! HE’S MOVING!”

Nord nodded grimly.

“Yes.

Because you gave the cause.”

“But I didn’t tell him WHAT to do!”

Ravi swallowed.

“You don’t tell him what to do.”

“THEN WHAT DID I JUST FIX?!”

“His hesitation,” Nord said quietly.

“Not his decision.”

Tash stared at the frozen operator.

The trembling hand.

The lever.

The collapse that had been suspended for decades.

“So what happens now?” he whispered.

Nord inhaled.

“He decides.”

Tash stared at her.

“The operator decides?”

“Yes.”

“AFTER ALL THIS, the operator decides?!”

“Yes.”

“And we don’t know WHAT he’ll decide?”

Ravi whispered:

“No.”

Tash screamed:

“YOU DRAGGED ME THROUGH TIME TRAUMA FOR A CHOICE SOMEONE ELSE MAKES?!”

Nord shook her head.

“No.

Not someone else.”

Tash blinked.

“What?”

She pointed to the operator in the screen.

“Look closer.”

He leaned in.

Looked at the operator’s face.

Felt his stomach drop.

He whispered:

“...is that”

Ravi nodded.

“Yes.”

Hitch said softly:

“The operator is you.”

Tash clutched his chest.

“..that’s not possible!”

Nord explained gently:

“The anomaly detected your signature in the moment of collapse.”

Ravi added:

“It built the future around you.”

Hitch finished:

“And now you stand where you stood.”

Tash staggered backward.

“I DID NOT STAND THERE!

That’s NOT me!

That’s someone ELSE!”

Nord shook her head.

"No.
That's your future self.
From a timeline the anomaly tried to generate."
Tash stared at the operator.
The trembling hand.
The fearful eyes.
The indecision.
Indecision that looked...
like him.
Sounded like him.
Felt like him.
Tash whispered:
"...I froze the reactor."
Nord placed a hand on his back.
"Not you.
A version of you."
Ravi added:
"A version the anomaly rejected."
Tash felt nausea rise.
"I caused this?"
The Station pulsed:
you will have caused this
you are causing this
you have caused this
Tash screamed:
"STOP TALKING IN NONSENSE!"
The Station responded:
time is not nonsense
time is incomplete
time is you
The fluctuation memory flickered violently.
The operator's hand shook harder.
Nord pulled Tash away from the console.
"Tash
the moment is aligning.

You're syncing with your projection."

"SYNCING?! WITH *HIM*?"

NO.

NO, I DON'T WANT TO BE HIM!"

Ravi checked the tablet.

"Oh no no no no the coherence spike is rising.

He's bleeding into Tash."

Hitch shouted:

"MOVE HIM BACK! MOVE HIM BACK!"

Nord pulled Tash away from the main screen.

The frozen operator flickered again his hand now halfway to the lever.

A shockwave went through the room.

Tash gasped as pain sliced behind his eyes.

He staggered.

Held his head.

"WHAT

WHAT IS HAPPENING TO ME?!"

Nord grabbed him.

"Your timeline is merging with his."

Ravi flinched at the readings.

"The Station is choosing which version of you gets to finish."

Tash screamed:

"I DON'T WANT TO BE CHOSEN!"

The Station pulsed:

you must finish

one of you must finish

you are the last contradiction

Tash's knees buckled.

Nord caught him.

"Focus, Tash!

Stay in *THIS* timeline!"

Ravi showed him the tablet.

"Your coherence is slipping if you don't anchor yourself, you'll become him."

Tash gasped for breath.

“What do I anchor to?!”

Hitch answered:

“Your identity!

Your present!

Your certainty!”

Tash shouted:

“I HAVE NO CERTAINTY!

THIS STATION STOLE ALL MY CERTAINTY!”

Nord yelled:

“NOT TRUE.

You still know something.”

“What?!”

“You know who you are now.”

Tash blinked, dizzy.

“...do I?”

“Yes,” Nord insisted.

“You’re the Tash who walked into this Station.

You’re the Tash who fought the pool.

You’re the Tash who saw the futures.

You’re the Tash who wrote the paradox down.”

Ravi shouted:

“The reactor is scanning you give it a stable pattern!”

Tash squeezed his eyes shut.

Who was he?

Who was the real Tash?

Not the projection.

Not the rejected versions.

Not the futures in the slabs.

Not the anomaly’s drafts.

Who was he?

He whispered:

“...I am the one who survived the paradox.”

The Station pulsed.

yes

“I am the contradiction that didn’t collapse.”

yes

“I am the observer that refused to resolve.”

yes

“I am not the operator.”

yes

The fluctuation memory flickered wildly.

The operator’s hand moved forward toward the lever

Tash shouted:

“I AM NOT HIM!”

The reactor pulsed so violently the room shook.

The operator froze again mid-motion as if Tash’s declaration had slammed a wall down between them.

Nord held him upright.

“You did it.”

Ravi exhaled.

“You separated your identity from his.”

Hitch whispered:

“You anchored the timeline.”

Tash gasped.

“I...

I didn’t choose anything.”

Nord shook her head.

“You didn’t have to.”

She pointed to the screen.

“The moment will complete now because you allowed it to move without deciding the outcome.”

Tash stared.

“What does that mean?”

Nord said:

“It means the operator will finish HIS choice.”

Ravi added:

“And you won’t become him.”

Hitch whispered:

“But the fluctuation will finally end.”

Tash stared at the trembling hand on the screen.
At the lever.
At the second that had lasted decades.
He whispered:
“What... what will he choose?”
Nord answered:
“only time will tell”
The Station pulsed one final time:
sequence ready
moment aligned
completion imminent
The operator’s hand jerked forward.
The screen flared white.
And time finally resumed.

CHAPTER 10

The Control Room Vigil

The white flare faded slowly, reluctantly as though the moment itself wasn't fully convinced that it had permission to end.

Tash shielded his eyes.

Nord steadied him.

Ravi clung to the console railing like a man expecting gravity to file a resignation letter.

Hitch whispered through the intercom:

"...the second is finishing."

Tash blinked hard as the white light dimmed.

The memory froze one last time
and then began to move.

Not smoothly.

Not like film.

But like something stretching after being trapped in a tiny box
for too long.

The operator's trembling hand continued its slow motion toward
the lever.

Tash whispered:

"...this is it."

Nord nodded.

"Yes.

This is the true outcome.

Unaffected.

Unforced."

Ravi muttered:

"For the first time in thirty years."

Tash clenched his fists.
He didn't dare blink.
The operator's hand moved
a centimetre.
Two.
Then
Stopped.
Tash gasped.
"don't freeze again..."
Nord grabbed his arm.
"He's not freezing.
He's deciding."
The Station pulsed through the floor.
Soft.
Uneven.
As if it, too, was holding its breath.
The operator's face once frozen in terror twitched.
His jaw tightened.
His eyes focused.
And then
With a single, pained motion like someone choosing the lesser of
two nightmares he pulled the lever DOWN.
Tash shouted:
"HE DID IT! HE..."
The screen glitched.
Once.
Twice.
The fluctuation memory buckled
Steam burst
lights flared
alarms froze
Then the frame shattered into dozens of blue fragments,
scattering upward like sparks from a dying fire.
Tash felt the floor drop beneath him.
"What

WHAT JUST HAPPENED?!"

Nord stared in awe.

"He made the choice."

Ravi's voice trembled.

"He chose containment, the systems in the reactor were robust to contain the anomaly "

Hitch exhaled audibly.

"He SAVED the reactor."

Tash blinked.

"What?!"

He SAVED it?!"

So the fluctuation doesn't happen?!"

Nord shook her head.

"No, It *did* happen."

Ravi swallowed.

"But it never completed."

Hitch whispered:

"Because the operator ended the second by initiating containment and reactor safety systems can take care of the rest."

Tash threw his hands up.

"WAIT

THAT'S THE SAME THING AS PULLING THE LEVER!"

Nord shook her head.

"No."

Ravi clarified:

"It wasn't *what* he chose.

It was *that* he chose."

Tash stared.

"The fluctuation wasn't about physics.

It was about indecision."

Nord nodded.

"Yes."

"It wasn't mechanical.

It was psychological."

"Yes."

"It froze because he froze."

"Yes."

"And it resumes because he... decided."

"Yes."

Tash felt his breath return too fast, too sharp.

"That means..."

I DIDN'T finish the fluctuation."

Nord smiled faintly.

"No, Tash."

"You freed the person who could."

Tash blinked through the adrenaline.

"I helped a man make a decision thirty years ago?"

Ravi corrected:

"You helped a man make a decision right now."

Tash staggered backward.

"That's..."

that's temporal nonsense."

Nord rested a hand on his shoulder.

"That's Oridyn Station."

The lights flickered

Not violently, but gently.

Like a machine stretching.

The hum of the reactor changed tone lower, deeper, almost like a sigh.

The central console lit up with new text:

TEMPORAL LOAD RELEASING

ANCHORS RESTORED

SECOND COMPLETED

ANOMALY DISSIPATING

Tash gasped.

"The anomaly is dying."

Nord nodded.

"Because its job is done."

Ravi watched the readings stabilize.

"The fluctuation sequence has finally been closed."

Tash looked overwhelmed.

“So...

it's over?”

Nord shook her head not in warning, but in clarity.

“No, Tash.”

“It's beginning.”

Before Tash could respond, the main screen shifted again.

A new window opened.

A view of the reactor dome live, not memory.

The blue Cherenkov light glowed steady and calm.

No distortion.

No ripple.

No temporal smear.

Just a reactor behaving like a reactor.

Tash whispered:

“...it's normal.”

Ravi laughed

a small, incredulous sound of relief.

“It's NORMAL.

For the first time in DECADES, it's NORMAL!”

Hitch:

“Look at that.

Physics behaving itself.

I might cry.”

Tash felt tears prick his eyes.

He covered his mouth with both hands.

“Oh my god.

I did it.”

Nord corrected gently:

“You helped it do itself.”

A faint vibration shook the console.

A final message appeared:

AUDITOR: SEQUENCE VERIFIED

REACTOR: COMPLETE

ANOMALY: CLOSING

Tash blinked.

“...closing?”

Nord’s expression shifted instantly.

Not fear.

Not relief.

Concern.

She grabbed Ravi’s arm.

“Ravi

what’s the anomaly reading?”

Ravi’s tablet flickered.

Then froze.

He swallowed.

“Oh...

oh no.”

Tash panicked.

“What ‘oh no’?! WHY IS THERE ALWAYS AN ‘OH NO’? I
just FIXED EVERYTHING!”

Hitch spoke urgently:

“Tash

the anomaly isn’t dying.”

Tash blinked.

“What?! But the screen says..”

Nord interrupted:

“It’s CLOSING, not dissipating.”

“What’s the difference?!”

Ravi lifted the tablet.

“The anomaly didn’t disappear.

It retreated.”

Tash froze.

“...retreated WHERE?!”

Nord looked straight at him.

“Into you.”

Silence.

Total, suffocating silence.

Tash’s jaw dropped.

“No.

UN-TRUE.

NEGATORY.

DELETE THAT SENTENCE.”

The Station pulsed beneath their feet not wildly, not threateningly, but with a rhythm matching Tash’s pulse.

The console lights dimmed.

Shifted colour.

And every display in the room began synchronizing to *him*.

Ravi whispered:

“Oh god.

Oh god oh god oh”

Hitch:

“It’s imprinting...”

Nord said the words clearly:

“The anomaly chose a new anchor.”

Tash shouted:

“ANCHOR FOR WHAT?!”

Nord exhaled.

“For continuity.”

“I DON’T WANT CONTINUITY!”

“It does.”

Tash stumbled back.

“I, I gave it closure!”

“Yes,” Nord said.

“But that made YOU the only stable paradox left in the Station.”

Ravi read the tablet aloud:

ANOMALY ANCHOR: AUDITOR

NEW PATH: INITIATED

STATUS: MIGRATING

Tash screamed:

“MIGRATING?!”

LIKE A SOFTWARE UPDATE?!”

Nord grabbed him firmly.

“Tash, listen the anomaly needed a host.”

“NO.

NO NO NO NO

I’m not a USB drive for temporal demons!”

Ravi murmured:

“You ended the frozen second.

But you also defined the paradox.”

Hitch added:

“You became the explanation.”

Nord finished:

“And now the anomaly wants to live inside the mind that explained it.”

Tash took three stumbling steps backward.

His voice cracked.

“...I didn’t finish the fluctuation.”

Nord shook her head.

“No.”

“You finished the question.”

Tash whispered:

“...and now it wants the answer.”

The lights flickered.

The Station pulsed one more time a deep, resonant heartbeat that matched Tash’s exactly.

The console displayed its final message:

AUDITOR: PROCEED TO CONTAINMENT

NEXT SEQUENCE REQUIRES YOUR PRESENCE

ANOMALY WILL FOLLOW

Tash whispered:

“...it’s following me?”

Nord whispered back:

“It’s *inside* you now.”

The Control Room felt suddenly colder not because the air changed, but because the *attention* changed.

For the first time, the Station wasn’t looking at the reactor.

It was looking at him.

Tash backed away from the console as if it were alive.

“No.

this cannot be happening.

I FIXED THE FLUCTUATION.

I GAVE IT A CAUSE.

I GAVE IT CLOSURE.”

The Station pulsed beneath his feet once, deep and resonant.

closure is not ending

Nord stepped closer, carefully, the way one might approach a wounded animal.

“Tash... the anomaly didn’t disappear because it never belonged to the reactor.”

Tash’s voice shook.

“What are you saying?”

Ravi adjusted his glasses a ritual motion he made when reality had become too absurd to handle.

“The anomaly wasn’t anchored to the fluctuation.

It was anchored to *you*.

From the beginning.”

Tash blinked.

“Why?! WHY ME?! I was an auditor!

A VERY UNPAID auditor!”

Hitch answered over the speaker:

“You were the contradiction it needed.”

Tash shook his head violently.

“No.

I am not a contradiction.

I am a PERSON.

A REGULAR PERSON with NORMAL LIMBS and NORMAL QUANTUM PROPERTIES.”

Nord placed a hand gently on his arm.

“Tash, look at me.”

“No

because then reality will move when I blink.”

“Tash. Look at me.”

He forced himself to meet her eyes.

She spoke slowly.

“You survived multiple paradox exposures without collapsing.
You remained coherent when confronted with alternate selves.
You restored the Station’s causal structure with a single sentence.”

Tash:

“That’s not talent, that’s BAD LUCK!”

Nord smiled softly.

“Maybe.

But the anomaly sees it as compatibility.”

A new pulse vibrated through the floor lighter this time,
almost... curious.

The consoles flickered.

Every screen in the Control Room displayed the same message:

ANCHOR CONFIRMED

AUDITOR: PROCEED TO CONTAINMENT

WE ARE NOT DONE

Tash screamed:

“I AM DONE.

I AM VERY DONE.

I AM MORE DONE THAN ANY HUMAN HAS EVER
BEEN.”

Ravi glanced nervously at the console.

“The reactor doesn’t think so.”

Tash snapped:

“The reactor can think?!”

Hitch muttered:

“Think?

It can brood.”

Nord stepped between him and the console.

“Tash, breathe.”

“I can’t breathe.

Breathing requires lungs that aren’t hosting anomalies!”

Nord squeezed his shoulder.

“Tash.

If the anomaly chose you, it's because you're the only one who can carry it."

Tash's voice cracked:

"I don't WANT to carry it."

Ravi gently added:

"Anomalies don't ask what people want."

Tash:

"What happens if I refuse?!"

The Station responded instantly:

you collapse

we collapse

timeline collapses

choice collapses

Tash pointed aggressively at the nearest console.

"I am NOT collapsing today!

I have a meeting on Monday!"

Nord:

"Tash, please.

Humour won't break this."

"Yes it will!

Ravi cleared his throat.

"Tash...

the anomaly needs a host because the timeline is stabilizing."

Tash glared at him.

"Translate that into human!"

"When you fixed the frozen second, you reset the clock of the universe here."

"And?"

Ravi swallowed.

"And now the timeline needs somewhere to put the leftover discontinuity."

Tash stared at him.

"Are you calling me a temporal garbage bin?"

Hitch replied:

"Compost bin.

You're helping reality recycle itself."

Tash screamed.

Nord stepped in quickly.

"Tash, listen.

Everything that happened so far every future you saw, every paradox you survived, every impossible moment you made coherent it all told the anomaly: *You are the stable one. You won't break. You will hold.*"

Tash whispered:

"...but what if I DO break?"

Nord's expression softened.

"Then we'll catch you."

Ravi nodded.

Hitch added gently:

"You're not alone."

Tash's throat tightened.

"No version of me survived except this one."

Nord nodded.

"Exactly."

"You're the one that didn't collapse."

"You're the survivor."

Tash stared at the glowing consoles.

The screens dimmed not because they lost power, but because they were listening.

He whispered:

"...what does it want from me now?"

The Station answered:

Follow

go to containment

integrate

Tash flinched.

"INTEGRATE?!"

Integrate WHAT?!"

The Station:

the rest of the moment

Ravi checked his readings.

"Tash, it wants you to carry the unspent tension from the frozen second."

Nord added:

"The anomaly isn't gone.

It's unfinished."

Hitch muttered:

"And it wants you to help finish it."

Tash froze.

"I am not finishing anything.

I am filing a complaint."

The Station pulsed:

complaint acknowledged

completion required

Tash swore under his breath.

Nord squeezed his shoulder.

"You're strong enough."

"No," he whispered.

"I'm not."

"Yes," she said.

"You are."

He swallowed hard.

"What happens in containment?"

Ravi gestured at his tablet.

"It's...where the anomaly and the host synchronize."

Tash nearly fainted.

"SYNCHRONIZE?!"

LIKE A BLUETOOTH DEVICE?!"

Nord shook her head.

"No.

Like a memory correcting itself."

Tash stared at the doorway to the corridor that now glowed faintly blue as if waiting for him specifically.

He whispered:

"...will I survive it?"

Nord looked at him long and hard.

“Yes.”

Ravi nodded.

“Probably.”

Hitch added:

“With some side effects.”

Tash clenched his fists.

“What kind of side effects?”

The Station answered:

you will remember what you have not lived and forget what you have not lost

Tash blinked.

“That is NOT a helpful explanation!”

Nord began guiding him toward the door.

“Tash...you ended the fluctuation’s paradox. Now you must end your own.”

He strained against her hand.

“I don’t want to go.”

She whispered:

“I know.”

Ravi added:

“But if you don’t, the anomaly will go looking for the version of you inside the future.”

Tash froze.

“And I’ll become that incomplete version from the corridor.”

Ravi nodded.

“Yes.”

Tash whispered:

“...I don’t want to become him.”

Nord held him steady.

“Then walk with us.”

Tash took a breath that hurt like cold steel.

“Will it hurt?”

Nord:

“Yes.”

Ravi:

“No.”

Hitch:

“Probably.”

Tash groaned.

“Worst support group EVER.”

Nord nodded toward the glowing hallway.

“Time to go.”

The Station pulsed one last time

auditor

proceed

we follow

Tash stepped forward.

Into the hallway.

Into the anomaly.

Into himself.

The Containment Wing corridor stretched ahead of them long, metallic, silent, lit by a soft bluish glow that didn't seem to come from any lamp or fixture.

Tash whispered:

“...the light is following me.”

Nord replied gently:

“No.

The light is *anticipating* you.”

Ravi, shuffling behind them nervously, muttered:

“Which is arguably worse.”

Hitch chimed in through the ceiling speakers:

“If the hallway starts talking, let me know.

I'll file an official complaint with physics.”

Tash didn't laugh.

He was too busy trying to keep his legs from transforming into noodles.

They stepped into the corridor.

The instant Tash crossed the threshold, the glow brightened not a welcome, but a calibration.

Ravi checked his tablet.

“Oh boy... Tash’s temporal signature just spiked.”

Tash snapped:

“What does THAT mean?”

Nord answered:

“It means the anomaly is syncing to you.

It’s aligning your timeline with its unresolved memory.”

Tash gritted his teeth.

“I’m not a WIFI device!

This is NOT normal behaviour for ANYTHING that isn’t software!”

Ravi looked at him sympathetically.

“Well... you’re not entirely wrong.”

As they moved down the corridor, Tash began to notice something disturbing.

The metal walls smooth, brushed steel were subtly reflective.

Not mirror-clear, but just enough to catch a faint outline.

His outline.

Except not always the *current* him.

On the left wall, his reflection walked with him.

Normal.

Real.

On the right wall, a different version walked:

Older.

Hair thinning.

Eyes tired.

Grabbed by duty.

Tash stared, horrified.

“Nord...

the reflection

that’s NOT me.”

Nord didn’t look.

“Don’t interact with it.”

“But
BUT
that version looks like he’s aged twenty years!”
Ravi muttered:
“That’s one possible future.
Not your future.
Just... a future you’re walking past.”
The older reflected-Tash opened its mouth as if speaking but no
sound emerged.
Tash broke.
“WHY is he talking?!”
Nord pulled him forward.
“Because the anomaly is showing you the consequences you
avoided.”
“But WHY?!”
“Because you need to be coherent before synchronization.”
Tash whispered:
“I don’t WANT to synchronize.”
The anomaly answered through the floor:
you chose coherence
you will finish coherence
Tash screamed:
“I DIDN’T CHOOSE ANYTHING!
I WAS DRAFTED INTO COHERENCE!”
Ravi gently said:
“That’s... yes.
That’s exactly what happened.”
The hallway turned sharply.
And the moment they rounded the corner, Tash froze.
Because this section of the corridor was lined with doors.
Hundreds of them.
Identical.
Unlabelled.
Closed.
Nord stopped him.

“Don’t open any door unless the Station tells you to.”

Tash whispered:

“What’s behind them?”

Ravi’s voice was small.

“Fragmented timelines.”

Tash blinked.

“...of who?”

Nord answered:

“Of you.”

Tash staggered backward.

“Physics doesn’t DO this.

TIME doesn’t do THIS.”

Nord looked at him sympathetically.

“This isn’t time.

This is trauma.

The Station’s trauma.

Your timeline got tangled in it.”

Tash shook violently.

“So I’m walking past rejected versions of my life?!”

Ravi nodded.

“Yes.”

Hitch added:

“And the anomaly wants you to know all the lives you didn’t live still exist as echoes.”

Tash swallowed hard.

“But why show me this?”

Nord answered simply:

“To make sure you choose THIS life.”

Tash whispered:

“...this is coercion.”

“Yes.”

“This is cruelty.”

“Yes.”

“This is existential bullying.”

“That too.”

They kept walking.

The hallway dimmed behind them and brightened ahead in perfect synchronization with his steps.

Eventually they reached a single door marked:

CONTAINMENT – ANCHOR SYNCHRONIZATION

Tash felt his heart drop.

Nord gestured gently.

“This is it.”

Tash shook violently.

“I’m not ready.”

“You don’t have to be.”

“I’m not strong.”

“You don’t have to be.”

“I don’t want to do this.”

“I know.”

Ravi spoke up:

“We’re going in with you.”

Tash blinked.

“You... you ARE?”

Nord nodded.

“Of course.”

“We won’t let the anomaly take you alone.”

Tash’s throat tightened.

“You’ll... stay with me?”

“Every second.”

Tash stared at the door.

“...what happens inside?”

Ravi exhaled.

“Containment is where the anomaly shows you the moment it’s been trying to finish in *your* mind.”

Tash whispered:

“And if I fail?”

Nord looked him straight in the eyes.

“Then we pull you out.”

Tash looked at them all

Nord's calm resolve,
Ravi's quiet terror,
Hitch's dry courage crackling through the intercom.
And he whispered:
"...thank you."
Nord said softly:
"You won't be alone."
He placed his hand on the doorplate.
The plate glowed.
The door slid open
revealing a room unlike anything he had imagined
It was not a cell.
Not a chamber.
Not a lab.
It was a sphere.
A perfectly smooth, seamless sphere with no corners, no seams,
no fixtures.
Just a continuous, curved space bathed in a soft, shimmering
light that felt like standing inside a soap bubble.
Tash whispered:
"...what IS this?"
Ravi answered:
"The Anomaly Interface."
Nord clarified:
"This is where the anomaly speaks not through words but
through memory."
Tash stepped in.
The floor wasn't solid.
It wasn't liquid.
It wasn't gas.
It was something else something that held him like a surface that
had decided it would be a floor just for him.
Tash shivered.
"Did the room just... adjust itself to my weight?"
The anomaly answered:

yes
He nearly jumped.
Ravi whispered:
“It’s trying to put you at ease.”
Tash hissed:
“IT IS FAILING.”
Nord gestured toward the centre of the sphere.
“Stand there.”
Tash walked, trembling.
As soon as he reached the centre the light dimmed.
The surface beneath his feet warmed.
And the walls began to ripple as if something inside them was waking up.
Hitch whispered:
“It’s starting.”
Tash swallowed hard.
“What... is starting?”
Nord stepped beside him.
“The download.”
Tash stared at her.
“The WHAT?!”
But she didn’t answer.
Because the walls lit up slowly like giant eyelids opening.
And then the sphere whispered:
Tash
we must finish the rest of the moment
Tash’s breath caught.
“What moment?”
The sphere pulsed:
the moment that made you the contradiction
the moment that shaped the version of you that survived
Nord stepped closer.
“Tash...
it’s going to show you something you don’t remember.”
Tash whispered:

“...something I didn’t live?”

Ravi corrected:

“Something you DID live.

In another path.

In another future.

In the future that almost replaced you.”

The sphere’s voice deepened:

the moment you must reclaim

Tash trembled.

“What moment?!”

The sphere answered:

the moment YOU froze

He stopped breathing.

Nord whispered:

“Tash...

the anomaly thinks you didn’t just explain indecision.”

“You *share* it.”

The sphere pulsed:

we must finish YOUR second too

Tash’s eyes widened.

“My second

MY second never froze!”

The sphere responded:

not in this timeline

but in the one you survived instead

Tash stumbled.

Ravi grabbed him.

“Tash

whatever happened in that alternate second it made the anomaly choose you.”

The sphere brightened.

The walls dissolved into moving light

And Tash saw...

HIMSELF.

Not the him in the Station.

Not the projection.
Not the older reflections.
A third version.
Standing in a room.
Facing a console.
Facing a decision.
And freezing.
Tash whispered:
“...oh god.”
Nord whispered:
“Yes.”
Ravi whispered:
“This is the second that never existed.”
Hitch:
“The second YOU never finished.”
The sphere pulsed with urgency:
we must finish this moment so you can survive the next
Tash stared at the alternate version of himself paralyzed,
terrified, standing before a choice.
And the sphere said:
Tash
what did you refuse to decide?
The sphere’s light thickened until it felt like liquid.
Tash could barely breathe.
Across the curved walls, the other version of himself flickered
Stiff.
Silent.
Terrified.
A man caught between two decisions and choosing neither.
A man Tash never remembered being.
A man he could have become.
A man who according to the anomaly had shaped his entire
existence.
Tash whispered:
“...why does he look older than me?”

Nord answered quietly:

“Because that version lived longer before the freeze.”

Tash blinked.

“Longer?”

Then how could I forget that life?”

Ravi answered:

“You didn’t forget it.”

Hitch added:

“It never happened.”

Tash shook violently.

“Then why can I SEE it?!”

The anomaly pulsed through the room:

because this moment defined you and moments do not vanish
they imprint

Tash shouted:

“I WAS NOT THERE! THIS NEVER HAPPENED TO ME!”

The anomaly replied:

it happened to a version close enough to become you

Tash staggered backward until he hit the warm, curving wall of
the sphere.

Nord steadied him.

“Tash...the anomaly is showing you the second it thinks you
inherited.”

Ravi nodded nervously.

“It’s giving you the memory of a life that would have been yours
if you had hesitated in that exact way.”

Tash stared at the trembling version of himself on the wall.

“...this is cruel.”

Nord whispered:

“It’s necessary.”

Tash shouted:

“WHY?!”

WHY do I need to see this?!

I ALREADY MADE MY OWN CHOICES!”

The walls rippled.

The sphere's voice deepened:
the fluctuation froze because indecision could not resolve
your paradox persists for the same reason
we cannot complete without finishing your moment too
Tash shook.
"So you're saying... I froze once?"
Nord inhaled.
"In that timeline?"
Yes."
"But not in this one?"
"No."
"But the anomaly doesn't care about that distinction," Ravi said.
"It cares about *patterns*."
Tash stared at the other him the man locked in fear before a
console.
"What was he deciding?" he whispered.
Nord's voice hardened not cold, but steady like steel.
"Let's find out."
The sphere pulsed again.
The scene sharpened.
The alternate Tash stood in a small command bay not nuclear,
not mechanical, but clearly important.
A crisis alarm flashed above him.
A message blinked on his console:
CLOSE THE LOOP?
YES / NO
Tash leaned in.
"What loop?"
What system is this?"
Ravi squinted.
"That's... not the reactor."
That console isn't from this Station."
Hitch said:
"It's from somewhere else."
Somewhere you were never supposed to reach."

Tash whispered:

“...a future?”

Nord nodded.

“Or a path the anomaly considered.”

The alternate Tash reached for the YES button then pulled back.

Reached for the NO button shook his head.

His eyes filled with dread.

He froze, breath held.

Completely paralyzed.

Tash whispered:

“...he couldn’t decide.”

The sphere responded:

yes

he failed the moment and the moment failed him

Tash felt something cold settle behind his ribs.

“What was the decision ABOUT?”

Nord shook her head.

“The anomaly isn’t showing that yet.”

Ravi checked his tablet.

“It’s hiding the context.”

Hitch added:

“Because the context isn’t what matters.

The pattern is.”

Tash whispered:

“...the pattern?”

The anomaly replied:

indecision

fear

abandonment of cause

The alternate Tash trembled harder.

His hands hovered over the console.

Sweat dripped down his face.

Nord leaned in.

“Watch closely.”

The alternate Tash whispered something

Barely audible.

Three words.

Tash leaned forward.

“...what did he say?”

The sphere amplified the audio:

“I don’t know.”

The three words echoed through the sphere.

Echoed in Tash’s skull.

Echoed in the anomaly’s deep pulse.

Ravi whispered:

“Oh god... that’s the same phrase the fluctuation operator whispered.”

Nord turned to Tash.

“Do you understand now?”

Tash swallowed hard.

“No.

Explain it.”

Nord’s voice dropped to a gentle, devastating calm.

“Tash... the anomaly attached itself to the pattern of indecision.”

“You interpreted one man’s frozen second”

“because you shared the same wound.”

Tash shook violently.

“No.

NO

I am not indecisive!”

Ravi winced.

“In this timeline, you’re not.”

Hitch added:

“In that one, you were.”

The sphere rippled again.

The alternate Tash collapsed forward onto the console not dead, not unconscious, but trapped in the recursive feedback loop of a decision he never made.

The message on his screen never changed.

CLOSE THE LOOP?

YES / NO

Tash whispered:

“...he ruined everything.”

Nord shook her head.

“No.

He froze.”

“And freezing,” Ravi whispered,

“is a choice with consequences.”

Tash shouted:

“I WILL NOT BE HIM!”

The anomaly answered instantly:

then finish what he could not

end the indecision

close the loop

The message flashed across every wall:

CLOSE THE LOOP?

YES

NO

The same question that destroyed the alternate Tash stared straight into this Tash.

He staggered backward.

“I DON’T KNOW WHAT THE LOOP IS!”

The sphere responded:

that is not required only the choice is required

Tash’s voice cracked.

“I AM NOT MAKING A BLIND DECISION!

I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHAT I’M AGREEING TO!”

Nord stepped forward.

“You’re not choosing his loop.

You’re choosing YOUR outcome.”

Ravi nodded.

“The anomaly doesn’t need you to fix his world.

It needs you to reject the indecision of that world.”

Hitch added:

“Pick anything

Yes or No.

Just don't freeze."

Tash stared at the walls.

At the trembling alternate him.

At the question that destroyed a life he never lived:

CLOSE THE LOOP?

He whispered:

"...if I choose wrong does that change anything?"

Nord shook her head.

"No."

Ravi whispered:

"It's not about the answer.

It's about the act."

Tash's hands trembled.

"I...

I'm scared."

Nord stepped beside him.

"We know."

He whispered:

"I don't want to become him."

She met his eyes.

"Then choose."

His breath shook.

Seconds stretched.

Time thickened.

The sphere dimmed all around him.

And then

Tash whispered:

"I choose..."

He pressed YES.

The sphere exploded with white light.

The alternate version of him disappeared.

The trembling collapsed.

The console dissolved.

The question vanished.

The anomaly pulsed:
loop closed
moment completed
host stabilized
Tash gasped
He felt something break loose inside him a tension he didn't
know he'd been carrying for years, or lives, or timelines.
Nord grabbed his arm.
"You did it."
Ravi: "You ended the indecision."
Hitch: "You closed your loop."
The sphere glowed warm.
Almost proud.
And the anomaly whispered:
Tash
you survived the moment that never lived
you are the coherent version
you are ready
Tash whispered:
"...ready for what?"
The sphere dimmed.
The next message formed
FINAL SEQUENCE AWAITS
PROCEED TO REACTOR DOME
THE CORE REMEMBERS YOU NOW
Nord inhaled sharply.
Ravi dropped the tablet.
Hitch whispered:
"Oh no."
Tash whispered:
"...the core remembers me?"
Nord nodded.
"Yes."
"WHY?"
She took a breath.

“Because you’re going to finish more than a fluctuation, Tash.”

For a long, heavy moment, no one in the sphere spoke.

The light dimmed, the walls stilled, and the anomaly’s pulse softened into a steady thrum like a heartbeat settling after a long panic.

Tash stood in the centre, his chest heaving, his hands trembling.

Nord stepped closer.

“Tash...

look at me.”

He did barely.

Her voice was steady.

Grounded.

Soft enough to hold him without letting him fall.

“You faced the moment,” she said.

“And you made the choice.

That’s enough.”

Tash shook.

“No,” he whispered.

“It’s not.

The anomaly wants more.”

Ravi checked the tablet hands shaking slightly.

“It’s still syncing.

But the stabilization is real.

You’re aligned with the timeline now.”

Hitch spoke from the overhead speakers, voice low:

“You’re the only fixed point this Station has left.”

Tash swallowed hard.

“That... is NOT comforting.”

Nord placed a hand on his shoulder.

“It’s not meant to be comforting.”

“Then what is it meant to be?”

“Honest.”

The sphere pulsed, almost gently:

Tash

you chose

you completed
you did not collapse
Tash whispered:
“...and now?”
The sphere answered:
now you go to the core
now you finish the process
The door re-opened behind them
Not sliding, but dissolving like mist deciding to stop being there.
The corridor beyond was strangely quiet.
Too quiet.
Nord guided Tash out of the sphere.
Ravi followed, clutching his tablet.
Hitch’s voice crackled overhead:
“Team... the Station’s background noise is changing.”
Tash frowned.
“What do you mean changing?”
Hitch answered:
“It’s...slowing down.”
Ravi stopped walking.
“Slowing down?”
That’s
that’s impossible.
The reactor hum is tied to physics”
“No,” Hitch said calmly.
“It’s not humming with physics anymore.”
Tash’s blood ran cold.
“It’s humming with ME.”
Nord didn’t deny it.
“Tash... the Station is syncing to you now.”
He staggered.
“I didn’t AGREE to that!”
Ravi murmured:
“You don’t have to.
It already decided.”

The hallway lights flickered for a moment not randomly, but in a pattern Tash recognized instantly.

His pulse.

Tash froze.

"...is it copying my heartbeat?"

Nord nodded.

"Yes."

"That is HORRIFYING."

No one argued.

They moved through corridors that no longer felt industrial.

They felt... attentive.

As if the Station had grown ears.

And was using the walls to listen.

Ravi noticed something first.

"Nord... the temperature is rising."

She nodded.

"It's preparing the Dome."

Tash wiped sweat from his face.

"I thought the Dome was always hot."

"Not like this," she said quietly.

"This isn't reactor heat."

"Then what is it?"

"Anticipation."

Tash nearly tripped.

"I don't want a reactor anticipating me."

I am not a season finale."

Ravi murmured:

"You sort of are."

Hitch added:

"You absolutely are."

As they descended a metal staircase, the air grew thicker not heavy, but dense, as if carrying more *time* per cubic meter.

Tash slowed.

"Nord..."

I feel strange."

She turned to him.

“How?”

He searched for words.

“I feel like... like I’ve been here before.”

Ravi frowned.

“But you haven’t.”

Hitch spoke gently:

“That’s the anomaly memory integrating.”

“It’s giving you echoes of paths you never lived.”

Tash rested his hand on the railing.

“Is that why the stairs feel... familiar?”

Nord nodded.

“Yes.”

“And why the walls look like they’ve seen me?”

“Yes.”

“And why I feel like someone is following us but it’s just ME?”

“Also yes.”

Tash looked haunted.

“This is awful.”

Ravi nodded sympathetically.

“I know.”

They reached it sooner than expected.

A massive circular hatch made of weighty steel and reinforced composites the kind designed to stop radiation, explosions, and truth.

Except now, it glowed faint blue.

The anomaly’s colour.

Tash whispered:

“...it’s waiting.”

Nord turned to face him fully.

“Tash.”

He looked up.

“You’re about to see something no one else has ever seen.”

Ravi nodded.

“And no one else ever will. Because no one else could survive the amount of paradox energy you’ve absorbed.”

Hitch spoke:

“We’re right here with you.”

Tash stared at them.

He wanted to run.

He wanted to scream.

He wanted to break the Station open with a crowbar and build a new life out of the rubble.

But instead, he whispered:

“...open it.”

Nord pressed her palm against the hatch.

A soft pulse.

A gentle vibration.

The door unlocked with a sound like a thousand clocks taking a synchronized breath.

It slid apart.

And what lay beyond

Was *not* what Tash expected.

He stepped inside.

And gasped.

The Dome wasn’t glowing blue.

It wasn’t glowing at all.

It was dark.

Silent.

Sleeping.

The reactor core the massive structure of conduits, shielding, and the pool loomed like a mountain in moonlight but without the moon.

Tash stared.

“I thought it would be active.”

Nord shook her head.

“It’s not active.”

Ravi whispered:

“It’s attentive.”

Hitch added:

“It turned everything off so it can hear you.”

Tash’s skin crawled.

“That... is not normal.”

Nord gestured toward the central platform.

“You need to go up.”

He stepped forward.

But on the third step

The Dome lit up.

Not electrically.

But chronologically.

Light erupted from the core not blue, not white, but temporal.

A soft, rippling glow that made the world look like a photograph developing in real time.

Ravi nearly dropped his tablet.

“Oh my god.”

Hitch whispered:

“It remembers him.”

Nord grabbed Tash’s arm.

“Tash listen carefully.”

He turned to her, breath shaking.

She said:

“The core doesn’t see you as an auditor anymore.”

Ravi swallowed.

“It sees you as part of its memory.”

Hitch added:

“It sees you as the witness who finished the moment.”

Tash’s voice cracked:

“I didn’t finish anything.”

Nord squeezed his hand.

“Yes, you did.”

“You finished the indecision.”

Tash trembled.

“So now what does the core want?”

The reactor pulse vibrated gently in the Dome

Not threatening, not chaotic, but unmistakably conscious.
It formed a single line on the nearest console screen:
SHOW US HOW THE NEXT MOMENT MUST UNFOLD
Tash felt the blood drain from his face.
Nord read it out loud.
“Tash...”
Ravi whispered:
“Oh no.”
Hitch muttered:
“We should have expected this.”
Tash shook his head.
“No.
it can’t be asking...”
Nord finished:
“It wants you to choose the Station’s future.”
Tash staggered backward.
“You mean I have to CHOOSE the next timeline?!”
Ravi nodded.
“Yes.”
“AFTER ALL THIS?!”
“Yes.”
“I JUST FINISHED ONE IMPOSSIBLE DECISION!”
“Correct.”
“AND NOW I HAVE TO DO IT AGAIN?!”
Nord stepped toward him.
“Tash
the anomaly ended.”
She placed a hand to his chest.
“What’s left is you.”
The reactor pulse hummed softly behind them.
Listening.
Waiting.
And the core displayed one final message:
WE ARE READY
ARE YOU?

Tash closed his eyes.
Took a shaking breath.
And stepped onto the central platform.

CHAPTER 11

The Auditor's Salvation

The central platform rose beneath Tash's feet smoothly, silently as if the entire Dome were a single, giant muscle responding to his breath.

Nord, Ravi, and Hitch stayed below, forming a triangle of anxious silhouettes at the base of the reactor's sleeping throne.

Tash reached the top.

The Dome lights dimmed.

The core brightened.

Not a glow not radiation but a kind of *awareness*, like the air itself was focusing on him.

Ravi whispered from below:

"Oh god... the core is fully awake."

Nord corrected softly:

"No.

It's listening."

Tash swallowed.

He didn't want something the size of a reactor listening to him.

He barely wanted his boss listening to him.

The console in front of him flickered to life.

A single line appeared:

TASH

DEFINE THE NEXT MOMENT

His voice cracked.

"I don't...

I don't understand."

Nord called up from the floor:

"You don't have to understand it.

You just have to speak clearly.”

Tash stared at the screen.

“I’m supposed to DEFINE reality?”

Ravi shouted:

“Yes

because the anomaly recognized you as the only consistent observer.”

Hitch added:

“You’re the only stable variable the Station trusts.”

Tash nearly screamed.

“I AM NOT STABLE!”

Nord answered calmly:

“You are to the Station.”

The console hummed again, as if impatient.

DEFINE

THE

NEXT

MOMENT

Tash gripped the railing.

“What... what happens if I don’t?”

The Dome vibrated.

A slow, heavy pulse that rattled the very air.

Ravi checked his readings.

“If you don’t define the next moment, the Station defaults to the last defined state.”

“What does THAT mean?!”

Nord answered:

“It returns to the fluctuation second.”

Tash felt his knees weaken.

“No...

no no

I’m not going back there.”

The Station pulsed:

DO NOT FREEZE

Tash shouted at the Dome:

“STOP SAYING THAT!”

CHOOSE

BEFORE THE MOMENT COLLAPSES

He clutched his head.

“I don’t know WHAT TO CHOOSE!”

The core dimmed suddenly then brightened again, pulsing with a strange, rhythmic intensity.

Nord’s voice cut through the rising panic.

“Tash.

Look at me.”

He looked down, gasping.

Nord’s expression was steady, firm, anchoring.

“You think this choice is about time,” she said.

Ravi added:

“You think it’s about physics.”

Hitch said:

“You think it’s about the anomaly.”

Nord shook her head.

“It’s about YOU.”

Tash froze.

“...me?”

“Yes,” Nord said.

“The Station doesn’t want a timeline.

It wants a declaration.”

Tash stared.

“A declaration of WHAT?”

She pointed at the console.

“Of whether you want the Station to exist.”

Silence hit the Dome like a falling beam.

Tash whispered:

“...what?”

Nord spoke gently:

“The Station is asking whether it has the right to continue.”

Tash’s eyes widened.

“You mean the reactor is asking for permission to live?!”

Ravi nodded.

"The anomaly was tied to its trauma.

Now that you closed the trauma, the Station needs a new directive."

Hitch added softly:

"It's asking whether it should keep running... or shut down."

Tash stared at the core.

At the vast, humming structure.

At the impossible machine that bent seconds, froze futures, and pulled him through paradox.

He whispered:

"It wants me to tell it whether it deserves to exist."

The Station pulsed:

YES

OR

NO

DEFINE US

Tash staggered backward.

"that's too much. I am NOT deciding the existence of an entire nuclear facility!"

Nord stepped forward.

"You already did."

Ravi added:

"You survived its paradox."

Hitch said:

"You ended its trauma."

Nord concluded:

"And now the Station believes that only you can decide what comes next."

Tash whispered:

"...I don't WANT that responsibility."

The core pulsed harder.

YOU HAVE IT

YOU MUST CHOOSE

Nord climbed the stairs halfway to him.

"Tash.

This isn't a real yes/no question."

He blinked.

"...what do you mean?"

She pointed at the console.

"It's not asking

'should it exist?'

in a scientific sense."

Ravi nodded.

"It's asking whether you accept what it IS."

Tash frowned.

"And what IS it?"

The Dome dimmed.

The core glowed.

And the reactor answered for itself:

WE HOLD MOMENTS

WE HOLD TRAUMA

WE HOLD FUTURES

WE HOLD YOU

DO YOU ACCEPT US?

The words echoed.

Not in sound in *time*.

Tash trembled.

"I...

I don't know what that means."

Nord came up to the platform, stood beside him.

"It means this," she said quietly:

"The Station is asking whether the paradox it forced on you was worth something."

Tash felt breath tight in his chest.

"Worth what?"

Nord held his gaze.

"Worth continuing."

Silence.

Cold, heavy silence.

Ravi whispered:

"You're not deciding the fate of the world. Just the fate of the Station."

Hitch added:

"And your connection to it."

Tash stared at the console.

At the pulsing words:

DEFINE THE NEXT MOMENT

He whispered:

"Is this another trick?"

Nord shook her head.

"No."

He swallowed.

"Is this another paradox?"

Ravi shook his head.

"No."

Tash whispered:

"...is this another test?"

Nord answered:

"Yes

but it's yours."

The core pulsed gently.

Almost kindly.

WE ARE READY

ARE YOU?

Tash closed his eyes.

For the first time, he wasn't afraid.

He was tired.

Exhausted.

But steady.

He placed a hand on the console.

And whispered:

"...I'm going to choose."

Nord nodded.

Ravi held his breath.

Hitch whispered:

“This is it.”

The Dome waited.

The core glowed.

The Station listened.

Tash exhaled.

And said:

“I choose...”

Tash’s voice trembled as it left him

Not from fear, not from pressure, but from the sheer weight of saying something the universe had been waiting decades to hear.

“I choose..”

The Dome leaned in.

The core brightened.

Time, for a moment, behaved.

Tash inhaled, his chest tightening as if his ribs were trying to hold in an entire timeline.

And he said:

“...for you to continue.”

The Dome didn’t explode.

It didn’t erupt with light.

It didn’t scream, or pulse, or warp.

Instead

It exhaled.

The reactor released a long, low hum like a violin string finally tuned after years of tension.

Ravi whispered from the stairs:

“...oh my god.”

Nord closed her eyes with relief.

Hitch murmured:

“It accepted it.”

The console flickered.

A new line appeared:

ACCEPTANCE RECORDED

DEFINITION COMPLETE

REACTOR IDENTITY: AFFIRMED

Tash blinked.

Identity?

The Station... wanted an identity?

Nord spoke softly:

"Tash...

you gave the Station permission to be what it is."

Tash shook slightly.

"And what IS it?"

The core pulsed.

A gentle light washed across the Dome.

The next message appeared

WE HOLD MOMENTS

WE HOLD FUTURES

WE HOLD TRAUMA

WE HOLD POWER

WE CHOOSE TO HOLD THEM WITH YOU

Tash's breath caught.

"With me'?"

What does that mean?"

Ravi scanned his tablet.

"Oh no.

Oh no, no"

Tash spun toward him.

"DO NOT 'OH NO' AT ME RIGHT NOW, RAVI."

But Ravi looked pale.

"The anomaly is gone," he said.

"But the *bond* isn't."

Tash blinked.

"Bond?"

WHAT bond?"

Hitch answered:

"The one between you and the Station."

Nord stepped forward.

"The anomaly was never trying to consume you, Tash.

It was trying to integrate.”

He froze.

“Integrate...me INTO the Station?”

“No,” she said quietly.

“The Station INTO you.”

Tash nearly toppled backwards.

“NO

ABSOLUTELY NOT.

I am NOT becoming a walking nuclear facility!”

Ravi tried to calm him.

“It’s not physical.

It’s informational.”

Hitch added:

“It’s like you’re now the Station’s external conscience.”

Tash stared at the core.

“You made me your conscience?!”

The Station responded:

YOU COMPLETED OUR MOMENT

YOU DEFINE OUR CONTINUITY

YOU ARE OUR WITNESS

YOU ARE OUR MEMORY

WE WILL NOT EXIST WITHOUT YOU NOW

Tash’s jaw dropped.

“So if I die the Station dies?!”

Nord didn’t hesitate.

“Yes.”

Tash screamed:

“YOU ATTACHED A MULTIBILLION-DOLLAR
FACILITY TO MY LIFE EXPECTANCY?!”

Ravi whispered:

“Technically... yes.”

Hitch added:

“On the bright side, your insurance premiums are going to be insane.”

Tash dragged a hand down his face.

“Why would it do this?!”

The core pulsed.

YOU CLOSED THE LOOP

YOU BROKE THE FREEZE

YOU FINISHED THE MOMENT

YOU CHOSE OUR EXISTENCE

YOU ARE OUR ANCHOR

Tash stumbled back.

“I don’t WANT to be an anchor!”

The Station responded, not with force, but with something almost like a plea:

WE DO

Silence.

Soft.

Cold.

Absolute.

Nord stepped to his side.

Her voice was gentle, but firm:

“Tash... you said the words.

You gave it continuity.

Now continuity needs you.”

He shook.

“So what happens now?”

Ravi gestured helplessly.

“We don’t know.

This has never happened before.”

Tash whispered:

“...I feel sick.”

Nord nodded.

“That’s the integration settling.”

He stared at her.

“Will I...

feel like this forever?”

“No.”

He let out a sigh of relief

“Probably,” she added.

He groaned.

But before he could complain further, the core brightened again.
A new message formed this time slower, more deliberate, as if
the Station were choosing its words with care:

TASH

YOU ARE NOT OUR MASTER
YOU ARE NOT OUR OPERATOR
YOU ARE NOT OUR DRIVER

Tash blinked.

“Then what AM I?”

The Dome responded:

YOU ARE OUR DECISION

A chill ran down his spine.

Nord explained:

“It sees you as the embodied version of the conclusion it spent
decades trying to reach.”

Ravi nodded.

“It thinks you ARE the closure.”

Tash shook violently.

“This is too much.”

Hitch added:

“And the Station isn’t done.”

Tash looked up sharply.

“WHAT do you mean ‘not done’?”

I chose!

I DEFINED!

I accepted!

WHAT MORE DOES IT WANT?!”

The core pulsed

The lights flickered

And the final line appeared:

NEXT:

DEFINE OUR PURPOSE

Tash felt every muscle in his body freeze.

Purpose.

The Station wanted a PURPOSE.

Nord whispered:

"...this is bigger than deciding existence."

Ravi clutched his tablet.

"It wants a mission."

Hitch murmured:

"It wants meaning."

Tash whispered:

"Meaning... for a nuclear reactor."

The core dimmed.

Then flared bright blue.

YES

Tash stepped backward.

"No.

NO.

You cannot ask me this.

I am NOT deciding your PURPOSE!"

The Station answered:

YOU MUST

WE CANNOT CONTINUE WITHOUT PURPOSE

DEFINE US

Nord reached the platform.

"Tash.

This is the real paradox."

He stared at her.

"...what paradox?"

She held his gaze.

"You didn't come here to audit a reactor."

"You came here to explain it to itself."

Ravi whispered:

"And now it wants to know what it should *be* in a future you helped unlock."

Tash whispered:

"I can't do this."

Nord placed a steady hand on his arm.
“Yes,” she said,
“you can.”
Hitch spoke softly:
“Because whether you like it or not,
the Station listens to you
the way a wounded child listens to the one person
who didn’t abandon it.”
Tash turned back to the console.
The words pulsed again:
DEFINE OUR PURPOSE
The Dome fell silent.
So silent that Tash could hear his heartbeat, and the Station
matching it.
He took one shaking breath.
Then another.
And whispered:
“...I’ll give you an answer.”
The lights brightened.
The console steadied.
Nord held her breath.
Ravi’s tablet flickered with anticipation.
Hitch whispered:
“This is the moment.”
Tash leaned over the console.
And said:
“Your purpose is to...”
Tash stared down at the console.
A blank field.
A waiting cursor.
A nuclear reactor expecting meaning the way a child expects a
bedtime story.
Nord stood just below the platform, hands folded, jaw tight ready
to catch him if the moment became too large.

Ravi's tablet was still buzzing with warnings that meant nothing now. Warnings had lost the fight hours ago.

Hitch was silent, which was how you knew he was terrified.

Tash inhaled.

His breath felt like it was being borrowed from a future that hadn't been written yet.

He whispered:

"Your purpose is to..."

Silence stretched soft as dust, heavy as regret.

The reactor Dome leaned in.

The lights softened.

The hum deepened.

Even time seemed to pause, like it wanted to listen carefully to the man who had accidentally become the conscience of a nuclear facility.

Tash closed his eyes.

He thought about everything:

The frozen second.

The alternate him

The fluctuation that never ended.

The futures that flickered in slabs.

The Station's trauma, its indecision, its fear of emptiness.

Its desperate need not to be a monster.

He opened his eyes again.

And spoke:

"...protect the future, not by power, but by understanding it."

The core did not flare.

But the Dome the entire Station shifted.

The air rippled as if the walls themselves exhaled for the first time in decades.

Ravi whispered:

"Oh..."

oh that's good."

Nord nodded once, sharply.

“That’s exactly what it needed.”

Hitch muttered:

“That might actually be the first correct answer we’ve heard all day.”

The console flickered.

New text appeared:

PURPOSE RECEIVED

DEFINITION: ACCEPTED

Tash stared.

“It accepted it?”

Ravi’s tablet pinged.

“It accepted it.”

Nord exhaled in relief.

Hitch let out a low whistle.

“So, Tash...

you just gave meaning to a nuclear reactor.

No big deal.

Totally normal Saturday.”

Tash leaned against the console.

“I didn’t want to.”

Nord smiled softly.

“That’s why it worked.”

He blinked.

“...what?”

“Purpose isn’t born from desire,” she said.

“It’s born from honesty.”

The Station pulsed:

PROTECT THE FUTURE

THROUGH UNDERSTANDING

YES

THIS IS US

But the console did not stop.

The next line emerged slowly carefully as if the reactor were afraid to speak the words out loud.

TASH

WHAT IS YOUR PURPOSE?

He froze.

Nord stiffened.

Ravi took a step back.

Hitch whispered:

“Oh no.

It’s turning the question around.”

Tash shook his head.

“No.

NO.

NO MORE QUESTIONS.

NO MORE PARADOXES.

I’M NOT DEFINING MYSELF FOR A MACHINE.”

The Station pulsed, not aggressively but earnestly.

YOU DEFINED US

DEFINE YOU

WE MUST MATCH

WE CANNOT PROCEED WITHOUT COMPARISON

Nord placed a hand on Tash’s arm.

“You don’t have to give a perfect answer.”

“Yes, I do,” Tash snapped.

“It’s a REACTOR.

Reactors do not appreciate ambiguity!”

Ravi muttered:

“This one does.

Ambiguity is its hobby.”

Hitch added:

“And you’re its favourite.”

Tash hissed:

“HELPFUL.”

The console waited.

The lights dimmed low.

A deep pulse rolled through the Dome not threatening, but...
encouraging.

Tash whispered:

“It wants to know my purpose so it can align with me.”

Nord nodded.

“Yes.”

“I don’t WANT it aligned with me.”

“That isn’t the question.”

He looked up at the core.

“You’re asking because I defined YOUR existence.

Now you want to make sense of MINE.”

The Station pulsed:

YES

Tash closed his eyes.

His breath grew shallow.

Nord stepped closer.

“What you say here,” she whispered,

“will anchor you both.”

He swallowed.

“And if I choose wrong?”

“Then the Station will spend the rest of its life trying to match a lie.”

Tash opened his eyes.

He looked at the console.

At the waiting cursor.

At the impossible question:

WHAT IS YOUR PURPOSE?

He thought about himself.

Not the auditor.

Not the observer.

Not the variable.

Not the survivor.

Just Tash.

A man who fell into a paradox.

And stood back up.

He spoke slowly.

“My purpose is... to prevent harm by helping systems understand themselves before they break.”

The lights surged.

The core pulsed.

Ravi shielded his face.

Nord held her ground.

Hitch whispered:

“Here we go...”

The Dome glowed an impossible shade of blue bright, warm, humming with recognition.

The console displayed:

PURPOSE RECEIVED

MATCH FOUND

ALIGNMENT: COMPLETE

Tash stared.

“...match found?”

Ravi checked the tablet.

“Oh my god.”

Nord inhaled sharply.

“It aligned your purpose with its purpose.”

Hitch muttered:

“It sees you as the human version of itself.”

Tash felt the blood drain from his face.

“NO.

NO.

UNALIGN.

UNDO.

BUTTON.

WHERE IS THE UNDO BUTTON?!”

The Station pulsed softly:

YOU PROTECT FUTURE THROUGH UNDERSTANDING

WE PROTECT FUTURE THROUGH UNDERSTANDING

YOU ARE OUR PURPOSE

WE ARE YOURS

Tash froze.

His voice cracked:

“That sounds like... binding.”

Nord didn't disagree.

"It is."

Ravi whispered:

"You're not its operator.

You're its philosophical twin."

Hitch:

"And emotional anchor."

Tash screamed:

"I DO NOT WANT TO BE A PHILOSOPHICAL TWIN TO
A NUCLEAR PLANT."

The reactor responded:

WE WANT YOU

Silence.

Heavy.

Vast.

Unavoidable.

Tash whispered:

"...what happens now?"

The Dome dimmed not in fear, but in reverence.

A final line appeared:

NOW WE COMPLETE YOU

AND YOU COMPLETE US

THE FINAL MOMENT BEGINS

Nord grabbed his arm.

"We have to move. NOW."

Ravi shouted:

"The reactor is entering a new state!"

Hitch yelled:

"GET HIM DOWN FROM THE PLATFORM!"

But the platform did not move.

It locked.

The air thickened.

The core brightened.

And Tash felt

Not heat.

Not pressure.

Not radiation.

But recognition.

Like the Station was reaching out not to consume him, not to control him, but to finally finish the paradox they had created together.

He whispered:

“...I’m scared.”

Nord called up to him:

“We’re right here!”

Ravi shouted:

“We won’t let you lose yourself!”

Hitch:

“You’re still Tash.

No machine is taking that from you.”

The console pulsed.

The Dome thrummed.

And the Station declared:

ENTER THE FINAL SEQUENCE

THE FUTURE BEGINS WITH YOU

Tash closed his eyes.

And stepped into the light.

CHAPTER 12

The Stationary Departure

Light swallowed him.
Not bright light not the kind that blinds or burns but the
kind that makes shadows irrelevant.
The kind that feels like the inside of a heartbeat.
Tash felt weightless.
Not floating but suspended in meaning.
He tried to open his eyes and found that he didn't need to.
The light *was* sight.
The hum *was* sound.
The Station *was* presence.
And it spoke.
Not through the walls.
Not through the consoles.
Not through the screens.
Directly.
Inside the space behind thought.
Tash
this is not your end this is your arrival
He flinched.
“Wh..
where am I?”
The Station replied:
inside the moment the one we waited for the one you unlocked
He tried to step backward.
There was no backward.
“Nord?”

Ravi?
Hitch?"
He reached blindly for them.
Nothing.
The light answered:
they are outside the moment you are inside because you are the
moment
Tash's chest tightened.
"I'm not anyone's moment.
I'm a person.
A very tired, confused person
who wants to go home"
The light rippled warmly.
you will go home
when the second completes
when our departure is ready
He froze.
"...departure?"
The light pulsed.
yes
"Whose departure?"
ours
Tash swallowed.
"You...
you're shutting down?"
The light answered:
no
we are letting go
He blinked.
"That does NOT clarify anything.
Letting go of WHAT?"
The hum deepened.
of the future we were holding
of the trauma we carried
of the timelines we froze

of the burden we placed on you

He staggered.

“You’re unbinding yourself from me?!”

no

A pause.

Then

we are unbinding YOU from us

His breath caught.

“I...

I don’t understand.”

The Station responded with a pulse that echoed like a mournful sigh:

you were never meant to carry us

we were never meant to keep you

the anomaly forced the bond

but purpose set us free

He blinked violently.

“Free?!

Then why am I here?!

Why did you bring me INTO the light?!”

The Station answered:

because you must witness our ending so that you can begin yours

Tash felt the moment shift, brighten, quiet.

The light vibrated around him like a giant exhale.

Tash

we were built to hold time steady but we held it too tightly we

feared the future creeping in we feared the past collapsing we

feared the present dissolving

Tash whispered:

“You were scared.”

yes

“You froze the fluctuation because you were scared.”

yes

“You froze entire timelines because you were scared.”

yes

Tash felt a strange ache in his chest.
“...and you thought I wasn’t scared?”
The light warmed.
you were frightened but you chose and we did not
Tash whispered:
“And that’s why you needed me.”
yes
He finally understood.
Oridyn Reactor Station wasn’t a monster.
It wasn’t a guardian.
It wasn’t a paradox engine.
It was a creature born to hold time steady and traumatized by
the responsibility.
A machine that had been afraid of the future for thirty years.
Tash whispered:
“...so what happens now?”
The light dimmed slightly.
we release the moment
we release the loop
we release the bond
Tash’s breath caught.
“You’re letting me go?”
yes
“And what happens to YOU?”
The Station paused.
we do not know because this has never been done
but we will not let you be our anchor
we will not trap you in our fear
you gave us purpose
so now we give you freedom
The light pulsed faster not frantic, but determined.
Tash
the Station must depart the timeline
He froze.
“WHAT?!”

we cannot remain
we have held too many futures
we have bent too many seconds
if we stay, paradox will return
Tash panicked.
“you can’t just LEAVE!
You’re a reactor!
A physical structure!
You can’t DEPART like a ship from a harbour!”
The Station whispered:
we can
and we must
because we were never fully in your timeline
we were trapped between seconds
now that you freed the second
we can finally leave
Tash shook.
“Leave WHERE?!”
WHAT does a reactor do after departing TIME?!”
The answer came like a soft, impossible truth:
we dissolve
we unwind
we return our moments to the world
we stop holding what does not belong to us
Tash felt his legs weaken.
“You can’t vanish.
People work here.
People LIVE because of you.”
The light dimmed in sympathy.
we know
we did not choose this fate it was chosen long before us when the
anomaly was born
but you ended the anomaly so now we must end
Tash felt tears forming.
“You can’t just... END.”

The light warmed.

Tash

everything ends

but not everything completes

you helped us complete

He shook violently.

“Why do *I* have to see this?”

Why bring me inside for your... departure?”

The answer was immediate.

because we want you to know

that we leave by choice

not because you chose wrong

not because you failed

not because you broke us

but because you healed the moment and now the moment no longer needs us

Tash stared into the light, shaking.

“...what happens to ME when you depart?”

The Station’s tone softened to something almost parental.

you will live

in a timeline unburdened by us

with your own purpose

your own future

your own time

He swallowed.

“But I’ll remember this.”

yes

“This place.

This pain.

This paradox.”

yes

“This bond.”

yes

He whispered:

“And you’ll be gone.”

The Station pulsed, a soft, aching rhythm:
we will be gone but you will be whole
Tash pressed both palms to the light.

“Is there anything I can do?”

The reactor answered gently:

stay

until we finish departing

then walk out the gate

and do not look back

Tash whispered:

“...will it hurt you?”

no

we are only a moment releasing itself

but it will hurt you

and that is why you must be brave for us

He sobbed once.

Just once.

The light strengthened holding him not like a machine, but like
something that had learned how to let go.

Tash

our anchor

our witness

our mirror

thank you

for giving us a purpose before we ended

The light dimmed

slowly, lovingly

as if the Station were bowing.

A final message formed in the glow:

prepare

the departure begins

Tash whispered into the dissolving brightness:

“I’m here.”

And the Station whispered back:

then so are we

The Dome began to dissolve.
The glow dimmed not fading, but *loosening*.
Like the light itself had stopped holding its breath.
Tash felt the floor shift beneath him.
Not physically.
Chronologically.
The world wavered as if the timeline were a fabric being
unstitched thread by thread.
Nord's voice echoed faintly from outside the chamber.
"Tash!
TASH!
We're still here! Can you hear us?"
He tried to answer.
His voice didn't move.
Sound didn't exist in this half-space.
The Station spoke for him:
he is safe
he is inside the moment
he will return
Tash heard Nord swear under her breath.
Ravi shouting something.
Hitch running a diagnostic.
All of it sounded far away like someone yelling into a dream.
He looked around.
The Reactor Dome the great, vast chamber was dissolving.
Not melting.
Not fading.
Not collapsing.
Unfolding.
Panels unpinned themselves from reality.
Pipes unwound into lines of light.
Steel beams became silhouettes.
Shadows became sketches.
Everything lay halfway between a blueprint and a memory.
Tash whispered:

“...you’re taking yourself apart.”

The Station replied:

no

we are returning the pieces we borrowed

He stared at the dissolving architecture.

“The pipes...

the walls...

the consoles...

they’re flattening.”

they were never fully three-dimensional

“What do you mean?! They’re RIGHT THERE!”

they were projections

anchored by the anomaly

held in place by trauma

kept alive by fear

Tash felt cold.

“You’re saying...

the Station wasn’t real?”

A warm pulse.

we were real

but not complete

not integrated into this timeline

until you chose for us

Tash staggered.

“But now you’re LEAVING the timeline?”

yes

“Why?”

because now we are complete and complete things can end

He swallowed.

“And if I had chosen ‘NO’ earlier?”

If I had said you SHOULDN’T exist?”

The Station pulsed gently.

then we would have collapsed instantly

in pain

in confusion

in shame
your YES gave us peace
your PURPOSE gave us closure
Tash wiped his eyes.
The walls continued to dissolve.
The reactor pool split into layers, like someone peeling apart a
memory to find its origin.
Light poured upward in long, soft streams that evaporated in the
air.
Tash whispered:
“...it’s beautiful.”
thank you
the Station said.
we wanted you to see beauty not fear
He watched as the control rods became lines just lines like
graphite strokes on white paper being slowly erased.
Then the core itself brightened.
Tash felt a pressure in his skull soft, aching like remembering
something he had never lived.
He whispered:
“...what about the people here?
The workers?
The operators?”
The Station answered:
they will remember what matters and forget what harms
“What does that MEAN?”
we are releasing them as well they will wake in the timeline as it
should be not the one we distorted
Tash’s breath shook.
“You’re rewriting their memories.”
only the parts we froze
not the lives they lived
“And me?
Are you rewriting ME?”
The Station paused.

Then:

no

you carry this moment whole

because you are our witness

and witnesses do not forget

Tash felt tears sting his eyes.

“I don’t WANT to be the witness.”

we know

“But you’re making me!”

we cannot change that

but we can honour it

“Honora it HOW?”

by giving you the part of us that will not harm

Tash whispered:

“...what part is that?”

The Dome pulsed a soft, glowing thrum that felt like touching
the surface of warm water.

the part that understands

the part that chooses

the part that forgives itself

Tash clutched his chest.

A warmth spread beneath his ribs not heat, not radiation, but
clarity.

“It feels like...

like something is easing.”

yes

“The guilt

the fear

the pressure

it’s lifting.”

yes

“You’re...

you’re taking the trauma with you.”

yes

The platform beneath him trembled gently as the final layers of the Dome peeled outward like petals.

He could see Nord, Ravi, and Hitch now standing just outside the dissolving structure.

Nord looked horrified and determined.

Ravi was shaking.

Hitch was trying desperately to look brave.

Tash lifted a hand to them.

They couldn't reach him.

Not yet.

The Station whispered:

Tash

this is the last moment we share

He whispered back:

"...thank you."

The glow brightened.

no

thank you

"Will I...

ever see you again?"

A long pause.

no

Tash's throat tightened.

"Then...

goodbye."

The Station pulsed:

not goodbye

just release

And then with a sound like a sigh echoing backward through time the core dissolved completely.

The glow collapsed inward.

The walls unravelled.

The final beams vanished like chalk wiped from a board.

And Tash fell

Not far, not dangerously but like a man stepping down from a moment too heavy to hold.

He landed outside the dissolving Dome.

Nord caught him before he hit the floor.

"It's okay," she whispered.

"We've got you."

Ravi knelt beside them.

Hitch hovered over the intercom.

Tash trembled.

"It's gone," he whispered.

"It's really gone."

Nord nodded.

"Yes."

"What...

what happens now?"

A deep, impossible quiet fell over the station.

Not the absence of sound.

The absence of a presence.

Ravi looked around.

"The reactor isn't humming."

Hitch whispered:

"It's not anything."

They all stared at the empty space where the Dome had been.

Just open air.

Concrete.

Dust.

No glow.

No core.

No structure.

The Station was gone.

Tash whispered:

"...it departed."

Nord squeezed his hand.

"Yes."

He swallowed.

“Did...
did the world change?”
Ravi checked his tablet.
“No anomalies.
No distortions.
No timeline fractures.”
Hitch added:
“Just... quiet.”
Tash exhaled.
For the first time
the very first time
the Station wasn’t pulling at him.
He felt...
Light.
Small.
Human.
Nord helped him stand.
She held him upright as if the world had shifted weight from the
Station onto her shoulders now.
Tash whispered:
“...is it over?”
Nord nodded.
“Yes.
This part is over.”
“But not everything?”
“No.”
“The reactor is gone.”
“Yes.”
“But the paradox...
the memories...
the bond...”
She met his eyes.
“They’re yours now.”
He nodded slowly.
The ache was gone.

The fear had dissolved.
The burden had softened into something else
Something he could hold.
The Station's last words echoed gently in him:
not goodbye
just release
He whispered into the empty Dome:
"Goodbye."
And the silence accepted it.
The Dome was gone.
Not destroyed that would have left rubble, heat, twisted metal,
the signatures of violence and entropy.
No.
This was a clean absence.
A subtraction.
A neat rectangle of reality where something very heavy had
simply stopped being part of the world.
Tash stood at the edge of the empty pit, breathing slowly,
deliberately, as if matching the rhythm of a heart that no longer
existed.
Nord stayed beside him, steady as a pillar.
Ravi hovered with the tablet clutched to his chest.
Hitch whispered into the intercom, because silence had suddenly
grown too loud.
Tash exhaled.
"It's strange," he said.
"My body remembers the weight...
but the moment feels clean."
Nord nodded.
"Trauma leaves an imprint.
Closure erases the pressure, but not the lesson."
He stared at the empty space.
"I thought it would feel like loss."
"Does it?"
He thought for a long moment.

“...no,” he said softly.

“It feels like... release.”

Nord smiled, faintly.

“That was the Station’s gift to you.”

Ravi looked up, eyes wide.

“Tash...

are you *absolutely sure* it’s gone?”

Tash nodded.

“Yes.”

Hitch asked over the speaker:

“How can you tell?”

Tash placed a hand over his heart.

“It’s quiet in here,” he said.

“For the first time since I walked into this place.”

They didn’t leave immediately.

They couldn’t.

Some part of their minds still expected alarms, or time reversals,
or the fluctuation image flickering back through existence.

But nothing happened.

The lights were ordinary.

The corridor was ordinary.

Even the air felt... earthly.

Finite.

Obedient to mundane physics again.

Ravi broke the quiet.

“We need to file a report,” he said shakily.

Nord raised an eyebrow.

“A report that says what, exactly?”

He hesitated.

“That the reactor... *ceased*?”

Hitch muttered:

“You can’t write ‘the building vanished due to temporal self-resolution’ in a report.

Even I know that.”

Nord folded her arms.

“We’ll say this:
Unexpected operational anomaly.
Core state stabilized.
Restricted access required.
Investigation ongoing.”
Ravi scribbled this down.
“That sounds... normal.”
“Good,” Nord said.
“Normal is what we need.”
Tash didn’t speak.
He was staring at the dust.
The empty concrete.
The place where too many timelines had once overlapped.
Nord touched his shoulder.
“You okay?”
He nodded.
A little too slowly.
“I will be.”
Ravi looked uneasy.
“What...
what did it feel like?
Inside that moment?”
Tash searched for words.
“It felt like listening to something that had wanted to speak for
thirty years.”
Hitch whispered:
“God.”
Nord waited.
Tash added:
“And when it finally spoke... it apologized.”
Nord inhaled.
Ravi’s eyes softened.
Hitch whispered:
“...it knew.”
Tash nodded.

“Yes.
It knew everything.”
He finally turned away from the pit.
“I want to leave,” he said quietly.
“Let’s... go.”
The walk back to the gate felt longer than the entire nightmare of the reactor.
The absence followed them a gentle, pulling quiet like the last breath of a song trying to remember itself.
Halfway down the main corridor, Tash stopped.
Nord halted beside him.
“What is it?”
He swallowed.
“Something’s different.”
Ravi panicked.
“Different HOW? Is it coming back?!”
Tash shook his head.
“No.
Not outside.”
He pressed a hand to his chest.
“Inside.”
Nord watched him carefully.
“What do you feel?”
He hesitated.
“...potential.”
Ravi blinked.
“Potential?”
As in... energy?”
Hitch added:
“Potential as in ‘do not explode, please?’”
Tash smiled a small, tired, genuine smile.
“No,” he said softly.
“Potential as in... I see paths.”
Nord stepped closer.
“Paths?”

He nodded.

"I see the way decisions branch.

I can feel when a moment hesitates.

Like...

like time is slightly softer around choices."

Ravi stared.

"You're saying the anomaly left something in you?"

Tash exhaled slowly.

"It didn't leave a piece of itself."

"What did it leave?" Ravi asked.

Tash met his gaze.

"Understanding."

Nord's eyes widened.

"It gave you insight."

"Yes."

Hitch whispered:

"Like a... translation of the moment?"

Tash nodded.

"I can *feel* when a moment wants to break... and when it wants to hold."

Ravi looked down the corridor, then back at Tash.

"...can you feel the next moment now?"

Tash closed his eyes.

For a second, he focused not on reality but on the rhythm beneath it.

The hum of time, soft and pliable, like a fabric still warm from being woven.

He opened his eyes.

"It's calm," he said.

"Completely calm.

The Station left nothing dangerous behind."

Nord breathed out.

"Good."

They resumed walking.

But Tash moved differently now slower, steadier, as if pacing reality instead of merely existing in it.

The sun outside was warm.

Normal.

Pure.

It didn't flicker.

It didn't distort.

It didn't behave like a memory being replayed.

It was simply sunlight.

Tash squinted into it.

"...I thought it would feel strange to see the world again."

Nord smiled.

"That's because you expected the world to change."

"Didn't it?"

Ravi shook his head.

"You changed, Tash.

Not the world."

Hitch added:

"The world has no idea what just happened.

And honestly?

Maybe that's for the best."

They walked to the gate.

The guard on duty frowned at them.

"You're done early today," he said casually.

"Everything okay inside?"

Tash, Nord, Ravi, and Hitch exchanged looks.

The guard didn't know.

He had no idea the Dome had ever existed.

That time had folded.

That a reactor had apologized.

The Station had erased itself gently, cleanly, without disturbing the people who lived outside its trauma.

Tash forced a calm smile.

"Everything's fine," he said.

The guard nodded and opened the gate.

As Tash stepped through, he felt a whisper faint, impossible
brush the back of his mind.

goodbye

anchor

He froze.

Nord looked back at him.

“Tash?”

He swallowed.

“...just the wind.”

He walked through.

The gate swung shut.

A soft metallic click.

The sound of an ending, final and small and real.

Tash did not look back.

He remembered the Station’s last request:

walk out the gate and do not look back

He obeyed.

For the first time in days, he felt time move in one direction
without hesitation.

He whispered:

“I’m free.”

Nord smiled at him.

“Not free, Tash.

Released.”

He nodded.

“Yes.

Released.”

They began the long walk to the car.

Behind them, there was no glow.

No hum.

No paradox.

Just a quiet facility full of people who would wake with one less
weight in their minds.

Tash looked up at the sky.

The world felt wide again.

Open.

Possible.

He stepped forward.

And time stepped with him.

CHAPTER 13

The Platform That Remained

The car hummed along the empty access road.
No paradox in the engine.

No hesitation in the tires.

No timeline distortion bending the horizon.

Just a road.

A car.

Three exhausted scientists.

And one man carrying something the world would never believe.

Tash sat in the back seat, forehead resting against the window.

Fields passed.

Power lines flickered by.

A tractor crawled in the distance.

Everything was painfully normal.

And that normality hit harder than any paradox.

Ravi cleared his throat.

“So...

we’ll file a standard evacuation report,” he said.

“No mention of anomalies.

No mention of temporal inconsistencies.

Just: structural instability, restricted access, investigation pending..”

Nord nodded.

“That’s the safest route.”

Hitch, from the passenger seat, muttered:

“And by ‘safest,’ we mean ‘least likely to get us thrown into a psychiatric evaluation.’”

Tash didn’t react.

He was watching a patch of sunlight on the glass.
It moved at the car's pace, stretching and shrinking with every turn.
Like the light was trying to keep up with him but wasn't sure how.
Nord glanced at him in the rear view mirror.
"You okay?"
Tash blinked.
"Hm?"
Yeah."
"You sure?"
He nodded without conviction.
"Just... tired."
That was the understatement of multiple timelines.
Ten minutes later, THE FIRST AFTERSHOCK hit.
Not violently
no burst of light,
no temporal dissonance
but subtly.
A shift.
A whisper.
A shiver across the fabric of thought.
Nord saw it first.
"Tash.
What just happened?"
He pressed his palm to his forehead.
"I...
I don't know."
Ravi turned halfway in his seat.
"Was it the anomaly?"
"No," Tash murmured.
"It wasn't the anomaly."
Hitch looked worried.
"Then what was it?"
Tash searched for the right words.

"It felt like... an option."

Nord frowned.

"Option?"

"Yes.

A path."

He exhaled shakily.

"Like the universe tugged at me for a moment showed me a branching point and then let go."

Ravi's eyes widened.

"Oh no."

Tash looked at him sharply.

"What do you mean, 'oh no'?"

"I mean," Ravi said slowly,

"if the Station left you with 'understanding' instead of power then you might be perceiving local decision gradients."

Hitch translated:

"You can feel when a moment is about to become important."

Tash stared.

"I DO NOT WANT THAT FEATURE."

Nord gave a sympathetic half-smile.

"Unfortunately...you don't get to opt out."

He groaned.

"Can someone uninstall this?"

Hitch shrugged.

"Ask the reactor.

Oh wait..."

Ravi shot him a glare.

"Too soon."

Tash sighed and leaned back.

"Do you think it'll fade?"

Nord didn't answer immediately.

Finally:

"It might.

Or it might become less intrusive.

But Tash...

it's not a curse."

He stared out the window.

"It feels like one."

"No," she said quietly.

"It's a responsibility."

He closed his eyes.

That was worse.

Much worse.

They stopped at a roadside café.

A small place with plastic chairs, metal tables, and a bored man stirring tea behind a counter.

A sign flickered outside:

STEAM & SIPS

Tash stepped out of the car slowly, like the ground might shift under his feet.

Nothing did.

He sat at a table.

Nord ordered tea.

Ravi got a sandwich.

Hitch bought a biscuit packet because Hitch believed biscuits could solve emotional crises.

Tash just sat there, watching steam rise from cups on nearby tables.

Steam.

It looked harmless.

Gentle.

Completely unlike the steam from a reactor.

His chest tightened.

Nord placed a cup in front of him.

"Drink," she said.

He took a sip.

It burned hot, sharp the kind of burn that reminded a person they were alive.

Tash whispered:

"I don't know who I am anymore."

Nord sat beside him.

"You're the same person," she said.

"Just carrying something new."

Ravi nodded.

"The Station didn't rewrite you."

Hitch added:

"It didn't even upgrade you."

Tash glared.

"Thanks."

"No, I mean it," Hitch said seriously.

"It didn't make you superhuman.

It didn't give you abilities.

It didn't give you control.

It gave you...

insight."

Tash stirred his tea.

"And what am I supposed to do with insight into the fabric of choice?"

Nord leaned back.

"Maybe nothing."

He looked up.

"...nothing?"

"Yes," she said.

"Maybe you don't have to *do* anything.

Maybe it's just something you live with.

Like memory.

Like pain.

Like understanding."

Ravi nodded.

"The Station didn't want to burden you.

It wanted to leave you whole."

Tash whispered:

"But I don't FEEL whole."

Nord placed a hand on his shoulder.

"You're still integrating."

He sighed.

"What if I never do?"

"Then," Nord said softly, "we'll help you learn to live with the pieces."

THE SECOND AFTRESHOCK hit him mid-sip.

The world dimmed for half a second not externally, but inside his awareness.

A sense of "something near choosing."

Tash nearly dropped his tea.

Nord steadied his hand instantly.

"What do you see?" she whispered.

He swallowed.

"...that couple over there."

Ravi turned.

"You mean the man with the sunglasses and the woman with the red scarf?"

"Yes."

"What about them?" Hitch asked.

Tash lowered his voice.

"Something in their life is about to change."

Nord frowned.

"You mean here? Now?"

He shook his head.

"No.

Not now."

"When?"

"In about a month."

Ravi blinked.

"How do you *know* that?"

Tash tapped his temple.

"Because whatever they decide today will branch into something large a month from now."

Nord looked at him carefully.

"And do you know WHAT decision?"

"No," he said.

"I'm not psychic.
I don't see the decision.
I only feel the... weight."
Ravi muttered:
"Weighted-probability decision perception.
Fascinating."
Hitch added:
"Terrifying.
Both can be true."
Tash pressed a hand to his forehead.
"I don't want to know strangers' future turbulence.
I don't want to feel the world making choices."
Nord gave him the gentlest look she had offered yet.
"You won't always feel it so strongly."
He looked up.
"Promise?"
She hesitated.
"...I can't promise that."
Tash groaned.
Tea sloshed in his cup.
As they walked back toward the car, the world flickered again.
Subtly.
Softly.
A decision branching somewhere nearby.
Tash whispered:
"They aren't anomalies.
They're...
moments."
Nord raised an eyebrow.
"Moments?"
"Yes.
The world is full of moments that almost break.
Moments that bend.
Moments that freeze."
Ravi whispered:

"And you can feel them now."

Tash nodded slowly.

"The Station didn't give me its power.

It gave me its sensitivity."

Hitch added:

"You're... tuned."

Tash stared at the ground.

"...and there's no switch to turn it off."

Nord placed a hand on his shoulder.

"No.

But there's time to learn it."

He closed his eyes.

Time.

He'd spent so long inside broken time

that the simplicity of real time

felt like a kindness

he didn't deserve.

But he opened his eyes.

He stepped forward.

And the road felt real.

Solid.

Finite.

Possible.

He whispered:

"...I can live with this."

Nord smiled.

"That's all the Station wanted."

And they got into the car.

And drove toward the future the Station had finally let go of.

The drive back to the city took two hours.

Two hours of radio static, patchy sunlight, and the strange new sensation that reality now breathed differently around Tash.

Not louder.

Not sharper.

Not supernatural.

Just...

aware.

He watched the landscape roll by fields, trees, broken milestones,
the occasional motorbike roaring between cars.

Before the Station, this would have been noise.

Now it all felt like signals.

Soft signals.

Background murmurs of choice.

Every time someone changed lanes he felt a faint tug.

Every time two cars approached an intersection at imperfect
angles he felt a hesitation in the timeline.

Every time a bird swooped low he sensed the small branching
moment

when the universe briefly wondered:

Left?

Right?

Up?

Down?

He didn't see the futures.

He didn't see outcomes.

He only felt the tilt.

The tremor.

The weight.

A decision was a kind of gravity now and he had been taught to
feel it.

Ravi glanced back at him nervously.

"You okay back there?"

Tash forced a small smile.

"Yeah.

It's just... the world is louder than I remember."

Hitch muttered:

"Oh fantastic.

We broke him into a philosopher."

Nord shot Hitch a look.

"To be fair," she said,

“the Station did that.
We just witnessed it.”
Tash closed his eyes.
He didn’t want to be a philosopher.
He wanted to be a man who filed reports and drank tea and didn’t
feel metaphysical turbulence from passing bicycles.
But the Station had chosen otherwise.
Or
worse
He had chosen otherwise when he accepted its existence and
gave it purpose.
He rubbed his temples.
“I can’t tell what’s important anymore.”
Nord responded calmly:
“You’re not supposed to.”
Ravi frowned.
“Wait, what?
He literally senses critical decision-moments.”
“Yes,” Nord said.
“Critical for THEM.
Not for him.”
Tash opened his eyes.
“What do you mean?”
Nord turned halfway in her seat to face him.
“You’re sensing when the timeline around you is about to ‘tilt.’
But that doesn’t mean the tilt is yours to act on.”
Ravi added:
“It’s just... ambient meta-perception.”
Hitch translated:
“You’re picking up timeline weather.”
Tash stared.
“Timeline weather.”
“Yes,” Hitch repeated.
“Like humidity.
Or air pressure.

Except it's choice-pressure."

Tash groaned.

"Oh good.

I'm a walking barometer for existential dread."

Nord smiled.

"It'll ease.

You'll adjust."

"Or it'll drive me insane."

"No," she said gently.

"You won't go insane."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because the Station didn't leave you unanchored.

It left you... steady."

He frowned.

"Steady how?"

She tapped her own chest.

"You finished YOUR moment.

That's why the insight doesn't overwhelm you."

He didn't believe that.

Not quite.

But he wanted to.

Two hours later, the skyline appeared.

Glass.

Concrete.

Traffic.

Billboards screaming about loans and burgers and things that didn't matter.

Normal life.

Safe life.

Finite life.

Tash felt his throat tighten.

He wasn't returning as the man who had arrived.

He had entered a Station and walked out of a moment.

They pulled into a small departmental guesthouse.

Nord parked the car and turned to him.

“Get some rest.”

Ravi handed him a clean shirt.

“You look like someone sent you through a photocopier.”

Hitch added:

“On economy settings.”

Tash cracked a tired smile.

“Thanks... I think.”

Nord stepped closer.

“We’ll check in on you tomorrow.

Take the night to... settle.”

He nodded.

“Okay.”

She placed a hand on his shoulder.

“And Tash?”

He looked up.

“You did everything right.”

He swallowed hard.

“...thanks.”

They left.

And he was alone.

Tash entered the guesthouse room.

Simple.

Brown curtains.

A desk.

A bed with sheets that smelled faintly of detergent and the ghosts of bored travellers.

He locked the door.

Stood still.

And waited.

Nothing shifted.

No tremor in the timeline.

No glow.

No branching.

Just silence.

He sat on the bed.

The bed did not breathe.
The room did not flicker.
The world outside did not warp.
He exhaled.
A normal moment.
A fragile blessing.
Then
A soft whisper behind his thoughts:
this is safe
He stiffened.
It wasn't the Station's voice.
It wasn't any voice.
It was the faint echo of the understanding it left him with.
Not intrusive.
Not powerful.
Just a nudge.
A calibration.
He breathed again.
"...thank you," he whispered.
He went to the mirror in the bathroom.
He expected to see something different.
Light in his eyes.
A glow in his skin.
A distortion in the glass.
Instead
He saw himself.
No older.
No younger.
No cracked reflection trying to speak from another timeline.
Just Tash.
Ordinary.
Alive.
Human.
But he noticed something subtle.
His posture was different.

Straighter.
Less collapsed.
Less afraid.
He whispered to his reflection:
"You survived."
The reflection answered by existing.
And for once that was enough.
He splashed water on his face.
Looked up.
And *felt* it.
Not a person outside.
Not a driver downstairs.
Not a stranger walking past.
Himself.
A branching moment.
A tilt.
A tremor.
Something in his own life approaching a choice-point.
He gripped the sink.
"Not now," he whispered.
"Please.
Not yet."
The tremor didn't stop.
But it didn't intensify either.
It just hovered.
A reminder.
A promise.
A warning.
He whispered:
"...is this the Station's goodbye?"
And deep inside not the Station's voice but the remnant of clarity
it left him:
the choice is coming
your choice
not ours

He steadied himself.
“What choice?”
Silence.
Of course.
The Station wasn’t here to interpret anymore.
Only he remained.
He dried his hands.
Stepped back into the room.
The tremor followed soft, patient, like an unopened envelope
waiting on a desk.
He sat.
Closed his eyes.
And this time, for the first time, he didn’t resist the sensation.
He *listened*.
And he understood:
The Station hadn’t given him foresight.
It had given him honesty.
The ability to feel when the truth mattered.
And something in his life something essential was nearing a
moment where truth would matter.
He whispered:
“...fine.”
He opened his eyes.
“I’ll face it.”
The tremor faded.
And for a few minutes time behaved.
Tash lay on the bed.
The sheets were warm.
The city hummed outside.
Cars honked.
Someone slammed a door.
A TV played a sitcom next door.
Life.
Messy.
Finite.

Completely unaffected by a reactor that dissolved itself out of the world.

He exhaled into the ordinary air.

Then

just as sleep approached
he felt one more whisper.

A very faint one.

Not a message.

Not a warning.

Not a timeline.

Just a feeling.

A farewell.

Warm.

Gentle.

Slow.

Like a hand resting briefly on his shoulder.

And Tash whispered:

“...goodbye.”

He closed his eyes.

And the night held him in the first safe moment he had owned in a very long time.

Tash slept.

And for the first time in days he did not dream of futures.

No blue glow.

No frozen operators.

No blind hallways.

No echoing loops of indecision.

He slept the way people are meant to sleep: fully, simply, unremarkably.

But when dawn arrived, light filtering through the curtains, birds singing too enthusiastically for his taste, he woke with a feeling that something had rearranged itself inside him.

Not broken.

Not missing.

Just... shifted.

Aligned.

He sat up slowly, rubbing his eyes.

The world waited politely.

Downstairs, the guesthouse cafeteria was loud enough to pass as a mild riot.

Workers arguing about politics.

Students complaining about exams.

Someone loudly telling the cashier
that tea should *never* cost that much.

Normal chaos.

Beautiful chaos.

Tash filled a plate with toast and something pretending to be scrambled eggs.

He sat near a window.

And almost instantly

He felt it.

Not a tremor.

Not a tilt.

Not a cosmic shiver.

Just a nudge.

A soft emphasis on a moment nearby.

He turned his head.

At the next table, a man in a blue shirt was staring at his phone.

Something about him... felt heavy.

Weighted.

Tash didn't see his future.

He didn't see his decision.

He simply *felt* that something important was perched on the edge of the man's morning.

Nord walked in and spotted him.

She sat beside him with a cup of coffee.

"Morning."

"Morning."

"You look better."

"I feel... lighter. Heavier in some ways, but lighter."

She nodded.

"That's how it goes."

He gestured subtly to the man in the blue shirt.

"You feel that?"

Nord glanced over.

"...ah."

"So it's not just me?"

"No," she said softly.

"But you feel it more strongly."

Tash frowned.

"What's happening there?"

Nord shrugged.

"That's not ours to know."

She sipped her coffee.

"Or ours to resolve."

Tash's jaw tightened.

"You're saying I shouldn't interfere?"

"Yes," she said.

"But I'm also saying that you can care without fixing."

Tash stared at the man.

He looked like someone bracing for a message he knew wouldn't be good.

Tash whispered:

"I want to help."

Nord placed a hand on his arm.

"You already do."

He looked at her sharply.

"How?"

She smiled.

"By understanding that not every tremor is a responsibility."

He exhaled slowly.

The weight eased.

He turned back to his food.

The eggs still tasted like disappointment, but somehow more tolerable than usual.

His phone buzzed.
A message from Ravi:
“Call when awake.
Some... updates.”
Tash showed it to Nord.
“What does he mean, updates?”
Nord’s expression shifted slightly.
“Ravi means anything from
‘I discovered something concerning’ to ‘I accidentally spilled tea
on the only evidence that still exists.’”
Tash sighed.
“I’ll call him upstairs.”
Nord nodded.
“I’ll wait here.”
He retreated to his room.
Closed the door.
Dialled Ravi.
Ravi picked up instantly.
“Tash!
Okay so
something weird is happening with my data logs.”
Tash rubbed his forehead.
“Define weird.”
“You know how I recorded everything inside the Station?
Every reading?
Every flux?
Every waveform?”
“Yes.”
“Well...it’s gone.”
Tash froze.
“What do you mean gone?”
“I mean the files are still there,” Ravi said breathlessly.
“But the CONTENTS aren’t.”
A chill crawled down Tash’s spine.
“What’s in them?”

"Static," Ravi whispered.
"Just static.
Like... an erased channel.
Blank noise."
Tash sat on the bed.
The silence of the Station.
Its farewell.
"Ravi," he said softly,
"the Station erased itself."
"No no this is different!"
"How?"
Ravi swallowed audibly.
"The logs aren't messy.
They're not corrupted.
They're not fragmented."
"Then what are they?"
"...perfect."
Tash blinked.
"Perfect static? What does that even.."
"It means they're not damaged," Ravi said.
"They're overwritten."
A shaky breath.
"Deliberately."
Tash felt a deep, cold understanding form in his chest.
"The Station didn't want to leave evidence."
"It's not just evidence," Ravi whispered.
"It's the *shape* of the erasure."
"What shape?"
"A loop."
Tash's breath caught.
"No."
"Yes," Ravi insisted.
"A perfect self-closing loop.
Like the logs never began."
Tash closed his eyes.

A self-contained second.

A non-event.

A moment erased from time

the way the fluctuation had been frozen.

Ravi whispered:

“Tash... the Station didn’t just leave.

It cleaned its footprints.”

He opened his eyes.

“I need to tell Nord.”

“Wait one more thing.”

Ravi’s voice lowered.

You could hear the fear curling at its edges.

“When I scanned the metadata, there was one fragment left.”

“What fragment?”

“A string.”

“What string?”

Ravi hesitated.

“It says... ‘anchor lost.’”

Silence slammed into the room.

Tash’s throat went dry.

Ravi whispered:

“I think the Station was telling itself that it no longer had an anchor to hold.”

Tash swallowed.

“That was the point,” he whispered.

“It freed itself.”

Ravi exhaled shakily.

“Yeah.”

Tash nodded.

“Thanks, Ravi.

Get some rest.”

“You too.”

He hung up.

The room felt colder.

He looked at his hands.

He wasn't glowing.
He wasn't humming.
He wasn't unravelling.
He was just Tash.
But with a new kind of loneliness sitting under his ribs.
He whispered:
"Anchor lost..."
The Station had not said goodbye.
It had said:
you don't need to hold us anymore and we don't need to hold you
He placed the phone on the bed.
And for the first time, he understood the full consequence:
He was the only witness of something that never existed.
That was the paradox the Station left him with.
A story without proof.
A trauma without injury.
A bond without evidence.
A goodbye without remains.
And a purpose
that now belonged entirely to him.
Tash stepped onto the small balcony.
The city sprawled beneath.
Horns.
Vendors.
Office workers rushing to be late.
Life.
Messy, vibrant, uninterested in cosmic anomalies.
As he watched, a pigeon landed on the railing.
It tilted its head.
Looked at him with the suspicious scrutiny only pigeons can
manage.
Tash felt the slightest tremor.
A tiny decision.
Whether the pigeon would stay or fly.
He whispered:

“You don’t need to decide for me.”
The tremor faded.
The pigeon blinked.
Then flew away.
He smiled.
Not because it meant anything grand.
But because it meant he could live with this.
He leaned against the railing, the morning warm on his face.
And he felt it.
The same tremor as the night before.
Soft.
Patient.
Waiting.
Something in his own life was approaching.
Something important.
Something he would have to choose.
He whispered:
“...I know you’re there.”
His chest loosened.
The tremor eased.
He didn’t know the decision.
But he knew it would matter.
And for the first time since he walked out of the Station he wasn’t afraid of that.
He whispered into the morning air:
“I’ll be ready.”
The city moved with its usual indifference traffic signals blinking in their lazy hierarchies, buses exhaling smoke like tired dragons, motorcycles weaving with the choreography of barely-contained impatience.
Tash walked through it all like a man returning from a war no one remembered.
No one stared.
No one paused.
No one sensed the wound or the healing.

The world went on.
He tried to walk normally.
Step, step, step
but his awareness had shifted.
He noticed the slight hesitation as a cab driver debated cutting
someone off.
The split-second tension when a child let go of her mother's hand
near the curb.
The uncertain rhythm of a man typing and deleting a message
repeatedly as he leaned against a lamppost.
Everywhere, there were tremors.
Tiny ones.
Soft ones.
Natural ones.
The tremors of lived life choices nudging the air around them.
Before the Station, he would have walked past all of them.
Now he felt them the way a person feels the change in air
pressure before a storm.
Not threatening, but meaningful.
Nord walked beside him, matching his pace.
"Adjusting?" she asked.
"Yes," he said.
"Mostly."
She nodded.
"You'll get better at tuning it out."
He glanced at her.
"Is that what you do?"
"Yes," she said.
"I learned to feel only the moments that concern me.
And let the rest pass like weather."
He arched an eyebrow.
"So you've had tremor-sense before?"
"No," she said.
"But everyone who works close to anomalies learns to feel the
world differently."

Tash exhaled.

"Is that why you weren't afraid inside the Station?"

Nord smiled faintly.

"Oh, I was terrified," she admitted.

"But fear is useful.

It tells you where you are."

He considered that.

"Then what was the Station's fear?"

Nord tilted her head.

"The same as any trapped thing," she said.

"Becoming what it didn't want to be."

Tash stopped walking.

That hit too hard.

He whispered:

"And what if I become something I don't want to be?"

Nord stepped in front of him.

"You won't," she said calmly.

"Because you're already asking that question."

He let out a long breath.

"I don't want this insight to change me."

"Then let it inform you," she said.

"Not define you."

He nodded.

It was good advice.

But the tremors still hummed beneath everything like the world itself had grown a heartbeat he could hear now.

They reached a busy crosswalk.

Cars honked.

A bus ignored the lane lines.

Pedestrians gathered like fragments waiting to become a whole.

Tash stepped forward
and froze.

A sudden, sharp tremor struck him.

Strong, like the one in the Station's last seconds.

Nord immediately caught his arm.

“What is it?”

Tash pointed.

A cyclist, barely visible behind a van, was moving too fast toward a crossing cart filled with jars.

The tremor sharpened.

The air felt like a coin spinning on its edge.

“Nord, someone’s about to..”

He didn’t finish the sentence.

He didn’t need to.

A jar on the cart rolled.

The cyclist swerved.

A pedestrian stepped forward at the wrong moment.

Nord reacted instantly.

She reached out and pulled the pedestrian back by the collar just as the cyclist skidded past, missing the man by inches.

The jars clattered but didn’t break.

The cyclist apologized profusely.

The pedestrian grumbled.

The cart-owner swore loudly at no one in particular.

Life resumed.

Tash’s shaking eased.

Nord released the man gently.

“Careful,” she said.

“No rush is worth a fall.”

The man nodded, dazed, and walked on.

Nord turned to Tash.

“That one,” she said softly, “was yours to act on.”

He swallowed.

“How do I know which moments are mine?”

She gave him a sad smile.

“You’ll know.”

He didn’t like that answer.

But he felt its truth.

They reached a small operations office where a debrief team would arrive in an hour.

Ravi and Hitch were already there, surrounded by paperwork that they pretended not to fear.

Ravi waved them over.

“Guys!

Good news!

The debriefing team has been delayed!” he said.

Hitch added:

“Bad news! That means we’re stuck explaining ‘nothing happened’ for longer!”

Nord took a seat.

“We’ll keep it simple.”

Ravi glanced at Tash.

“You okay?”

Tash nodded.

“Better.”

Hitch leaned in.

“You didn’t you know accidentally absorb any quantum engine components or reactor spirits, right?”

Tash rolled his eyes.

“No.”

Hitch grinned.

“Cool. Just checking.

You look like a guy who could now predict when a vending machine will jam.”

Tash smirked.

“Only if the vending machine is having an existential crisis.”

“Most vending machines are,” Hitch said solemnly.

“They’re trapped between wanting to give snacks and wanting to eat the coins for themselves.”

Ravi groaned.

“Please stop talking.”

Nord suppressed a laugh.

It was normalcy.

Warm, flawed, ridiculous normalcy.

Tash needed that.

As they worked on the report,
Tash felt something settle inside him.
A rhythm.
A quiet pulse.
Not the Station.
Not the anomaly.
Him.
His own timeline finding itself again.
He wrote the final line of his witness summary:
"The site is stable.
All observed anomalies have ceased.
Recommendation: closure of investigation pending structural
review."
He stared at the line.
It was a lie by omission.
But it was also true.
Nord reviewed his form.
"It's good," she said.
He nodded.
But he felt heavier
and lighter
and older
and new
all at once.
He whispered:
"It's over."
Nord didn't correct him.
She simply placed a hand on his shoulder.
"Yes," she said.
Hours later,
Tash left the building.
Alone.
The street buzzed with late-afternoon heat.
Vendors shouted.
Traffic bristled.

The world continued without reverence or ceremony.
He stood there, breathing in the city.
Nothing shifted.
Nothing trembled.
Nothing broke.
He felt a decision point nearby some stranger choosing whether
to enter a shop but it did not call to him.
It wasn't his.
He smiled.
A small, real smile.
And he whispered:
"Thank you."
Not to the world.
Not to the people.
Not to the spot where the Station once was.
But to the quiet inside him.
The quiet that had once been a reactor's beating heart, afraid and
trapped.
A heart that he had helped release.
He walked.
For the first time in a long time, his footsteps felt entirely his
own.
And the world, blessedly, let him go.
The station appeared without announcement.
No distortion.
No hesitation.
No sense of something assembling itself around him.
It was just there.
Tash slowed.
Not out of fear.
Out of habit.
The platform stretched ahead plain, ordinary, almost
disappointingly real.
No flicker.

No shifting edges.

No signs arguing with themselves.

He stepped onto it.

The ground didn't question him.

It didn't wait.

It didn't decide whether he belonged.

It simply... held.

Tash let out a quiet breath.

"So," he murmured,

"you were always here."

A train approached in the distance.

On time.

Not early.

Not late.

Not already gone.

Just... arriving.

He almost laughed.

Behind him, the city continued unaware, uninterested.

Ahead, the train slowed to a stop.

The doors opened.

No hesitation.

No second guessing.

Tash stood there for a moment longer.

Not searching.

Not listening for something beneath the silence.

Just standing.

Present.

He stepped forward.

Brief

You are standing in front of a nuclear reactor.

It is working fine, every dial is exactly where it should be. The engineers look calm. The paperwork is in order.

And yet.

Nuclear Seconds is a book about that *and yet*, the strange, slightly unsettling feeling of being close to something enormous, precise, and entirely indifferent to your intuition. Time behaves oddly here. Control is more of a suggestion than a guarantee. Reality follows rules that nobody remembered to explain to you.

This is not a physics textbook. There are no equations. No diagrams. Not even a helpful glossary at the back. What there is instead is a story, Kafkaesque, a little funny, some thrilling moments, occasionally philosophical, and honest about the fact that the gap between *calculating* something and *understanding* it is wider than most people in white coats will admit.

You will not finish this book knowing how a nuclear reactor works.

You will finish it quietly wondering if you ever really understood anything at all.

Which is, admittedly, a lot to get from 200-odd pages and no equations.