

BETWEEN *the* WORLDS

TSSHERING PEMO TAMANG

**TIME IS A CIRCLE.
I'LL MEET YOU IN BETWEEN.**



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About the Author

Tshering Pemo Tamang was born in Thimphu, Bhutan. She completed her B.A. in English (Honors) from ICFAI University, Sikkim, and is currently pursuing a Master's degree from University of Delhi. Her academic background informs a sustained interest in literary fiction, with focus on introspective and emotionally layered narratives.

Her writing engages with themes of memory, absence, and the complexities of human relationships. Blending literary sensibility with elements of science fiction, she is particularly drawn to stories that examines human bonds and the enduring impact of loss.

Between the Worlds is her first book as she continues to develop her voice as a writer.

Acknowledgement

The book was shaped by the bonds that do not dissolve with time.

I acknowledge my brother, Victor, whose life and silence form the unseen gravity of this work. While this is not his story, it carries what loving him revealed to me; about tenderness, loss, and the weight of absence. The questions that animate these pages existed long before the act of writing began.

I extend my sincere gratitude to His Excellency Minister Chandra Bdr. Gurung of Bhutan for his generous support and encouragement. His guidance made the publication of this book became possible.

I am deeply grateful to my parents for their quiet endurance, patience, and unwavering support. Without them, this work could not have been sustained.

I also acknowledge the teachers, mentors, and institutions that have shaped my academic journey and sharpened my engagement with literature and critical inquiry.

This book was written in the space where language ends and meaning begins.

*To my brother, Victor, and everyone
trapped in between worlds.*

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The Burnout Star

Before Eliya Norbu learned to read the stars, she learned to read the atmosphere of her own home; the small tremors in her mother's breath, the long pauses in her father's footsteps, the way evening light always seemed to fade too early in their kitchen. She was six when she realized that quiet could mean two things: safety or danger. Tenzin was four, small enough to waddle behind her like a shadow, tugging the hem of her dress whenever thunder, real or man-made shook their little house. Their home stood on a slope facing the old riverbed, a modest two-room structure built from the savings their parents had fought years to gather. The wooden floors creaked with every step; the roof leaked in three places during monsoon; the windows rattled when the wind grew serious. But to the Norbu children, this place was everything until it wasn't.

Mr. Norbu, Eliya's father: a man who feared hunger more than failure. Mr. Norbu was a quiet man with the kind of silence that came from survival, not temperament. He had grown into adulthood with the memory of hunger chained to

his ribs. When he was a boy, his father drank away their money, what little they had—at card tables behind the market. One night, the man gambled away their land too, drunk on borrowed confidence. Six months later, he died coughing blood into a torn blanket, and the village shook their heads in pity rather than grief. His mother survived by working other people's fields, her stomach often rumbling louder than the monsoon rain. Two years later, poverty claimed her too; tuberculosis, worsened by cold floors and empty pots. Mr. Norbu learned young that love could die, but hunger would not. So, he worked, worked until his palms split. Worked through fevers, even when his children pressed their faces against the window waiting for him to come home. It wasn't that he didn't love them, it was that he believed love meant survival, and survival meant work.

Mrs. Norbu, a woman stitched together by old wounds, she had her own ghosts. Orphaned at ten, passed around from one reluctant relative to another, she had never been held with tenderness. At fourteen, she was married off to a man fifteen years older; a man who treated her like another household object and handed her over to in-laws who believed affection made children weak. She ran away at sixteen. Worked the same fields Mr. Norbu worked and ate the same leftover rice given by kind neighbors. They married not out of romance, but out of mutual understanding, they were each other's only refuge. Yet marriage could not fix wounds it did not cause.

Mrs. Norbu's bitterness grew like mold in dark corners; slowly, quietly, clinging everywhere. She wanted affection, a thank you, a holiday, and a small gesture from her husband. But Mr. Norbu was married to work, to fear, to the ghosts of

hunger. So, she nagged, not because she disliked him, but because she felt invisible. And every evening, just as Mr. Norbu stepped into the house, she began, “You never look at me, Dorje. Other men take their wives to the hills, and to the fairs. I am not made of mud. I want to live too!”

The neighbors heard, and the walls heard. Eliya and Tenzin heard most of all.

The fights didn’t begin suddenly, they crept into the house like dampness, spreading under doors, filling corners no one checked. On good days, the parents barely spoke. On bad days, they yelled until something broke; usually a plate, sometimes a door, once even a chair.

Eliya would grab Tenzin’s wrist and drag him under the dining table, their secret refuge. She told him they were explorers hiding in a cave from giant monsters.

Tenzin always asked the same question, voice trembling, “Eliya... will they stop?” Eliya would smile, even when her throat tightened.

“Of course. One day they will get tired, trust me.”

She always said that. A soft lie, the kind that keeps a child’s world from collapsing too soon.

One night, when a plate shattered in the kitchen, Tenzin squeezed his eyes shut and whispered, “It’s just thunder,” because Eliya had once said that to comfort him. Hearing her own lie come back to her made her heart ache in a way she did not have words for.

The sibling's escape into the cosmos didn't happen on a peaceful day; it happened on a day too loud to bear.

Eliya was nine and Tenzin was seven. Their parents' voices rose before sunset, a storm building early. Mrs. Norbu shouted about being unappreciated and Mr. Norbu shouted about money slipping through their fingers. The river outside seemed quieter than the room they lived in.

Eliya rushed Tenzin under the table as he cried silently into her sleeve. To distract him, she stretched her hand toward the bookshelf, fishing blindly. Her fingers brushed something thick, an old hardbound book their father had bought at a flea stall.

"*The Cosmos Within*," the cover read. It was dusty and heavy. It smelled that of old paper and sun.

She opened it. The first page had an illustration of a swirling galaxy. Tenzin sniffed, eyes widening.

"What is that?"

"A... a sky," she guessed.

"A big one."

He leaned closer until their foreheads nearly touched.

"Bigger than our sky?"

"Maybe," she whispered.

She turned the page. Black holes, supernovas and nebulas like spilled paint. The universe; quiet, vast, indifferent to the chaos of their living room. Then Tenzin pointed at a black circle.

“What’s that?”

“A black hole,” she read clumsily.

“It swallows everything.”

His fear dissolved into awe.

“So, it takes everything bad away?” She hesitated, then nodded.

“Away and far, far from here.” He smiled for the first time that evening.

That was how the cosmos became their sanctuary; through a book rescued from chaos, beneath a table that smelled of dust and shelter. A Fortress Built of childhood and paper stars. The next day, Eliya stole some glow-in-the-dark stickers from a shop’s entrance. Not really stole: the shopkeeper saw her take them but didn’t stop her. Children were allowed small rebellions. That night, she stuck the stars under the table. When the lights went out, the world beneath the wood glowed softly. Tenzin gasped as if the universe had folded itself just for them.

“We have our own sky,” he whispered.

“Yes.” Eliya smiled.

“No shouting here and no breaking things. Only stars.”

They slept there that night, side by side, Tenzin’s small hand gripping her shirt. Outside, through the thin walls, their parents argued about money and duty and unfulfilled dreams. Inside the fort, Eliya whispered explanation from the cosmos book, her voice steady even when she felt anything but steady.

And in that small blue glow, they made an unspoken promise, to be each other's refuge when the world grew too loud, too dark or too small.

Before sleep dragged her under, Eliya looked at Tenzin's peaceful face and thought, not for the first time; If there is a universe where parents don't fight, where children aren't scared, I hope we find it someday.

Tenzin murmured something in his dreams, his fingers still curled in her shirt. She didn't understand the words, but she understood the feeling. They would grow, and the fights would worsen, and the world would pull them apart eventually. But for now, under the paper-star sky, they were safe, they were one. They were the whole universe.

By the time Eliya was thirteen and Tenzin was eleven, the Norbu house had become a place divided into two universes: the one where the parents lived, and the one the children created for themselves under the dining table. The parents' universe was loud, cluttered, full of arguments that started as whispers and grew into storms. The children's universe was quiet, glowing, stitched together with glow-in-the-dark stars, stolen crayons, and pages from *The Cosmos Within*.

The fights sharpened, arguments became a routine; like evenings, like meals, and like breathing. Sometimes it began with something small.

"I worked twelve hours. Twelve! Let me eat in peace."

"Peace? You don't even notice this house! You don't look at me; you don't talk to me—"

Sometimes it escalated into deeper wounds.

"I am tired of living like a widow while my husband is still alive!"

"And I am tired of carrying the entire weight alone!"

Something would break again; a cup, a promise, or a deafening silence. Eliya would take Tenzin's hand every time, as though his little bones were made of glass. He no longer cried out loud when things crashed, he had learned to shrink inward, folding himself like paper until he disappeared.

One evening, after a particularly long argument where their mother shouted that she wished she had never married and had kids too. Tenzin hid behind Eliya, trembling so violently that she felt each tremor through her spine.

“Eli,” he whispered, voice cracking, “why do they hate us?” Eliya cupped his face gently.

“They don’t. They’re just broken.”

Tenzin frowned. “Like the plates?”

“Like the plates,” she said softly.

“And like the plates, we can’t fix them. We can only wait.” He nodded slowly, trusting her even when she didn’t trust herself.

If home was chaos, school was no better for Tenzin. He had grown into an introverted, quiet boy, soft-spoken and absent-minded in a way his teachers mistook for laziness. He had a habit of staring out the window as though he were watching a galaxy form. Some boys in his class didn’t like that.

“Hey, stargazer,” one of them sneered once, pushing Tenzin’s books off his desk, “are you dreaming again? Trying to run away to space?”

Tenzin said nothing, he rarely did.

Another boy snatched his water bottle. “Hello? Tenzin, come back!”

A few laughed. Tenzin stared at his hands, cheeks burning. But the laughter stopped abruptly when a voice sliced through the hallway.

“Touch him one more time, and I’ll break your fingers.”

Eliya stood behind them, taller, older, eyes blazing in a way that made the boys step back without thinking. She lifted

Tenzin's books from the ground and dusted them gently before placing them in his arms.

"He's my brother," she said.

Her voice didn't tremble but her hands did. The boys muttered excuses and scattered like stray dogs. Tenzin looked up at her.

"You... came."

"Always," she said. He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes, not anymore.

That night, when the fighting grew loud again, they retreated to their fort and opened the cosmos book like priests opening scripture. Tenzin pointed at a swirling spiral of stars.

"Eli, do you think there are worlds where... nobody fights?"

"Yes," she answered without hesitation. She didn't believe it, but he needed to.

"And do you think," Tenzin continued, "there are worlds where we always stay together?"

Eliya swallowed. "I hope so."

He lay down beside her, fingers tracing the illustration of a black hole.

"The book says the black holes destroy everything," he murmured.

"Do you think that's true?"

Eliya flipped through the pages until she found the definition she'd memorized from reading it so many times.

"It says a black hole pulls things in because its gravity is too strong for anything to escape."

"That sounds scary."

"It does," she agreed.

"But...look at this." She pointed to the section on singularity.

"It says everything becomes one point inside. Like... the whole universe folded into a tiny seed." Tenzin blinked slowly.

"So, if we fell in... we wouldn't disappear?"

"Maybe we'd become part of everything," she said.

"No pain, no shouting. Just... silence." His shoulders relaxed.

"I like that." Eliya smiled faintly.

"Me too."

Silence pressed around them, the safe kind, not the dangerous kind. Then Tenzin whispered,

"Eli... do black holes lead anywhere?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

He lifted his head, eyes wide. "I think they do."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because nothing ends," he said confidently.

“Not when the universe is so big.”

Eliya watched him, struck by how certain he looked for a boy who had so much taken from him.

“What do you think is on the other side?” she asked.

“A world where we don’t have to hide,” he said softly.

“A world where there are nice classmates, and you don’t have to protect me all the time.”

She nudged his shoulder.

“I don’t mind protecting you.”

“I know,” he murmured.

“But I want to protect you too. One day.”

She didn’t tell him that he already did, just by existing, by being the one constant in her world that didn’t rage or shatter.

They were back on the roof one cool evening, wrapped in a single blanket because the air bit at their skin. Their parents were quiet inside, either exhausted or avoiding each other. Tenzin sat there and stared at the stars.

“Eli, if we built a ship, what would we call it?”

“A ship?”

“Our ship,” he said, grinning.

“To leave this world and go to a better one.”

Eliya pretended to think hard. “Hmm... the Eliya-1.”

“No!” Tenzin snorted.

“That sounds like a princess boat, not a space ship.”

“Fine,” she shot back, laughing, “then you name it.”

He tilted his head dramatically, as though listening to the stars.

Then he whispered: “10X-01.”

Eliya raised a brow. “What does that even mean?”

“It’s mysterious,” he said with a shrug. “And cool. And nobody else has it.”

She rolled her eyes. “It sounds like the name of a broken machine sent for repair.”

They both laughed, quietly at first, then louder until the sound carried over the roof tiles and floated above the riverbed.

That night, they planned the entire thing; how they would build it, where they would hide the parts, what they would

pack. Tenzin said he would bring the cosmos book. Eliya said she would bring two toothbrushes because even in another universe, hygiene mattered.

They talked until the stars blurred and the blanket slipped off their shoulders. It was the closest thing they had to hope.

Years passed in the same rhythm. Parents fighting, Tenzin being bullied and Eliya stepping between him and the world.

But something shifted when Eliya turned fifteen, her science teacher noticed her curiosity. Her grades climbed and she found herself drawn deeper and deeper into the mysteries of the universe, not because she wanted to become a scientist, but because the cosmos was the one place where Tenzin wasn't scared. She saw the way he relaxed when he talked about stars. The way his eyes lit when explaining wormholes to her with childish certainty.

So, she followed that path, adopted it and made it hers. Because loving him meant stepping into his worlds, even the ones made of stars and dark matter.

One night, while lying under their paper-star fort, Tenzin whispered, "Eli... do you promise you won't leave me?"

Eliya didn't answer right away. Her throat tightened, she wanted to promise. She wanted to swear she would never leave. But life had a way of prying them apart, like fingers tearing at glued paper.

"Tenzin," she said at last, "I won't promise but I will always find you. In this universe or any other."

He closed his eyes, accepting it. And just like that, two children clung to the idea of multiverses not as science, but as salvation; a belief that somewhere, somehow, there was a version of life where they were safe and whole and unbreakable. But they were growing older, and soon, the world would demand things from them it never had before. Eliya watched Tenzin sleep peacefully, and did not want to wake him up. But

it was cold under the dining table, she had to wake him up to send him to his room. Tenzin dragged his body towards the room as Eliya adored him with a warm smile.

By the time the sun rose the next morning, the house felt like a battlefield after everyone had fled. The walls were quiet, too quiet, like they were exhausted from holding so much anger through the night. The floor still had the chipped bits of a broken cup near the kitchen corner, and the smell of burnt dal lingered from when their mother forgot it on the stove in the middle of shouting.

Eliya tiptoed out of her room, rubbing sleep from her swollen eyes. She hadn't cried, but sometimes exhaustion created the same effect. She paused near Tenzin's door; it was slightly open. He had nightmares again, she could tell by the way blankets were twisted and how he sat on the edge of the bed, hair messy, staring at the floor.

"Are you okay?" she whispered, stepping in softly.

He looked up, forcing a smile that was too thin, too shaky.

"Yeah, I'm good."

She sat next to him. "Liar."

He let out a breath through his nose, half-laugh, half-sob, and leaned his head onto her shoulder like he did when he was small.

Eliya wrapped an arm around him. "You heard everything?"

"I always do," he said. "I don't think they know sound travels."

Eliya swallowed. Last night's argument replayed in her mind in harsh flashes; her father shouting that nothing he earned was ever enough, her mother crying that she was tired of doing everything alone. Accusations bouncing back and forth like weapons neither side knew how to put down.

And in the middle of it, two siblings sat behind a locked door, trying to pretend that the cracks in their home weren't widening right under their feet.

Tenzin sniffed. "Why do they fight so much?"

"Because grown-ups sometimes forget what matters," she said softly. "And they don't know how much it hurts us."

He stayed quiet. The morning light touched his face, revealing faint puffiness under his eyes from crying at night.

Eliya's heart tightened. To cheer him, she tapped his knee lightly.

"Hey! Want to talk about space?"

Finally, a small smile tugged on his lips.

"Yeah."

They went to the rooftop, their secret place. It was Sunday morning; the air smelled like fresh morning dew and distant temple incense. Eliya sat cross-legged, Tenzin lying on his back, staring at the fading stars.

"So," she began, plucking a leaf from the rooftop plant pot, "remember what we talked about last time? The multiverse?"

He nodded. "Where a different version of us exists somewhere."

“Exactly. Think about it.” She lifted the leaf. “Right now, somewhere, there could be multiple versions of us.”

“That sounds fake,” Tenzin muttered.

“Not fake,” she said, pressing the leaf against his chest. “Just possible. Some scientists say every choice creates another reality. Like, if Appa came home five minutes earlier instead of later, maybe they wouldn’t fight that day. Maybe that little change creates a whole new universe.”

Tenzin turned his head toward her. “So, in another universe, I’m happy?”

“In many universes,” she insisted. “Not just one. Millions.”

He closed his eyes. “And us? We are still together in those universes?”

Her voice softened. “We are always together, Tenzin.”

He turned back to the sky. “What about black holes? You said you’d tell me the cool part.”

Eliya smiled. “Black holes are like the universe’s garbage bins.”

Tenzin snorted and spoke at the same time. “I know that, but you said you would tell me something else about it.”

“Okay listen up!” her voice became smoother. “They suck in everything; light, matter, time. But the interesting part is inside the center, the singularity.”

“Singularity,” he repeated.

“It’s the point where everything breaks. All the rules of physics stop working. Where everything becomes too much for the universe to hold.”

Tenzin frowned faintly. “Like Appa when he yells?”

Eliya froze. He wasn’t wrong.

“Yeah,” she whispered. “Sometimes people hit their own singularity, where they can’t hold everything in anymore.”

Tenzin touched the bruise on his arm where the school bullies shoved him yesterday.

“I think I have a singularity too.”

Eliya’s chest ached. She cupped his face and kissed the side of his head.

“No. You are not breaking. You are bending because you are strong.”

He looked at her like she was the only star still shining.

“You want to know something?” Eliya said suddenly, breaking the silence.

“What?”

“You’re the reason I chose to focus on science.”

He blinked. “Me?”

She nodded. “You always talked about stars, planets and asked questions nobody else cared about. You were curious, bright, and so excited about the universe. And I wanted to be someone who could give you answers. Someone who wouldn’t make you feel alone in your questions.”

Tenzin stared at her for a long moment. Then he whispered,

“You already do that, Eliya.”

Those words were simple and small yet it felt like they healed something in her.

When the morning sun grew warmer, Tenzin sat up suddenly. “Hey! remember our plan? The spaceship?”

Eliya laughed, eyes widening. “10 X-01.”

“Yes!” He grinned. “We were going to build it and leave this stupid world.”

“It isn’t stupid,” she corrected. “It just hurt sometimes.”

“Same thing,” he muttered.

She nudged him with her shoulder. “You drew the wings too big.”

“And you added a snack compartment bigger than the fuel tank,” he shot back.

“Because you eat a lot!”

He shoved her playfully, laughter finally bubbling out of him, it was real, warm, and childlike.

For a moment, the world was silent. The arguments inside the house disappeared. The bullies at school vanished. The future didn’t exist. It was just Eliya and Tenzin, planning escape routes and universes, sitting on a quiet rooftop that smelled like hope.

Tenzin rested his chin on his knees. “If other universes exist, do you think there’s one where we actually built 10 X-01 and flew away?”

Eliya looked at him lovingly.

“I think,” she said, “there’s a universe where we are already on it. And we made it far... far away.”

“And are we happy and free of pain there?”

She brushed his hair gently.

“Yes,” she whispered. “We are very, very happy.”

The acceptance email arrived on a quiet Thursday afternoon, the kind of day where sunlight carried no warmth. Eliya was sitting on the rooftop, legs dangling over the edge, when her phone vibrated. She didn't expect much; maybe a notification, maybe another promotional message. But the subject line froze her heart. *Congratulations, Eliya Norbu— You've been accepted at Nova University of Science and Technology.*

For a moment, her breath left her and the world tilted. She stared at the screen as tears pooled in her eyes, tears of pride, relief, hope. A breeze brushed her hair as if the universe itself whispered, you did it. She covered her mouth, shaking with quiet joy. Then she heard footsteps.

Tenzin burst onto the rooftop, panting. "Why are you crying? What's wrong?"

She laughed through tears. "Happy tears, idiot. I got in."

His expression slowly shifted from worry to disbelief to a wide, bright smile that lit up his entire face.

"You got in?" he repeated.

"I got in, and I will leave in three days" she whispered.

He jumped, grabbed her shoulders, shook her gently. "You got in! Eliya! You did it," Then he pulling her into the tightest hug. She closed her eyes and held him back, feeling his heartbeat flutter fast with excitement for her. But underneath his joy, beneath his trembling, she could feel it, fear. Because her acceptance meant distance and distance meant he would be alone again.

The night before she left, Tenzin sat on his room floor, hugging his pillow, refusing to talk. He didn't cry or yell. He just stared at the wall like it held answers he couldn't reach.

"Tenzin," she said, sitting beside him. "Look at me." He didn't, so she gently turned his chin toward her.

"I'm not leaving you," she whispered. "I'm just going to study for a few years."

"You're still leaving," he murmured.

She sighed and pulled him into her arms. He squeezed her tightly, fingers clutching her shirt as if absorbing the shape of her.

The next morning, when the taxi honked outside, he walked her to the gate. His eyes were red and his hands kept shaking.

"Promise you'll call every day?" he whispered.

"Every day," she said with a smile she didn't feel.

"And text?"

"Whenever I am free, but every day."

He managed a small laugh and she placed her forehead on his.

"We are a team, remember? 10 X-01."

"10 X-01," he echoed.

As the taxi pulled away, Eliya watched him shrink into a tiny figure in the rearview mirror; a boy standing alone, waving, holding the pieces of a childhood spaceship in hands too gentle for the world.

The university swallowed her. Classes, orientations, deadlines, everything moved like a storm she had to sprint through. Days blurred and nights evaporated. And the assignments piled like mountains. Group projects and readings ate up weekends. Eliya often held her phone, meaning to call Tenzin, but something always interrupted; an online meeting, a reminder, an unexpected task. She would text him quick messages like, *'Busy right now, will call soon', 'Later, okay? I have a deadline'* He responded simply, okay. And she always told herself that he understood.

One night, around 1:40 AM, Eliya was buried in an essay that refused to cooperate. Her eyes burned and her fingers cramped over the keyboard.

Her phone buzzed on the desk: Tenzin calling. She glanced at the screen. A small part of her reached for it instinctively. But her assignment deadline screamed for attention. She stared at the phone, torn.

"Tomorrow," she whispered to herself.

"I'll call him tomorrow. I promise. If I pick up today, we will talk or long and I won't finish work."

She silenced the call without picking up. He called again, and again. But she had silenced her phone, turned it over so the screen faced down.

The next morning, she woke up with a headache and thirty notifications, but before she could check them, her roommate burst into her room, phone in hand.

“Eliya” she whispered urgently, “isn’t this your brother?” Eliya froze.

Her roommate handed her the phone, where a local news article was open: *Teen boy found unconscious after a suspected suicide attempt.*

A video of her mom being asked several questions by the local reporters were everywhere on the internet. Everything inside Eliya broke. Her legs gave out, her vision blurred. A sound tore out of her chest; a raw, animalistic cry she didn’t know she had. She didn’t remember rushing out of the building or the ride home. She didn’t either remember pushing through the hospital doors. All she remembered was the sight of Tenzin, small, still, pale, lying on a hospital bed with tubes and wires all around him. Her heart shattered as she stumbled forward and gripped his cold hand, whispering,

“I’m here... I’m here... I’m so sorry...” But his fingers didn’t move.

Her tears fell onto the blanket. The world felt like a black hole, swallowing light, hope, and every promise she failed to keep.

No one understood what had pushed him. Eliya doubted the cause was bullying until she found out through his old journals that was handed over by the police. She couldn’t bring herself to read but she gathered up the courage to open it. It shattered her to find out that he had been silently drowning in a storm of undiagnosed depression, worsened by bullying, a sense of worthlessness he masked with imagination. He

thought he was a burden, that the world didn't need him. He couldn't see how wrong he was.

He had also written down about how he felt she was the only one he could confide in when the world became cruel to him. She broke down realizing she had let him down by choosing to chase her dream.

"If only I had called him back that day." She sobbed clenching the journal to her chest.

The ICU nurses said that he was barely holding on when they took him in.

She got to meet him once, in a sterile white room that smelled of antiseptic and fading hope. His eyes fluttered open for a moment, just long enough to find hers. "Don't worry," he whispered, voice like paper.

"Time is a circle," his lips barely moved "One day, I'll meet you in between."

She reached for his hand, but he was already slipping away, and then he was gone.

The funeral felt like a dream with sharp edges. Eliya stood in a black dress she didn't remember putting on, surrounded by people who spoke in hushed tones, as if volume could disturb the dead. But it wasn't the grief that gutted her. It was the feeling that he had been trying to hold on to her, and she let go.

She buried him with one of their shared glow stars.

After that, she became a seeker, started to chase anomalies. She stopped sleeping and started dreaming wide-awake. It

took her a decade to finish her work on the project proposal "*The Tenth Percent: Theoretical Return from Beyond the Horizon*", but the truth was, she did not care about the return. She just wanted to follow him. Her vision was set. She worked on her proposal without break to be recognized by the investors. She had already planned on making the craft and, to name it the 10-X 01 as she had told Tenzin. People called her brilliant, visionary and reckless but she didn't care. Because somewhere beyond the event horizon, past where science could speak and theory could explain, she believed he was waiting, and she would follow.

The world moved on, but Eliya stayed suspended in a quiet orbit of her own.

One day, she got a reply from a private consortium called LUXOR. They were old money dressed in modern tech—philanthropists with too much power and secrets no one dared question. They'd taken interest in her proposal, but it wasn't just science they wanted. They saw an edge, an opportunity.

She was instructed over an email to meet with the LUXOR's spokesperson over a cup of coffee, with date, time and venue mentioned. The café was all glass and chrome, but the figure waiting for her belonged to another century; linen suits tailored in a style older than memory, pocket watches gleaming, yet wore sleek neural implants that pulsed faintly at his temple. LUXOR embodied that contradiction, the past clothed in the future.

She set down her folder, '*The Tenth Percent*' between the untouched cups.

Mr. Gyel, LUXOR's spokesman spoke with a smooth and aristocratic voice.

"Your paper was intriguing, Doctor. Ten percent. Such a modest number. Yet modesty, as we both know, often hides revolutions."

"It's a theory. Nothing more, nothing less. But with the right resources, we can turn it into a mission," said Eliya making a direct eye contact.

"A mission into the very jaws of death."

“I have made my decision. I am not just handing this over to your pilots. I am boarding the craft myself.”

Mr. Gyl leaned in, eyes narrowing,

“You? Doctor, with all due respect, astrophysicist are visionaries, not voyagers. You belong at the console, not in the cockpit.”

“Let me explain precisely why it must be me. I designed the theory ‘*The Tenth Percent.*’ I understand the mathematics, the fault lines, the windows where probability bends. If there’s even a fraction of a chance to slip back across the horizon, I will know it before anyone else.”

Mr. Gyl leans back, measuring her words carefully.

“You realize the magnitude of what you’re saying. Crossing an event horizon is not a return ticket, its suicide dressed as science. It will take additional year to train you for that.”

Eliya leans forward, unflinching.

“Every breakthrough looked like suicide before it became survival. Someone has to be more than a passenger, someone who knows the equations as intimately as her own pulse, that’s me. I won’t trust anyone else to gamble with this. I am ready to invest extra time for it.”

A slow, knowing smile spreads over Mr. Gyl's face, his voice now lowering.

“Remarkable. Bold. Reckless. You’ll fit right in with our kind of history. Very well if you want to wager your life for the tenth percent, Luxor will provide the table.”

There was silence, only the faint clink of porcelain as Mr. Gysel set down his cup.

"Come to the office tomorrow and get through with the paper works and we will be set to proceed." Eliya just nodded.

Mr. Gysel left half of his coffee, shook her hand and walked away with a faint smile. Eliya stood up and gave a gentle bow to thank him.

She then moved to the city, into the sterile white walls of a lab that hummed with possibility and artificial lighting. Her life became reduced to patterns; calibrations, data analysis, testing algorithms and the training to board the craft.

From the outside, she was the epitome of genius with interviews, headlines, and speeches. But inside, she was unraveling in slow motion.

She rarely went back home after that. Not really, just a few hurried visits. A handful of awkward conversations with her parents. And then distance; emotional, geographical and intentional. When her father died three years later of a sudden heart attack, Eliya was in the middle of a simulation for temporal field expansion. She had dozens of missed calls from her mother, and a voice message left by a neighbor. By the time she listened to the voice note, the funeral had passed.

She told herself it was the project. The deadlines. The funding. The mission. But the truth was, she couldn't face that house. Not without Tenzin in it, and now the absence of her father was too heavy for her fragile shoulders to carry.

Her mother changed after that. The sharpness she once carried dulled into something brittle. She stopped asking Eliya when she would visit. She would call her sometimes. When they did talk, her mother's voice was tired, like someone who'd grown used to waiting for something that would never return.

"I planted marigolds again," she would say sometimes, out of nowhere. "Tenzin liked them. Remember?"

And Eliya would nod, though she knew her mother couldn't see her. The distance wasn't just miles. It was guilt, it

was grief too heavy to lift over a phone call. But still, Eliya worked. She poured herself into the 10-X 01 project like it was penance. Every blueprint, every sleepless night soldering metal or calculating trajectories with the aerospace engineers and the technicians, was a prayer. A desperate attempt to make meaning out of absence.

Few years later.

The Arctic light was cruel in its honesty, never warm, never dim, always white enough to erase shadows. Inside the LUXOR training dome, Eliya had begun to look like a shadow herself.

Every day, her work began before dawn: cognitive drills, sensory deprivation chambers, low-gravity simulation, emergency decompression exercises. Her body had learned to move through exhaustion like a second atmosphere. Sleep became theoretical, a concept, not a necessity.

She was not only building the ship 10-X 01 but also preparing to become its sole passenger. She wanted no one else to board that craft. LUXOR's psychologists called it "heroic fixation." Mr. Hadley called it "obsession." Eliya called it "responsibility."

If anyone doubted her, they didn't say it aloud anymore. Not since she outperformed even the veteran pilots in flight simulation. Not since she refused every break, every day off, every suggestion to "pace herself."

But one man never offered advice or sympathy, Dr. Kai Palden. He was her lead astronaut trainer, LUXOR's best. Former commander of three off-world expeditions. The man who had walked closer to a neutron star than any living human. He was also a ghost in human form. He spoke only, when necessary, his words clipped and precise. When he stood beside her in the zero-gravity chamber, he corrected her grip or her breathing without looking directly at her. His eyes were sharp, but distant, as though constantly fixed on a point far beyond anyone's understanding.

“Your pulse is too high,” he said one morning as she floated in the simulator capsule. “You’re anticipating disaster before it happens.” And then he walked away.

Eliya found herself studying him more than she intended. The way he memorized every calibration setting, how he refused assistants, how he wrote mission notes by hand in a small, leather-bound notebook even though everything was digitally archived. And every day, precisely at 4 pm, Dr. Palden would leave the dome for an hour. No explanation or clearance reports. He returned just as the rest of the team was winding down, expression unchanged, voice steady.

At first, Eliya ignored it because everyone needed a break. But curiosity was a scientist’s sin, and her constant companion. On the thirteenth week of training, after a brutal round of G-force endurance tests, she decided to follow him. He didn’t take a vehicle. He walked, slow and deliberate, across the frozen expanse behind the dome. The wind carved pale ribbons through the snow. Eliya kept her distance, her parka zipped to the chin, her breath fogging the visor of her helmet. He crossed through a line of frost-coated fences, past a half-collapsed hangar, and into the far end of the compound where the old researcher’s graves lay. The place LUXOR never showed in their documentaries.

There, among the white silence, stood a small headstone half-buried in snow.

Kai knelt in front of it, his gloves brushed the ice from the name. Eliya strained her eyes.

Dr. Lena Palden
2040–2070

The epitaph read:

“To reach the stars, she became one.”

Eliya’s chest tightened. The cold was biting, but the ache that rose within her was warmer and sharper. She had read about the tragedy years ago. The Astra-7 expedition led by Dr. Kai Palden had been meant to establish a human relay near Jupiter’s outer orbit. A minor system failure had triggered an oxygen leak. Dr. Lena Palden, did not make it but Dr. Kai was rescued somehow. Alone.

He didn’t move for a long time. Then he reached into his coat pocket, pulled out a small object; a wedding band, the gold still sparkling and placed it on his palm as he started to greet and talk facing the grave. His shoulders sank, just slightly, and the wind howled through the graves like something grieving with him.

Eliya backed away quietly. She didn’t want him to know she had seen. But the image followed her all night; his stillness, his solitude, the quiet ritual of loss. The next day, during hydro-pressure training, Kai’s voice was different. Still calm, but softer.

“You are not sleeping enough,” he said, scanning her vitals.

“I don’t need to, four hours is enough for me,” Eliya murmured.

“Everyone needs to take adequate rest.”

She looked up from her console, surprised by the faint trace of emotion in his tone.

“Do you?”

He didn’t answer.

Later, in the control bay, she found him staring at the projected map. The black hole shimmered like a dark pearl against a field of light.

“What do you think is on the other side?” he asked quietly.

She smiled, faintly. “That’s the wrong question.”

“Then what’s the right one?”

“Who are you trying to find there?”

He turned to her then, really looking at her. “You are building this ship to reach the point no one returned from. You designed a ship for a journey that might not have an end. That’s not curiosity, that’s grief.”

She looked away. Her hands trembled slightly as she adjusted the simulator controls.

“We all grieve differently.”

“Yes,” Kai said softly. “Some of us bury it under work. Some of us train others to take our place.”

For the first time, Eliya saw the man beneath the title. Not the legendary astronaut, not the trainer, but the husband who had once loved a woman who believed she could survive the stars. And in that moment, she understood him completely.

After that day, their silences began to mean something. They worked side by side, hours on end without needing words. When Eliya overworked to the brink of collapse, Kai

would appear silently beside her with a nutrient bar or a thermal drink. When he spent too long staring at the holographic star maps, she would quietly turn them off and remind him that gravity still held them both here.

One evening, LUXOR executives arrived for a press inspection. Mr. Gysel himself walked through the dome with a retinue of journalists and investors, all smiles and applause. Eliya stood at the center of it, her suit gleaming under the cold lights, her name projected on every monitor. *Dr. Eliya Norbu — Mission Commander, The Tenth Percent Initiative.*

She answered questions, posed for photographs, and repeated the rehearsed line:

“It’s about understanding what lies beyond the event horizon.”

But as the crowd dispersed, Kai stood quietly in the shadows, watching. When they were alone, he approached her and said, “Don’t let them turn your reason into their story.”

She met his gaze. “It’s too late for that.”

He gave a small nod. “Then make sure your ending is your own.”

That night, neither of them slept. The launch was weeks away. The Arctic winds screamed against the dome, and the aurora shimmered like liquid fire above the frozen horizon. Eliya found him standing outside, helmet off, head tilted toward the sky.

“Do you ever stop looking up?” she asked.

He smiled faintly. “Do you?”

They stood in silence, two souls bound by loss, staring at the same stars that had taken everything from them and yet still called them home.

When she finally spoke, her voice was quiet, but steady. “If I don’t come back...”

“You will,” he said firmly.

“And if I don’t?”

He hesitated, then said, “Then I’ll see you between the worlds.”

The words struck something deep in her chest, Tenzin’s words, once whispered through trembling lips in a hospital bed. Eliya blinked away the sting in her eyes and nodded.

The countdown clock began its soft pulse through the intercom - T minus 168 hours. The final simulations in a week, then launch. For now, only the wind, the stars, and the quiet bond between two people who had already lost everything the universe could take. And somewhere beyond the horizon, perhaps, the ones they loved were waiting.

She hadn't slept in four days before the launch. On the third night without sleep, Eliya left the compound without permission. She walked alone through the biting wind to a small outpost helipad where a silent drone waited. Her breath fogged against her visor as she activated the coordinates, slumped into the passenger seat, and let it carry her. She didn't speak to anyone during the journey.

The graveyard was nestled in a dry valley, somewhere far from the noise of cities. A clean, quiet place. Tenzin's headstone was plain: white stone, black letters.

No quote, no epitaph, just his name and the dates.

Tenzin Y. Norbu
Born: 3rd March, 2044
Died: 5th August, 2062

Eighteen years. That's all the world gave him. Eliya crouched beside the grave and pressed her forehead against the stone, trying to feel warmth that wasn't there.

"I should have known," she whispered. "You were quiet but not okay. And I was too busy while you fought your demons alone."

Tears didn't come. She had cried them all already years ago, and in secret. Now her body was only dust and ache. Her fingers brushed the frozen ground, wishing it would open and let her crawl inside.

"He told me", she said aloud, her voice hoarse. "He said he would meet me between the worlds. That's what you said, remember?"

She looked up at the stars overhead. Faint behind the clouds, but steady.

“You knew,” she murmured. “You knew I would try to follow.”

When the drone came back to pick her up, she didn’t resist. She just stood and turned without a goodbye. There were no goodbyes left. Only the mission, and she believed that they will meet soon.

Back at the facility, Hadley, LUXOR’s project overseer, was waiting with his permanent frown.

“You’re running on fumes,” he said sharply. “And you can’t afford a mistake. Not at that proximity. The black hole doesn’t give second chances.”

Eliya gave him a dead-eyed stare.

Hadley sighed and stepped closer. “You need to understand something. We’re giving you a miracle, not a guarantee. The moment you cross the gravity threshold; the craft might fall apart. You might never send a single reading back. Your atoms might smear across the void. This isn’t a dream, Eliya. It’s suicide with a launch code.”

She smiled, the first real smile in weeks.

“Maybe that’s the point,” she whispered.

Hadley said nothing.

“I’m not scared,” she said. “Not of the black hole. Not of death. What scares me is dying here. Without knowing, without seeing what’s beyond the horizon.”

There was silence between them. Then Hadley handed her the launch tablet, freshly encoded. “Sleep. You launch at 0500.”

That night, Eliya curled up in the crew quarters. Not to rest, but to remember. The hospital smell of antiseptic and filtered air. The soft beep of machines keeping Tenzin alive. His words in the ICU, quiet and brave. “Don’t worry about me, Eli. I will see you between the worlds.”

The final mission log stared at her from the desk, still unfinished. But she didn’t write more. Instead, she closed her eyes and whispered his name until the blackness behind her eyelids shimmered into fields of liquid light and the sound of a boy’s laugh echoed across memory.

She didn’t sleep, but for the first time in years, she rested.

After the launch [08.11.2080]:

Dr. Eliya Norbu floated inside the capsule of 10X-01, knees bent slightly in the cradle of zero gravity. The hum of life support surrounded her like a lullaby, broken only by the occasional soft exhale of oxygen vents. She stared out through the viewport at the yawning maw of Sagittarius A*, the black hole at the center of the Milky Way. It didn't look like destruction. Not yet. It looked beautiful, divine, yet terrifying.

Her body felt eerily calm for someone on the brink of an uncharted plunge. But her mind, it was a storm. Thoughts layered and knotted so tightly she could hardly distinguish fear from anticipation.

"MICHAEL," she said softly.

"Yes, Dr. Norbu?" The AI's voice came, warm and measured. Almost human.

"Final checks complete?"

"All systems optimal. We are at 0.03 AU from the event horizon."

She let the words settle. They sounded unreal, even to her. The world hadn't believed in this. They'd called her reckless and unstable. One newspaper headline read, "A Scientist's Dangerous Delusion."

"Eliya Norbu," they whispered, "chasing ghosts in the dark. She says there is a tenth percent of return from somewhere nobody had returned in recorded history." But it wasn't madness and it couldn't be.

She reached into her flight suit pocket and pulled out a worn photograph. Its edges were soft; its surface creased with

years of folding and unfolding. Two children stared out from the image; a girl with stormy eyes and a boy with a gap-toothed grin. She brushed her thumb over the boy's face. She reminisced about the time when they had spent entire nights lying on their backs in frozen fields, pointing at constellations with mittened fingers, whispering dreams into the star-pocked sky and spoke of galaxies they would visit someday. "We'll go there, Eliya," Tenzin had promised, voice earnest in the dark. "Somewhere stars don't die."

But stars did die, and so did Tenzin.

She remembered his funeral. The coffin was too small. His body so light when they carried him. His body looked shrunken inside it, as though the pain had folded him inward before stealing him away completely. Her last memory of him, his hand in hers, weak but warm. His eyes searching her face as if memorizing it.

She exhaled shakily and tucked the photo back.

"MICHAEL," she murmured, "record a message for Tenzin."

A brief pause. "Ready."

"Hey." Her voice caught. She cleared her throat. "I kept the promise. You said you'd meet me in between the world; I'm coming to find out what's on the other side."

The words hung heavy in the capsule.

She closed her eyes, imagining his face again; not gaunt and sickly, but grinning, wild-eyed, chasing her through the apple orchard behind their house. She could almost hear his laughter echoing across the years. When her eyes opened, the

accretion disk outside swirled like golden silk poured into the void.

“Initiate sequence,” she said.

“Are you sure?” MICHAEL asked.

“Yes, I didn’t come here to orbit.”

A click echoed faintly in the capsule as systems shifted.

“Sequence initiated.”

10X-01 shivered as it drifted closer. The gravity well began to stretch light itself, turning stars into liquid ribbons across her vision. As they passed the event horizon, all known physics seemed to collapse inward. Time rippled, colors bled together in impossible ways. Her body felt weightless and yet impossibly heavy, as though existence itself was trying to decide whether to keep her or let her go. Somewhere behind her, MICHAEL began to recite a familiar prayer, it wasn’t programmed to. She didn’t stop it.

“May the road rise to meet you...” Her breath quickened.

“...may the wind be always at your back.” She gripped the straps across her chest tighter, feeling the photograph still safe in her chest pocket.

“May the sun shine warm upon your face...” The light outside fractured into endless shards.

“...and until we meet again...” Her body felt like it was unraveling, each molecule pulled into a different dimension.

“...may God hold you in the palm of His hand.” Then darkness swallowed her.

Between the Worlds

She expected pain, a violent end maybe. The tearing of flesh from bone, atoms pulled apart by the singularity's hunger. She braced herself for heat, for pressure, for the unbearable weight of being undone. But when it happened, it was quiet. Not gentle, but silent. Time stretched like syrup, slowed and then snapped.

Her capsule was gone. Just gone, so was the AI. No alarms, no flickering lights. No desperate last-minute oxygen warnings. Not even the hum of the capsule's systems trying to stabilize her. There was no gravity either. Just weightlessness. Her limbs floated around her like they belonged to someone else. Her hair fanned out softly in all directions.

She wasn't in space, not exactly. She was inside something. A translucent membrane surrounded her. It was massive and seamless. It shimmered faintly, as though it were made of condensed breath or vapor-thin glass. She turned slowly in place, taking it in. Behind her, the bright light pulsed. It wasn't terrifying. Just distant and contained like a memory behind a locked door. Ahead of her was something stranger. A realm of

golden radiance. It pulsed with a living light, too bright to stare at directly. It wasn't a star and it wasn't a place. It was something in between.

She gasped, startled to find that she could still breathe. There was no helmet on her head. No airflow system. No suit pressing against her skin. Yet her lungs worked. The air tasted like nothing, neither sterile nor sweet, just sufficient. Her bare feet touched nothing. Her body was suspended in space like a drop of water held in tension. Her mind reeled.

What was this? Was she still alive? Her thoughts spiraled, grasping for facts, explanations, science. But before she could ground herself in logic, she saw movement below her. She drifted closer to take a clearer view.

There, below the membrane was a field. Not just any field. A golden one, stretching endlessly beneath a sky the color of soft honey. Grass shimmered like silk threads under invisible wind. And in that light, two figures ran. Her heart stopped. It was Tenzin; laughing, alive, and whole. No oxygen mask, no IV lines. Just his soft hair bouncing as he ran barefoot through the field. And beside him, Tobi, her old dog, alive as he had been before the cancer. He was barking joyfully, tail a blur, chasing the boy through waves of light.

"Tenzin!" she cried out, her voice cracking with awe.

She pressed her palms to the surface of the membrane and pounded it, desperately trying to get his attention.

"Tobi! It's me!"

But her voice made no sound. It evaporated before it left her lips. As if this space didn't recognize sound or didn't need it. He didn't turn, neither did Tobi. But for a moment, she wondered if he slowed, just slightly. She tried again. Her hands trembled as she struck the membrane, harder this time, but it barely vibrated. The membrane shimmered faintly under her touch, like the surface of a calm pond touched by wind. It wasn't glass, it wasn't solid, but it rippled like water, but with rules of its own.

She floated back slightly and placed a hand against her chest. She felt her heart thudding or imagined she did. Something about the rhythm didn't feel entirely like hers anymore. She turned her attention back to the edge. They were still there. Still playing and still running. And a terrible thought came to her. What if they weren't real? What if this was a trick? A dying brain flooding itself with comforting hallucinations? She blinked hard. But the vision didn't fade nor did it flicker. It remained consistent in a way dreams never did, solid in its joy.

Her scientific mind began to search again, desperate to classify. What is this? The edge, this membrane, it wasn't random. It reacted when she approached. It shimmered more strongly in response to her emotions. It pulsed when she touched it. She reached out and watched the ripple again. She tried to calculate the distance to the field beyond the membrane. Tried to measure anything; scale, time, velocity. But her internal sense of math was falling apart. Equations wouldn't hold in her mind and logic disintegrated like dry

leaves in fire. So, she stopped, because here, math didn't matter.

She turned her attention inward. Was this death? It didn't feel like heaven, but it wasn't home either. She didn't know what to call it. There were no myths that covered this ground. No scripture, no physics textbook, no spiritual guide. But it was real and she was inside it. She watched Tenzin, again and again. He laughed and ran. Sometimes older, sometimes younger. The timeline fluctuated like memory.

The field changed subtly—never chaotic, but always shifting, and then it vanished. She understood, somehow: this space was responding to her. Memory was painting it. Longing was shaping it, and maybe even guilt. The realization made her chest tighten.

She placed her palm against the membrane once more, but softer this time. As if she was afraid of waking something. She wasn't dead, she wasn't alive either. She had crossed the horizon, and now she waited.

Time meant nothing here. Not in the poetic way, not as a metaphor. It literally had no grip, no presence. It did not move forward, nor backward. It did not breathe. It simply wasn't. And yet, Eliya kept trying to measure it. Count it. Anchor it. But she wasn't the only one. Voices flickered like old radio signals, some childlike, others sharp with anger or weeping. They came and went, echoes from the corners of reality or delusions clawing their way through silence. She tried to speak to them, but her voice barely reached her own ears. She tried to listen, but their words were always half-formed.

Then came the shadows; brief, angular, some human, and some not. Shapes that blinked into view for a second, standing too still. It was as if watching, judging, and mourning. She wasn't sure. But each time she tried to approach, they dissolved like mist. Others had come here before, or she imagined they had. Or left traces of a self that never truly crossed over. But no one passed through. Not whole, anyway. This wasn't purgatory, it wasn't hell. It wasn't even death. It felt like an interstice; a seam between dimensions, a divine limbo between thought and form. A nowhere that somehow existed between two somewhere.

She began to hallucinate a journal. At first, it appeared only as a vague impression, lines on her palm, a weightless pen hovering at her fingertips. She wrote using strokes of light, desperate to remember, to hold on to some part of herself. But every entry vanished the moment she blinked. Every attempt reset. She tried again and again, scratching meaning into the void, chasing memory like a phantom. Her own handwriting began to look foreign. Her thoughts reset each time she lost

focus. Her sense of identity slid in and out of reach, like a dream half-remembered upon waking. She wept, sometimes without knowing why. Somewhere in this collapsing chamber of self, she began to hear it.

Tick.

Not like a clock, it wasn't mechanical but just a rhythm.

Tick.

At first, she thought it was the ticking of the clock. Then she remembered, she no longer had one. Or if she did, it was far away, ticking in another world, in another time. The tick came from within the membrane. A heartbeat? A countdown? A signal? She began to count along.

One. Two. Three....

She always got to eight, then it returned to zero. Each time, her hands began to tremble more quickly. Her breath came faster. But her mind thought she was imagining it. She could no longer tell the difference. That was the cost of passage: forgetting.

She began to whisper stories to herself, like a child warding off night terrors. The tales weren't logical, and they didn't need to be. She needed them to remember herself. One was about the time she and Tenzin pretended to be astronauts using foil-wrapped cereal boxes. Another, about the time he got sick and she slept on the hospital floor beside him for weeks.

In the stories, he was alive, she hadn't yet lost him. She whispered them until she no longer needed to whisper. Until they were all she had. And in the far distance, from beyond

the membrane, something began to listen, like a ripple, a tremor.

The ticking changed, it became music, almost. Not melody but a tone. It was the first sound she had heard that felt foreign. It felt like it came from outside.

A crack formed in the membrane; it was small but then gone quickly. And suddenly, she felt like she knew what this place was; it was not a prison, not a punishment but it was the waiting room of reckoning. And something or someone was coming. She waited, but the Forge had not yet appeared but its breath was stirring. And Eliya Norbu, even as her name nearly vanished from her mind, knew one thing: She had almost earned her passage. Until then, she waited with anguish and the waiting felt like eternity.

Eliya had no idea how long she had been trapped inside the membrane. She began noticing moments that didn't belong to her current reality. Images flickered in and out like unstable holograms. It began with a sound; soft, rhythmic beeping. She turned her head instinctively, though nothing lay beyond the translucent walls. The sound grew louder with each occurrence, like a signal trying to pull her attention away from this strange, in-between world.

Then, the visions started. Fleeting and fragmented, they made no sense at first. One moment she was standing in the bubble, staring at Tenzin in the distance, and the next, she saw herself pale and still. Lying on a hospital bed with tubes and wires attached to her arms. Monitors blinked steadily. A faint, antiseptic smell reached her nostrils, impossible in this sealed space, yet undeniably real. Then a graveyard with her name etched in stone. But the dates didn't align. She hadn't been born yet. She gasped and clutched her head. It vanished just as quickly.

"No! that wasn't real," she muttered. "I'm here. I came through the singularity."

But her voice was hollow, echoing within herself more than the space around her. Every day, or what passed for a day, she saw more flashes: her mother's face blurred with tears, a man in scrubs adjusting machines, the sound of soft weeping, lullabies. Then she would blink and return to the bubble, and watched Tenzin play happily from a distance. Again, another glimpse of herself in the hospital bed flashed before her. Her mother leaned in close. Someone whispered, "She moved... she's coming back."

The vision tormented her more than the eerie membrane that had trapped her for what it seems like eternity. This time, she stood at her childhood home. Tenzin's laughter echoed as he chased fireflies under the apple tree, his arms flailing in wild delight. The summer wind carried their mother's voice, calling from the porch,

“Come inside before the soup goes cold.”

Her figure stood in soft silhouette, holding a steaming bowl of noodle soup that smelled so real Eliya could feel the warmth rising to her cheeks. The scene was golden, hazy with memory, like looking at a beloved photo in motion. Eliya took a step forward. The grass bent under her bare feet, and for a moment, she could swear this was real, more real than anything she had touched in years. Her brother turned to her, fireflies orbiting his small frame like stars. “Eli,” he called. “Come see, one landed on my hand.”

But something was wrong. The stars above twisted. The moon cracked like a glass; its pieces suspended in the sky like a shattered ornament. The laughter began to echo unnaturally, looping like a broken record. Tenzin's voice warped, deeper, slower. Their mother's silhouette dissolved into ash. Eliya's knees buckled. The world pixelated and folded in on itself, like collapsing data on a screen. Then, the vision disappeared and she was back inside the membrane.

The golden light was gone and the silence replaced warmth. She gasped, clutching her head, trembling. Her breath clouded before her even though the air was not cold. Something inside her had splintered.

"What is this?" she whispered to no one, or perhaps to everything.

"You broke the law," a voice of the Forge answered.

It came from within the membrane that surrounded her, a voice without a mouth, disembodied and distant, yet startlingly nearby. Its echo rattled her bones. She spun around.

A shadow hovered across the surface, barely humanoid, its form shifting like smoke suspended in liquid. It had no face, but it watched her.

"What law? Who made it?" she demanded.

"The First Law of Passage," the voice intoned. "The fulfillment of one's destiny is what it takes walk towards the golden field."

Eliya felt a coldness bloom within her, it wasn't physical cold, but the kind that sinks into thought, that silences hope. Her fingers dug into her arms as if anchoring herself to presence.

"I didn't mean to break anything," she murmured. "I just followed the grief. Now that I see him, I can't reach him."

The membrane pulsed softly, almost like it breathed.

"What is beyond this? I want to see," she asked. "How do I pass through this membrane?"

"You don't," the voice said. "You tear." The words struck like stone. The membrane rippled, and the pressure in her skull intensified. A high-frequency pitch built in her ears, pressing behind her eyes. Her skin prickled with static.

"Tear it?" she said, her voice cracking. "But you just said—"

"Laws are for the linear," the voice replied. "To cross without permission is to break, and to break is to bleed."

A sudden vision flashed in her mind; herself, torn across versions, scattered in timelines, looping endlessly through pain she never remembered choosing. She clutched her chest as she struggled to breath.

"But if you tear it," the voice continued, gentler now, "be prepared, because what lies beyond may break more than it reveals."

Eliya stood still. Her breath came shallow, each inhale scraping like glass against her ribs.

"What if I don't tear it?" she asked.

"Then you stay. You orbit the truth, but shall never enter it."

She swallowed hard.

"Then guide me," she whispered. "Or stop me." But there was no reply from the end, just the sound of her own heart. Just her reflection on the surface of the membrane blinking slowly, almost questioningly, as if even it wasn't sure she was real.

She lifted a trembling hand to the glowing wall. As her fingertips touched the surface, it hummed with a familiar warmth, like skin. Her own image distorted and blurred, showing flickers of other hers. Was she all of them? Or was she merely the one who had dared to come too far?

Her hand pressed deeper into the wall. The hum grew louder and the pitch climbed. She stared at the shimmering membrane, breath shallow, heart loud. She took a deep breath and looked below, the field appeared again and Tenzin was still there, barefoot in the glowing field, laughing with Tobi. Just beyond reach like a paradise sealed off with impossible grace. She pressed her palm to the barrier. It rippled gently, as if mocking her desire.

"You don't pass," the voice had said. "You tear." But how?

Eliya stepped back, closed her eyes and thought of his small hands wrapped around hers. Of the too-quiet coffin, of every night she had dreamt of his return. When she opened her eyes again, she no longer reached with her hands, she reached with grief. The moment she felt instead of fought, the surface pulsed. Cracks of light branched like lightning across the membrane. Then, without sound, it tore open.

She was then pulled through into the light for the revelation.

The Multiverse

Eliya's arrival was not like falling. It was more like being set down, placed by unseen hands onto the earth with a care that felt almost ceremonial.

The surface beneath her feet was cool and smooth, cut stone worn to a satin polish by centuries of steps. She stood in the center of a courtyard shaped with deliberate symmetry, the kind that seemed designed to settle the human mind into quiet. The air was thick with the faint trace of incense, as if a prayer had been burning here for a long time and would go on burning long after she left. Somewhere, a faint dampness clung to the air; rain had come earlier, and gone, leaving the world smelling washed.

Around the courtyard, a ring of bronze bells swayed gently, each suspended on beams of darkened wood. They moved without wind. Their motions were subtle, more suggestion than sway, yet they carried a low, rounded note that pressed into the ribs rather than the ears.

“Look,” the Forge’s voice said, not in her ears, but directly in her mind. It was not loud, nor soft. It simply was. “This is one of you.”

Eliya lowered her gaze and saw that she was wearing a robe, not hers, not from her world. Pale, unadorned, and soft enough that it clung to her gently when she moved. The sleeves hung loose past her wrists, and the hem brushed the tops of her bare feet. In her hands, a loop of wooden prayer beads rested with the ease of long habit. Each bead was warm, as though it had been held countless times before this moment.

A sound stirred at the edge of her awareness: unhurried footsteps. From a covered walkway at the edge of the courtyard, a figure emerged. The woman’s steps were light. Her head inclined in passing, a wordless bow that carried the weight of recognition.

Eliya bowed back without thought, then froze. The woman was her. Not merely similar in form. Not the kind of passing resemblance that makes strangers turn for a second glance. This was her, exactly, down to the faint scar above her brow and the uneven lean in her posture. The skin around the eyes was softened, unlined by strain. The mouth held the shadow of a smile; not the brittle kind that cost effort, but the kind that seemed to rise and fall like breathing. Her hair, tied loosely, bore strands of silver that caught the muted light.

But her eyes, those were the difference. They were deep and quiet, like still water after a storm, holding the kind of calm one only earns by surrendering to something larger than the self. The woman continued past her without speaking,

disappearing into the cloistered shadows at the courtyard's edge.

"She is you," the Forge said, its voice like the space between two heartbeats. "But without the hunger. Without the gnawing at the edges of sleep. Without the nights where your mind will not still."

The bells gave a slow, deliberate toll, their sound not striking the air so much as blooming within it. "In this thread of your life, you laid your instruments down. You stopped asking the questions that only opened into darker questions. You turned from the sky, from the equations, from the engines of your mind. You turned inward, and here you stayed."

Eliya felt her pulse in her fingertips, in the beads she still held.

"She believes the search for him is not among the stars," the Forge continued, "but within the self. That the road to reunion lies in silence, not velocity. Every toll of those bells is a prayer for him. A way of keeping him close without tearing herself apart."

Eliya stood still, absorbing the sight. There was no need to speak. Even if she had, her voice would have sounded like an intrusion in this place.

The air thickened and shadows in the courtyard began to lengthen unnaturally, stretching into corners that moments ago had been empty of them. The warmth in the air cooled, and colors seemed to drain from the stone, the wood, even the sky above.

She felt the Forge's presence shift, not impatient, but absolute.

"Enough," it said, and though the word was soft, it pressed through her like a closing door. "You have seen her. There are more."

The bells swayed harder now, though the air remained still. Their tone changed; deepened and bent, as though it was being drawn through some unseen channel. The sound elongated, folding into itself until it was no longer the resonance of metal but the rushing of air in her ears.

The courtyard blurred, the bells became streaks of bronze, and the stone beneath her feet was gone. The rush grew until it filled everything. And then she shifted into another multiverse.

Warmth struck her skin like sunlight poured through open windows on a winter morning; unexpected, undeserved. Eliya inhaled, and the air carried the faint perfume of chamomile, baked bread, and something green, living.

When her eyes adjusted, she found herself standing on a cobblestone path outside a low, white building. Vines curled across the roof in loose spirals, dotted with small yellow blossoms that swayed as though the wind knew a secret.

From beyond the far wall came the laughter of children. It rose in short, bright bursts, then dissolved into the rustle of leaves like joy and grief braided together.

The Forge's voice came as it always did, without sound, without direction. It was simply in her, pressing into the spaces between thoughts.

"Another you. One who built something lasting."

Her gaze was drawn to a wooden plaque, aged but well kept, mounted beside the entrance.

The letters had been carved by hand, the strokes uneven yet deliberate:

TENZIN FOUNDATION

Grief Support Centre.

Her chest tightened, not with the sharp sting of surprise, but with the slow, grinding ache of inevitability.

"This you, did not cross the event horizon of obsession," the Forge murmured. "She did not spend her years chasing what could not be caught. Instead, she shaped her grief into a home for others to place theirs."

The door opened without a sound, she stepped inside. Sunlight pooled across polished wood floors, falling in soft rectangles that stretched into the quiet corners. The air was thick with stillness, but not the hollow kind; this was a stillness full of breath, of quiet footsteps, of the murmur of low voices in adjoining rooms. Her eyes found her instantly. There, at the far end of the hall, a woman—herself, older by seasons rather than years, stood behind a counter, pouring tea into a chipped ceramic cup. The motion was unhurried, as though the seconds themselves had learned to loosen here. She slid the cup toward a woman whose face was swollen from weeping. The other Eliya's smile was not wide, not forced. It was something rarer; patient, offering no false promise.

The Forge's voice lingered, almost reverent. "She learned that not all rescues come from reaching beyond the stars. Some come from staying where you are and holding the hand of the one who suffers beside you."

Eliya wanted to move closer, to hear her voice, but the Forge spoke again before she could take a step. "In this life, Tenzin's absence never closed, it only widened. And in the widening, she built shelter, not for herself, but for others who stand in the same rain." Through an open doorway, she glimpsed more of the place: small rooms bathed in warm light, beds dressed in soft quilts, windows that framed gardens where wind teased the branches. A boy with thin arms and too-large eyes sat in a chair, his head resting against a nurse's shoulder as she read to him.

"Here," the Forge whispered, "she made a world where people do not die alone. It does not stop the dying but it stops the loneliness. That is her rebellion against loss."

Eliya's throat ached. The smell of tea drifted to her, mingling with the quiet hum of life in the building. She wondered, had this version of her found peace? Or had she simply learned to carry grief without letting it devour her?

But she did not ask, she could not. The Forge had not brought her here to converse, only to witness.

The light began to change, so subtly at first that she thought it was her own eyes failing. The gold in the sunlight dulled.

The warmth thinned until she felt the edges of the air like a skin pulled too tight.

Somewhere outside, the people's laughter faded. In its place rose a wind, low at first, then building into an unbroken howl that rattled the blossoms on the roof.

"You have seen enough," the Forge said. Its tone was neither kind nor cruel, but final. "The shape of her life is not yours to take, though it is yours to carry."

Eliya blinked, and the image of the hospice-Eliya; the steadiness of her hands, the weightless patience in her smile was already receding, pulled backward into a place she could no longer touch.

The hall elongated, stretched like molten glass, then shattered into white light.

And, again, she was pulled into another multiverse.

Cold. It did not just touch her, it filled her, threading into her lungs, numbing her bones. It was the kind of cold that didn't come from the air, but from absence.

The corridor stretched ahead, impossibly long, lit by the pale hiss of fluorescent tubes. Walls white to the point of blindness. Floors polished to mirror every overhead flicker. The scent of antiseptic hung heavy, sharp enough to burn the back of her throat.

Eliya moved forward, her steps making no sound. A nurse passed by, pushing a cart, eyes fixed on a clipboard. She didn't see Eliya, no one here would.

"This," the Forge's voice said, low and even, "is you, that chose the unthinkable path."

Eliya's gaze swept the endless corridor. "What happened to her?"

"You'll see."

She turned a corner and stopped as though her body had struck glass.

The room was small, the light inside thin and sour. Machines formed a circle around the bed, each one blinking or hissing, their cables spilling across the floor like veins. The bed's occupant was pale, almost translucent, her frame swallowed in a hospital gown.

It was her.

The Forge's presence seemed to press her closer. "Look closely. This is where the hunger took you."

Her other self's eyes were cracked open but not truly awake. They did not track the ceiling, the walls, or the nurse who moved about the room. They were fixed somewhere far away, locked on a horizon Eliya could not see.

Then Eliya saw the walls. Every inch of paint was buried under black ink; equations scrawled in frantic bursts, diagrams of wormholes and gravitational maps, spiraling notations about event horizons, lines of coordinates and timestamps. Some formulas were drawn over and over until they bled into dark blots, like black holes punched into the plaster.

"She kept working," the Forge said. "Long after reason left her. The grief was fuel, but it was poison too."

Eliya's breath slowed. "She lost her mind?"

"At first," the Forge said, "it was not madness, but momentum. She pushed beyond exhaustion, beyond the needs of her body. Nights without sleep became her routine. Meals became interruptions she resented. She began to see the answers everywhere; in the walls, in the patterns of light on the floor, in the sound of her own breathing."

The nurse entered again, carrying a fresh IV bag. She did not look at the patient's face. She avoided the walls entirely, as though afraid the ink would reach for her.

"She thought," the Forge continued, "that if she could just run the calculations one more time, she could reach him. The lines between what was real and what was imagined began to fray. She saw Tenzin in reflections, heard him in the hum of the machines. She began speaking to him out loud, though no one else could hear."

Eliya's fists curled. "And then?"

"And then the body began to fail. Hallucinations became seizures. The mind unraveled in threads too fine to weave back together. One morning, she stopped speaking. By evening, she stopped moving. She slipped into this state."

Eliya's other self's fingers twitched; once, twice, tracing invisible shapes in the air.

The word felt like a hand closing around her chest. She took a step forward, drawn by the need to touch her own hand, to anchor this version of herself back to the surface. But the Forge's grip tightened around her, unseen but immovable.

"You cannot touch her," it said. "She is already far beyond where you stand."

The room dimmed, the machines fading into shadows. The ink on the walls bled outward, swallowing the light. The last thing she saw was her own still face, and half-lit. The corridor dissolved and the cold followed her into the next breath.

The multiverse had folded around her, collapsing its kaleidoscope of infinite colors and fractured selves into a single, endless black. A silence that felt older than creation swallowed everything. Then, there was light as she was pulled back inside the membrane. The Forge appeared before her, but this time it took a form of a massive flame. Eliya stood still, chest rising and falling too quickly, as her mind spun with shards of what she had witnessed. The versions of herself across timelines, across choices. A nun, cloaked in silence and prayer. A scientist who had given up everything to build sanctuaries for the dying. A woman driven half-mad by grief.

Every path she walked had branched from a different decision. And yet all led to the same place. She realized Tenzin was already gone. Not missing, not hiding in some distant variation of reality. Just gone, the kind of gone that echoed across existence.

She hadn't noticed it at first. Each world distracted her, offered her tiny hopes in new forms. But now the truth stood unhidden, unveiled like a wound in open air.

Her knees softened. She let herself sink down into the quiet, her hands trembling. She did not cry, there were no tears left. Only the terrible, clean stillness of knowing. All this time, she had believed there might be a version of life where he had been spared. She looked toward the Forge, toward the soft, living light that beat like breath. It did not tower over her, it didn't demand reverence, it simply waited.

"So, he... he always dies?"

The Forge stirred, a soundless ripple across the unseen fabric. Like the universe holding its breath.

“Yes.”

Her voice cracked, raw with disbelief and aching defiance. “But why?”

There was a pause, one that felt like compassion.

“Why would any universe write him that way?” she asked again, more quietly. It was a whisper, a plea.

The Forge did not answer at once.

Then, gently, it spoke. “Because some stars are born to flare only once. Bright, and brief.”

She shook her head. “Then what was the point?” Her voice rose slightly, broken by the weight of futility. “What was the point of seeing all those lives if I couldn’t save him in any of them?”

“To show you the only thing that ever belonged to you,” the Forge replied.

She blinked. “What?”

“Your response.”

The words struck her like quiet thunder.

“In every thread,” the Forge continued, “the loss remained the same, fixed and final. But you chose how to wear it. In faith, in service, in madness. That was never written, that was you.”

Eliya sat in the silence that followed. Not the silence of shock or emptiness, but the silence of clarity beginning to bloom. The kind that comes when something inside you surrenders not in defeat, but in understanding.

She had tried to outrun grief, to outwit it with science. To fold space and time until it gave her back the one thing she had lost.

But the universe had not stolen Tenzin. It had never promised to keep him.

She looked at the Forge again.

Its flames shimmered, still waiting. As if it had waited eons just for her to understand this one thing.

“He was not taken,” the Forge said, its voice low, almost reverent. “He was destined.”

The Last Choice

She stood inside the membrane processing everything she had just heard.

“The place you saw, where Tenzin and Tobi played. That is not a dream, Eliya.” Spoke the Forge breaking the silence. Her breath hitched.

“Then what was it?” she asked, almost afraid of the answer.

“A realm for the souls who have finished their time,” it said. “You saw it because your grief tore the veil. But without your time, you cannot enter.” She glanced below the membrane. The golden field returned, clearer than before. Golden grass shifting in a wind that made no sound. The sunlight soft like breath. Tenzin’s bare feet in the dirt, his hand resting on Tobi’s back. His face younger, still untouched by death.

This time, he looked at her and smiled and waved at her.

This was not a vision, not a metaphor. It was a place of eternal peace but not hers, not yet.

She looked down at him again; alive, eternal, untouched by time. The dog barked once, a sound pure and distant. And Tenzin laughed, not the laugh worn by age or loss. But a boy's laugh, which sounded free.

She gripped her wrist.

"Then why did I see it?" she whispered.

"Because you needed to know he's safe," the Forge said. "And that you cannot follow."

A silence fell between them. The kind that exists only when the heart is listening.

She stared into the field. "So, I can't go there?" She asked again.

"Not with your time still unwritten." Replied the Forge, patiently.

Her hand dropped to her side, but she didn't cry. There was no grief left to spill, only a vast, aching stillness. She just turned away.

Behind her, the membrane rippled. A new shimmer emerged, not the glowing meadow, but something dimmer, sharper and rhythmic.

Beep... beep... beep.

The sound pierced the silence like a pin through gauze. A sound of a heart monitor.

The glow of sterile hospital light touched her skin like memory. The smell of antiseptic, the weight of sheets, and the soft, trembling grip of someone holding her hand.

"There is one thread open," the Forge said. "This body still waits. It is weak but breathing."

"You mean.... the Eliya, the comatose version of me in that multiverse you showed me?"

The answer was already in the deafening silence. Her stomach turned as she felt the ache of life tugging at her, it was heavy and unfinished.

"And what do you mean by the body still waits?" Her throat tightened.

She looked down at the field again. Tenzin was still waving, the same age, unchanged. He would never age now, never decay, or ever suffer again. Then without warning he turned and ran. Not away from her, not toward anything in particular. Just into the light. He didn't look back, and she didn't try to follow. Instead, she stood at the edge of everything; a soul divided between infinity and return, and said nothing.

The Forge, too, was silent.

"You only have one way to return," spoke the Forge.

She swallowed. "Can I not return to the world I came from?"

This time, the answer was immediate. "You cannot."

She turned slowly, as though the truth were a sound she hadn't caught. "Why?"

She thought she already knew the answer to it.

The Forge pulsed once, and the darkness shifted. She felt, more than saw, the moment again, the instant the 10X-01 slipped past the event horizon. That awful stillness, that silence when even MICHAEL's voice had vanished. The pull, the collapse, her breath suspended in a prayer.

"Your body did not cross," the Forge said softly. "Not fully."

She felt it then. The knowledge that had been coiling in her bones since the moment she passed through the black hole.

"So, I'm... dead?"

"No," the Forge corrected. "You are disembodied. The part that crossed was not flesh. You passed through the threshold as soul."

Eliya looked down at her arms, expecting skin, pores, veins, something to mark her as real. But they were only light, shimmering faintly. Familiar in shape, alien in truth.

"All this time," she whispered, "I thought I was whole."

"You were whole enough to see."

She couldn't tear her gaze away from herself. This form. this essence, had passed through fields of stars, cracked

universes, and stared at grief in infinite mirrors. All without a body, all without a shell.

"Why does it still feel like me?"

"Because you never were just body. You were the choice that carried forward."

She turned away, as if hiding from her own reflection, and her breath stilled.

She suddenly remembered the theories, how time bent around massive gravity. How a second near a black hole could become centuries on Earth. But the truth of it, its cruelty, hit her now like cold stone.

Her world was gone; her people were gone. Even the sky that once carried her starlight had forgotten her.

She stood there in the silence, trying to imagine a time where she was never born, where she never existed. Where her mother and her friends had been buried beneath fields now turned to ocean or flame. She was an orphan of time. Then she paused, the words lingered with an odd weight.

"And the Eliya there? Would I overwrite her?"

The question hovered in the space between them, heavier than sound. The Forge pulsed slowly, its light dimming as if in thought.

"No," it finally said. "You will continue."

Eliya narrowed her eyes. "What does that mean?"

But the Forge offered no clarification, only a silence that felt like withheld truth. Not a lie, but a redirection. It didn't answer like a machine, it answered like something that had seen too much.

"Then who am I in that world?"

"You are what endures."

The vagueness pressed against her ribs. But something in the Forge's presence told her not to chase it. Not yet, not here. Whatever waited for her on the other side of the veil was not hers to understand in full.

She would not be a stranger to that world. She was that Eliya; somewhere, somehow, just divided by fracture and fate.

"How do I know I won't destroy her? Her thoughts and her pieces." She asked breaking the silence.

The Forge's light dimmed, like a heartbeat slowing.

"What remains in her is no longer a self, only memory. You will not overwrite her. You will remember, you will become."

Eliya nodded slowly. Her mind reeled, not just from the physics but from the emotion of it, the eerie sensation of walking into herself, a version broken by grief, left behind by time.

She closed her eyes. She did not know what waited on the other side. Only that someone once her, still breathes. And perhaps, in that breath, there is something worth saving.

The Forge pulsed once more. And the silence held her, like arms, not pushing her forward, not pulling her back. She placed her hands on her chest as she was getting ready for the return.

Then everything started to move around her. And it went dark.

The days were quiet now. Since her discharge, Eliya had returned to her childhood home. The place where the memories of Tenzin were brought every morning by the breeze that rustled through the trees and whistled through the old windows.

Her recovery had been steady, outwardly, at least. The doctors called it a miracle. One day, she simply blinked and whispered a word. Months later, she was walking again, eating again, living again.

But inside, something still floated. An echo, or perhaps a residue, of where she'd been, or if she had been anywhere at all. The world around her looked the same; her mother still steeped tea before dawn, the trees still leaned against the wind but Eliya had changed. Or maybe she had returned changed.

One afternoon, while reorganizing a pile of old documents in the attic, she stumbled upon a newspaper dated 8th November, 2080, the day she launched the craft. Its headline stretched boldly across the front page of the Lungta Observer:

“Space Launch Ends in Collapse: Astrophysicist trained for the mission suffers episode on launch eve”

Her breath caught. The name was there.

Dr. Eliya Norbu, 38, reportedly collapsed at a private space testing site the night before a solo launch toward the event horizon...

She sat down on the wooden floor, the newspaper shaking slightly in her hands. The article mirrored everything she had

done in her other world, right down to the mission year, and the exact date, even the location matched.

Later that evening, as the moon rose over the peaks, she found her mother steeping tea in the kitchen.

“*Ama*,” she said quietly, her voice hesitant, “did I... really try to launch a space mission? And collapsed the night before the launch?”

Her mother looked up slowly. Her eyes were tired, but not surprised.

“Yes,” she said, after a long silence. “You did.”

Eliya sat down across from her, barely breathing. Her mother didn’t rush to explain, she spoke slowly.

“I didn’t tell you everything,” her mother said, her voice soft but firm. “You were brilliant, brave, but obsessed. After Tenzin died, it was like a fire started in you. You built that craft with your own hands and trained hard for years. You spoke in riddles, equations, and dreams. I was proud, and terrified.”

She looked down at her tea. “The night before the launch, they found you sitting alone inside the crew quarter. You were talking to someone, eyes closed but no one was there. You didn’t respond, you just repeated Tenzin’s name. Then your eyes rolled back. The doctors said your mind had gone somewhere too deep.”

She paused, then met Eliya’s gaze. “You slept for years.”

Eliya swallowed. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought if you remembered, you might try again. And this time...” Her mother’s voice broke. “This time, I don’t want to lose another child.”

Silence stretched between them. Not cold, but fragile.

That night, Eliya lay awake, eyes tracing the patterns of the cracks in the ceiling. She was real, this was her body, her home. The truth seemed to be that she did not cross anything at all. But the memories; the Forge, the membrane, the infinite versions of herself still lingered like embers in her chest.

A few days later, a fresh envelope slid through the mail slot. No return address, just a sender’s name written “*From Dr. Kai Palden*” Inside was the latest issue of the Lungta Observer.

She almost didn’t open it. But curiosity tugged harder when she remembered the name ‘Kai Palden’, it was the man from her world that trained her for the mission.

As she opened the envelope, the front-page headline stopped her heart:

“BREAKING: Unidentified Object Spotted
Near Sagittarius A”

Deep-space surveillance picks up ship-like silhouette. Experts confirm: ‘It doesn’t match any known Earth-origin structure.’

Beneath the article was a grainy image; half obscured by cosmic dust and distance, but she recognized it instantly. The same curved hull, the same solar wings, the same ship she had built: 10X-01.

Eliya blinked, her pulse slowed as she re-read the article:

NASA had received the image from a joint telescope array run with other international agencies. They were calling it “Object A49.” It was moving, slowly, but against the current of galactic wind.

Her hands trembled slightly as she folded the newspaper back.

Outside, the wind moved through the cypress trees, stirring their branches like whispers. Inside, the silence of space seemed to return; subtle, cold, and impossibly close. She closed her eyes, she felt lost in between.

Maybe it had been a coma dream, a delusion formed by a desperate mind. Or maybe—some version of her had really made it. She wasn’t sure what was real anymore.

But someone had gone.