

*State, 2107*

Elara's shoes click thirty-two steps to the lift, same as always. Twelve floors down. Past the retinal scanner. Then five minutes on foot to the Central Archive. Above, the dome's sky gleams cerulean, clouds calibrated for aesthetic equilibrium.

Routine is safety. Deviation is a crack. She tells herself this often. Because her parents died protecting this order. Because she's their daughter. Today, she tells herself again. A lullaby, with teeth.

At the fifth junction, her pace falters. A shimmer. A flick. A breath caught mid-swallow.

The city glitches.

For a split second, the sky ripples, sharp as shattered glass. Beneath it: ash and ruin. Charred stone. Corrosion. And there, painted red on the rubble like a wound: a glyph curved like a vessel or a vase. Beneath it, two words: *We Remember*.

Elara's heart snaps. Her hand jumps to the State band on her wrist. But before she can press it, the dome corrects itself. The illusion reasserts. The sky smooths. But inside her, something has broken.

The words burn behind her eyes. She thinks of her parents. Of duty. Of what it means to belong to something greater than yourself. She was five when the red-marked ones killed them. Too young to remember, but old enough for the body to keep the echo. Tight-throated nightmares. Sweat-slick sheets. Screams that never leave the throat.

She clenches her fists now, as if her nails might pin her to the rules. And still, something coils inside her. A muscle she shouldn't have, pulling in a place she can't name.

A twitch in the blueprint. A glitch in the girl.

She keeps walking. But the rhythm is wrong now.