

Chapter One – The Train That Shouldn’t Exist

The last train of the night was never this full.

Emily stood on the platform, backpack slung over one shoulder, thumb digging into the frayed strap like it was the only thing keeping her anchored. Midnight in the city always had a certain hum to it—sirens, distant music, the rattle of old pipes. Down here, though, the sounds were swallowed by the tiled walls of **Waverly Station**, the air thick with the smell of damp concrete and burnt coffee.

The digital clock over the tracks flicked from **11:59 PM** to **12:00 AM**, its red numbers bleeding in the fluorescent light.

The train waiting on Track Two looked... wrong.

Not dramatically, not enough for anyone else to flinch, but enough for Emily. The metal was a shade darker than the city's usual silver cars, almost gunmetal. The windows were tinted too much, like someone had turned the opacity up. Even the logo of the transit authority on the side was slightly off-center, as if whoever had painted it had been in a rush or didn't fully understand symmetry.

“Where are you, nerd?” she muttered, glancing down at her phone again.

The last message from Jeremy sat at the bottom of their chat.

JEREMY: you ever heard of a 13th station?

EMILY: like... in the bible?

JEREMY: no doofus. on the green line

EMILY: there is no 13th stop

JEREMY: exactly 😊

JEREMY: meet me at waverly @ 11:40. promise it'll be worth it

He hadn't shown.

And Jeremy didn't *not show*. He was late, sure. He took side streets instead of main roads to “avoid NPC traffic.” He stopped in front of every weird flyer on light poles just to read the fine print. But disappearing? No. Jeremy didn't just vanish.

Emily checked the time again. **12:01 AM.**

The other people on the platform—night shift workers, a guy in a cheap suit typing furiously on his phone, two girls in club dresses leaning on each other and laughing—moved like everything was fine. Like this was just another Friday night, and the strange train on Track Two had always been there.

The PA system crackled overhead.

"Next arrival on Track One: northbound train to Kingsway. Next arrival on Track Two: southbound service. Doors close in one minute."

The voice was calm. Normal.

Emily frowned. Track Two wasn't supposed to have southbound service after 11:30. She knew because she'd been scrolling through the schedule for the last half hour, trying to convince herself Jeremy was caught on a delayed train, stuck somewhere between stations, not answer—Nope. She wasn't finishing that thought.

She felt a pinch of panic press against her ribs, sharp and familiar. Emily swallowed hard and dragged in a slow breath, counting to five like her therapist had taught her.

"One, two, three, four, five," she whispered under her breath.

When she opened her eyes, the train on Track Two had its doors open.

Nobody got off.

That was the first thing that made something inside her twist. No commuters, no tired stragglers, no one at all spilled out of the open doors. The car just sat there, humming softly, windows dark.

Then she noticed the sign.

Above the open door, where the line and destination should've been displayed in simple block letters, the digital panel flickered. For a second, static. Then:

LINE: UNKNOWN

STOP: 13

Her mouth went dry.

"There is no 13," she muttered. "Cute, very cursed, very illegal."

It had to be a glitch. A hack. Some weird guerilla marketing stunt for a horror movie or a game. Jeremy would have loved that. He'd be the first one to try it, too, just so he could tell her afterward with that smug grin that made her want to punch him and hug him at the same time.

But Jeremy wasn't standing beside her making nerdy commentary about liminal spaces or ghost trains. Jeremy wasn't anywhere.

She scrolled up through their earlier messages, thumb tracing the familiar rhythm of their chaos.

JEREMY: when we make it big i'm naming our company "lil apocalypse co."

EMILY: absolutely not. i refuse to work under that banner

JEREMY: u say that now but wait til we have matching tees

EMILY: you're not even supposed to wear graphic tees to an office

JEREMY: jokes on you we're not gonna HAVE an office

JEREMY: anyway see you tonight. don't flake

Her chest ached.

The Kingsway train pulled into Track One, its headlights blasting the platform in harsh light. People shuffled, adjusted their bags, stepped forward. A blast of air hit her as the doors slid open and the usual tide of commuters traded spaces with those getting off.

Nobody glanced at the other track.

Emily did.

The gunmetal train on Track Two was still there, doors open. Its interior lights were on now, but they weren't the usual harsh white fluorescents. They were softer, tinted slightly yellow, like an old photograph. The seats inside were a different style too—cushioned, with dark green upholstery instead of plastic.

Her phone buzzed.

She jumped, a small gasp tearing from her throat, before realizing it was just a notification.

No new message from Jeremy.

Just a weather alert.

“Of course,” she muttered. “Because what I really need right now is to know it’s going to rain.”

The Kingsway train doors chimed. “Doors closing,” the PA said. People rushed, a couple darting through the narrowing gap. Emily stayed where she was, staring across at the other track.

The Kingsway train pulled out with a screech and a sigh, wind pulling at her hair as it sped past. For a heartbeat, both trains were parallel, metal blurs in opposite directions. Then the ordinary one was gone, leaving only the other, humming quietly like it was waiting just for her.

Her rational brain said: Go home. Call the police again. File another report. Tell them your best friend is missing and watch them try to be sympathetic while hinting that twenty-somethings sometimes just disappear for a bit, that maybe he just needed space.

Her heart said: He sent you here. To this station. At this time.

And Jeremy didn't joke about trains.

He joked about everything else—death, deadlines, the absurdity of adulthood—but when it came to the transit system, he treated it like a religion. That train lines were veins, stations were

lungs, the whole city one giant breathing animal. He'd spent an entire summer learning the schedules from memory, just so he could navigate "like a local NPC with admin privileges."

He'd told her about the rumor once. Half-laughing, half-serious.

"Supposedly," he'd said, waving his fries around in the air outside the campus library, "there's a hidden station that only shows up for certain people. Like the city decides you're ready to see it or some cosmic nonsense. People call it the Thirteenth Station. You board the train and it takes you somewhere you're meant to go. Or somewhere you never come back from, depending on how goth the storyteller is."

"And you, of course, want to find it," Emily had replied, sipping her soda. "So you can... what? Put it on your resume?"

He'd grinned. "So I can prove it's real."

Now he was gone, and a train with a 13 lit over the door was waiting in front of her.

The PA crackled again.

"Final boarding," the calm voice said. "Track Two. Southbound service."

No one else moved.

It dawned on her then that the platform, without the Kingsway crowd, was almost empty. The suit guy had left. The girls had left. Most of the workers had left. Only an older woman sat on a bench far down the platform, eyes closed, headphones in. A man in a maintenance vest swept near the stairs, not even glancing at the train.

Emily's heartbeat thudded in her ears.

"If this is how I die, I'm going to be so pissed," she muttered.

She walked toward the edge of the platform, sneakers scuffing the dirty tiles. The hum grew louder, different from the usual mechanical grind of a subway car—smoother, almost like a low note from some unseen violin string.

Up close, she could see her reflection in the window: tired eyes, dark curls shoved into a messy bun, black hoodie hanging too big on her frame. She looked exactly like the kind of person who would do something monumentally stupid in a horror movie.

"Don't go in there, idiot," she whispered to herself, voice cracking. "That's what the audience is saying right now."

She thought about Jeremy's stupid face, his stupid grin, the way he'd shoved a coffee into her hand every exam week like it was a peace offering from the gods. She thought about his desk at the comic book store where he worked part-time, still covered in little sticky notes with

half-finished ideas. She thought about the way the dispatcher had paused on the phone when she said the words “went missing.”

If there was even a chance he had stepped onto this train—

Emily grabbed the rail and stepped up.

The floor inside was colder than she expected. The moment her foot crossed the threshold, the hum shifted, deepened. A faint vibration ran up through her shoes into her bones.

“Passenger detected,” a soft voice said.

Emily froze. “What?”

The doors were still open, the platform still visible behind her, but the sound hadn’t come from any speaker she could see. It seemed to echo from the very air. She swallowed, throat tight.

“Okay,” she said aloud. “That’s not creepy at all.”

She stepped fully inside.

The car was empty.

No, not empty—clean. Too clean. The city’s usual trains were a collage of graffiti and scuff marks, half-peeled ads, forgotten flyers, mysterious stains that no one questioned. This car looked untouched. Seats lined both sides, dark green cushions unwrinkled. Vertical poles gleamed, polished, no sticky fingerprints in sight.

Near the ceiling, the route map was wrong.

Emily stepped closer, frowning up at it. She knew the layout of the green line by heart—Jeremy had drilled it into her with trivia quizzes on their long rides home. But this map wasn’t the green line. The river wasn’t where it should be. Neighborhood names were half unfamiliar, half missing. A few stops were marked only with symbols instead of words.

Her gaze caught on the end of the line.

There, instead of the usual terminus, was a simple icon: a circle with a vertical line through it. No label. No explanation.

She shivered.

The doors chimed behind her.

“Wait—” Emily spun.

The platform seemed farther away for a second, like the car had stretched. Then, with a smooth, final hiss, the doors slid shut.

Her stomach flipped.

"No, no, no—hey!" She lunged forward and hit the button beside the door. It didn't light up. The doors didn't respond.

From somewhere overhead, that soft voice spoke again.

"Destination confirmed," it said. "Thirteenth Station."

Her blood ran cold.

"You have got to be kidding me," she whispered.

The train lurched.

It wasn't like the usual jerk-and-screech of a subway car starting up. This felt like an elevator dropping a few inches before catching itself, a smooth, gliding pull that made her knees buckle. She grabbed a pole, knuckles white.

Outside the windows, the tunnel began to move.

At first, it looked normal enough—rough concrete walls, occasional lights blurring by. But as the train picked up speed, the lights stretched, dragging into lines of white. The concrete darkened. The usual tags and graffiti marks vanished, replaced by long, smooth stretches of something else—stone, maybe, or metal, but older, worn in a way that made her teeth ache to look at it.

The overhead lights in the car flickered.

A chill slid down the back of her neck, the kind that felt like someone breathing there.

"Jeremy," she whispered, voice shaking. "I swear to god, if you got on this thing..."

She imagined him sitting where she was now, feet bouncing, eyes shining with that mix of fear and excitement. Emily had always been the anchor—the one who double-checked the plan, carried the spare charger, remembered train times and closing hours. Jeremy leaped first. She pulled him back when he went too far.

But this time, she hadn't been there. He'd come alone.

And now she was following a ghost train to a station that didn't exist.

The overhead map flickered. For a second, the little digital light that usually tracked the train's progress zipped past the normal sequence of numbers. 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12—

It stopped on a blank space.

Slowly, the number **13** burned into existence.

The car grew colder.

Emily hugged her arms around herself, breath fogging faintly in the air. Her reflection in the window looked paler than she felt, eyes too wide.

The tunnel outside changed again.

The walls fell away completely, replaced by darkness. Not the soft, smudged darkness of a city night, but a thick, swallowing black that seemed to press against the glass. Every now and then, something like light moved out there—too slow to be passing lamps, too deliberate to be random.

Shapes. Distant. Watching.

“Don’t look at it,” she told herself, voice barely audible. “Just... don’t.”

Instead, she focused on the floor, on the little emergency hammer case near the door, on the printed evacuation instructions that had no logo, no transit authority name. Just symbols. Triangle, circle, that same vertical line.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket.

Emily nearly jumped out of her skin. She yanked it out, hands trembling so much she almost dropped it.

A new notification.

Her breath caught.

For a second, hope flared so hard it hurt. *Jeremy. Please be Jeremy. Please be some stupid meme you forgot to send.*

It wasn’t.

UNKNOWN SENDER: **You shouldn’t be on this train.**

Her heart slammed against her ribs.

The message app didn’t show a number. No contact name, no digits, nothing. Just **Unknown**. She tried to reply, thumb fumbling over the keys.

EMILY: who is this

EMILY: where is jeremy

EMILY: do you know where he is??

Three dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again.

UNKNOWN SENDER: **Turn back at the next stop.**

UNKNOWN SENDER: **If you can.**

Her mouth went dry.

The train began to slow.

From somewhere ahead in the darkness, a faint light appeared, growing larger, brighter, resolving slowly into something she recognized all too well: a platform. Columns. Tiled walls.

A station.

Her pulse fluttered like trapped wings.

Along the edge of the platform, in stark white letters that hadn't been there on any map she'd ever seen, she saw it:

STATION 13

The train rolled to a stop.

The doors chimed.

"Thirteenth Station," the soft voice said. "Passengers may disembark."

Emily stared at the doors.

If she stepped off, there was no guarantee she'd find Jeremy.

But if she didn't...

She tightened her grip on her backpack strap until her knuckles ached.

"Okay," she whispered, anger rising to cut through her fear. "Fine. You wanted to prove it's real, idiot? I'm here. I'm coming to get you."

The doors slid open with a hiss.

Cold air poured in, carrying with it a strange smell—like rain on hot asphalt, old paper, and something metallic underneath, sharp and coppery.

Emily stepped out onto the platform of the Thirteenth Station.

Chapter Two – The Girl on the Platform

The moment Emily stepped off the train, the doors slid shut behind her with a heavy, final sound. A lock. A seal. A choice she could no longer undo.

The hum of the train faded as it drifted down the tunnel—too fast, too smooth, like it wasn't rolling on wheels at all but gliding through air. Within seconds, it was swallowed by darkness.

Emily stood alone.

The platform stretched out on both sides, long and unnervingly empty. No advertisements. No maps. No graffiti. Just pale tiles that reflected a cold, bluish light from fixtures overhead. The walls were tiled too, but the color shifted as she looked at them—off-white one second, a faint bruised grey the next.

The air smelled of dust, rain, and old metal.

Her phone buzzed again.

She flinched and yanked it out.

UNKNOWN SENDER: *If you can still go back, do it now.*

She spun toward the tunnel where the train had disappeared.

Too late.

The dark swallowed everything—no distant lights, no rails gleaming, nothing but an oppressive void that felt alive.

“Great,” she muttered. “Love that for me.”

Not wanting to stand in one spot like a horror-movie extra waiting to die, she forced her legs to move. Each step echoed sharply off the walls, too loud for a place this empty.

Across the platform, she saw something that made her heart leap to her throat.

A person.

Standing still. Silhouetted under one flickering light.

Emily froze. “Jeremy?”

The figure didn't respond.

She took a hesitant step forward.

"Jeremy? Is that you?"

Silence.

Then—movement. Soft, deliberate. The figure stepped deeper into the light, and Emily's stomach dropped.

It wasn't Jeremy.

It was a girl. Maybe sixteen or seventeen. Short black hair cut just above her shoulders, a jacket too thin for the cold, knees turned inward like she was trying to make herself smaller. Her skin looked pale under the harsh lights, and her eyes—

Her eyes reflected the light strangely. Almost too bright. Almost metallic.

The girl didn't move toward Emily. Didn't run or scream. She just tilted her head like a confused bird.

Emily swallowed. "Uh... hi."

The girl blinked once.

Then, quietly: "Why did you get off?"

Her voice was soft, raspy, like she hadn't used it in a long time.

Emily cleared her throat. "I— I'm looking for someone. My friend disappeared. I think he got on this train."

The girl stared at her for a long, uncomfortable moment.

Then she whispered, "You shouldn't be here."

Emily let out a dry laugh. "Yeah, well, apparently neither should he."

The girl stepped backward, panic flickering across her face. "No. You don't understand. This place isn't for you. The station chooses who it takes."

Emily stiffened. "I wasn't chosen. I came here on purpose."

"That's worse," the girl said.

A metallic groan echoed through the tunnels—long, low, and unnatural, like steel being bent by unseen hands. The girl flinched and hugged herself.

“What was that?” Emily asked.

The girl shook her head. “You need to keep moving. If you stay still too long, it notices.”

“It?” Emily echoed.

The girl didn’t answer.

Emily stepped closer. “What’s your name?”

The girl hesitated.

“...Marisol.”

Emily exhaled. “Okay, Marisol. I’m Emily. And I need to find Jeremy.”

Marisol’s gaze flicked toward the far side of the station where a single staircase led upward into shadow.

“No one goes up there,” she whispered. “Not if they want to leave.”

“So where do they go?”

Marisol pointed toward the opposite end of the platform—the darker side, where the lights flickered more.

“The tracks,” she said. “He might have gone down.”

Emily’s pulse thudded hard. “He climbed onto the tracks?”

“He wouldn’t be the first.”

A cold shock traveled down Emily’s spine. “Why? What’s down there?”

Marisol hesitated again. Her lips trembled like she didn’t want to say the words.

“There are doors.”

“Doors,” Emily repeated slowly. “Like... maintenance tunnels?”

Marisol shook her head.

“No. Doors to places that aren’t supposed to exist.”

Emily stared at her. “What kind of places?”

Marisol’s eyes sharpened with something like fear. “Places the train stops for only once.”

Emily took a step back, heart pounding.

The metallic groan echoed again—closer this time.

Marisol's head snapped to the side. "It's coming."

"*What is coming?*" Emily demanded.

Marisol didn't answer. She whispered only: "Run."

The lights overhead flickered violently, buzzing like bugs trapped in glass.

A shadow moved deeper in the tunnel.

Not a person.

Something bigger.

Emily grabbed Marisol's wrist. "Come on!"

The two of them sprinted toward the darker end of the platform, their footsteps cracking against the tiles. Emily didn't dare look behind her, but she felt the shift of air—heavy, cold, wrong—sweeping out of the tunnel.

Her breath hitched. She tightened her grip on Marisol. "Where are the doors!?"

Marisol pointed. "Down there—past the last lamp!"

They reached the end of the platform. A dim maintenance ladder descended into darkness.

Emily stared at it.

"That leads to the tracks?"

"Yes!"

The air behind them grew heavier.

Something was coming out of the tunnel.

Something that clicked.

Something that breathed in long, shuddering pulls like it was tasting the air.

Emily didn't think.

She climbed.

Marisol scrambled down after her, boots clanging on the ladder. The moment Emily's feet hit the gravel below, the station lights above them went out all at once.

In the pitch black, something massive stepped onto the platform with a slow, wet thud.

Emily grabbed Marisol's hand.

"Run. Now."

Together, they sprinted down the tracks, swallowed by darkness—toward the doors Jeremy might have opened, and toward something far worse waiting beyond them.

Chapter Three – The Doors That Don't Belong Here

Gravel crunched under Emily's boots as she and Marisol bolted down the tracks, the tunnel swallowing them whole. The air was thicker here—damp, metallic, vibrating faintly with the echo of whatever had climbed onto the platform above.

Behind them, the creature's steps thudded, slow but deliberate.

Emily risked a glance over her shoulder.

She wished she hadn't.

Something tall—too tall—was moving along the platform edge. Backlit by the faint emergency lights, its limbs seemed too long, too jointed, its head tilted like it was listening for them.

A scraping sound swept across the concrete, like claws dragging.

Emily jerked her gaze forward. "Tell me that thing doesn't come down here."

Marisol didn't answer.

"Marisol!"

"It... depends," Marisol whispered. "Sometimes it does."

Emily swore under her breath. "Great. Fantastic. Love the consistent rules in this place."

Shadows crowded in from all angles as their footsteps splattered gravel. The tunnel lights overhead flickered randomly, creating flashes of white that made everything look like a stuttering nightmare.

"Where are these doors?" Emily demanded.

Marisol pointed ahead. “There—keep going!”

Emily squinted. At first, she saw nothing but darkness. Then the tunnel widened slightly, and shapes began to emerge on the far wall.

Rectangles.

Five of them.

Unevenly spaced, each one shaped like a door—but not subway or maintenance doors. These looked like they belonged to completely different buildings:

A rusted iron door with a porthole.

A wooden door with peeling blue paint.

A glass-paneled office door with no handles.

A metal hatch covered in bolts.

A simple white bedroom door, clean and out of place.

None of them had signs or markings.

None belonged to a train tunnel.

Emily slowed, breath ragged. “Okay... creepy Silent Hill vibes. Love that.”

Marisol tugged her forward. “We have to choose one.”

Emily stopped dead. “What do you mean *choose one?*”

Marisol’s face was pale. “They lead to different places. The doors... they’re not random. They change. They shift depending on who’s looking for them.”

Emily’s stomach twisted. “So Jeremy could have gone through any of these.”

“Yes.”

“So how do I know which one he picked?”

Marisol looked down, voice trembling. “You don’t.”

The creature above let out a sound—a guttural, choking click that carried through the tunnel like metal grinding against bone.

Emily winced. “Okay, we don’t have time for your cryptic, ghost-girl answer. Pick something. Anything.”

Marisol pointed to the door with the peeling blue paint. “That one.”

“Why that one?”

“Because it feels wrong,” Marisol whispered.

Emily stared. “What—why would we—why is that the reason!?”

“Because the Station takes what it’s missing,” Marisol said. “It knows what you want. It knows what you’re afraid of. The safest door is almost never the right one.”

Emily didn’t have time to argue.

A heavy thud sounded behind them.

The creature had stepped off the platform.

Emily grabbed the blue-painted door and yanked it open.

A gust of cold air blasted out, carrying the smell of pine trees and wet dirt. Beyond the threshold was not concrete—it was a forest at night. Trees stretched tall and silent under a silver moon, and a dirt path wound forward into darkness.

“What the hell—”

Marisol shoved her inside. “Go! If the door closes, we’re trapped!”

Emily stumbled forward, boots sinking into soft soil. Marisol leapt in behind her just as—

SLAM.

The door shut.

The click of the latch echoed like a gunshot through the trees.

For a moment, Emily stood frozen, chest heaving, staring at the closed door behind them.

It no longer looked like a blue-painted house door.

It looked like a tree trunk.

A solid, unbroken tree trunk.

“What... what the hell...?” Emily whispered.

Marisol bent over, bracing her hands on her knees, breath shaking. “The Station doesn’t let you go back.”

Emily pressed her palm against the bark where the door had been. Smooth. Cold. No hinges. No knob. No seam.

Panic began to crawl up her throat.

“Okay,” Emily said, forcing breath into her lungs. “We’re stuck in a haunted botanical escape room. Awesome. Do we... do we at least know where this is?”

Marisol shook her head. “Every door leads somewhere different. Somewhere the Station thinks you need to be.”

“Great,” Emily muttered. “The Station has opinions. Love that.”

She took a step back and scanned the forest.

Far above, the moon was unnaturally bright—too large, too white, with faint rings around it like an oil sheen. Shadows pooled under the trees, so deep they looked bottomless.

Somewhere in the distance, something howled.

Not a wolf.

Not anything Emily had heard before.

She swallowed hard. “Okay. Okay, no big deal. A cursed moon. An eldritch subwoofer wolf. Perfect.”

“We need to move,” Marisol whispered. “Doors don’t stay where they are for long. If we don’t find the next one before this place shifts—”

“Shift?” Emily echoed. “What do you mean shift?”

“The world changes,” Marisol said. “Sometimes slowly. Sometimes all at once.”

Emily stared at her. “You are a wealth of comforting information.”

Marisol didn’t smile. “I’m trying to help you.”

Emily paused. “How long have you been here?”

The girl hesitated.

Then she whispered: “I don’t know anymore.”

A chill rattled down Emily’s spine.

Before she could speak, a faint crunch sounded behind them—twigs snapping under careful, slow footsteps.

Emily’s breath hitched.

Marisol grabbed her wrist. “Run.”

Emily didn’t argue.

They sprinted down the dirt path, branches whipping at their arms, the moon watching them like a giant, unblinking eye.

Behind them, the footsteps grew louder.

Whatever was following them wasn't running.

It didn't need to.

It knew they would tire first.

Emily struggled to keep up, her lungs burning, legs shaking. "We—need—another door!"

"We will," Marisol panted. "They appear near danger."

"Well fantastic," Emily shot back, "because we have a LOT OF THAT RIGHT NOW!"

They raced around a bend in the path—and stopped short.

Ahead of them, in a clearing, stood a small wooden shed. Crooked. Rotted. Tilting slightly to one side.

Its door—barely hanging on by two rusted hinges—glowed faintly around the edges.

"Another door," Marisol breathed.

Emily grabbed the handle.

It didn't budge.

"No no no—not this trope—"

She yanked harder.

Behind them, branches cracked loudly.

Marisol screamed, "Hurry!"

Emily put her shoulder into it and slammed.

The door burst inward.

A blinding white light flooded out.

Without thinking, she shoved Marisol through and threw herself in after her.

The moment they crossed the threshold, the door slammed shut.

And the forest was gone.

Emily lay on her back, blinking up at fluorescent lights.
The air smelled like antiseptic and old plastic.

They were in a hallway.

A hospital hallway.

Marisol scrambled to her feet, eyes wide with panic. "No—no, not here—"

Emily pushed herself upright. "You know this place?"

Marisol shook her head violently. "We have to leave. Now."

Emily hesitated. "Wait—what's wrong? What is this place?"

Marisol's voice cracked.

"It's one of the bad worlds."

Emily's blood ran cold. "Bad like...?"

A PA system crackled overhead.

Then a voice—flat, emotionless—said:

"Code Black. All unauthorized patients must be returned to their rooms."

Far down the hall, something began to move.

Not walking.

Rolling.

Something on wheels.

Emily grabbed Marisol's arm. "Okay. Run again."

Marisol nodded, trembling. "Run."

Together, they sprinted down the sterile corridor deeper into the nightmare world the Thirteenth Station had chosen for them next.

Chapter Four – The Hospital With No Exits

Emily's sneakers squeaked against the waxed floor as she and Marisol sprinted down the long hospital corridor. The fluorescent lights flickered overhead, turning the world into a series of sharp white flashes and deep, stuttering shadows.

Behind them, the thing on wheels came closer.

Not a wheelchair.

Not a gurney.

Something heavier.

Metal grinding on tile.

Marisol glanced back, face pale. "It's one of them—hurry!"

"One of—one of WHAT?" Emily demanded, lungs burning.

Marisol didn't answer. She only ran faster.

The hallway stretched impossibly long, doors lining both sides. Emily tried each one they passed:

Locked.

Locked.

Locked.

Each window on the door showed the same thing: a dark, empty room. No beds. No machines. Just an impossible blackness swallowing everything inside.

This wasn't a real hospital.

This was a world dressed up like one.

"Left!" Marisol shouted.

They skidded around a corner so fast Emily nearly slipped. The grinding behind them echoed louder now—an aggressive, mechanical shriek that sounded like metal teeth chewing the floor.

Emily risked a glance over her shoulder—

—and immediately wished she hadn't.

A **hospital bed** was rolling after them.

Pushed by no one.

Guided by nothing.

Its rusted wheels sparked faintly with each rotation, screeching against the tile. Leather restraints hung from the sides and flapped like dead hands. A thick black body bag lay strapped to the mattress—long, bulging, twitching.

The bag *moved*.

A fist-shaped bulge slammed outward against the zipper, straining to burst free.

Emily almost tripped over her own feet. “NOPE—NOPE—NOPE—NOPE—WHY—”

Marisol grabbed her arm and yanked. “Don’t look at it! Run!”

They tore down another corridor, weaving past overturned carts and flickering light panels. The PA system crackled again.

**“Code Black in Wing C.
Unauthorized patients detected.
Return to your rooms.”**

Emily spat, “I am NOT returning to ANY room in this nightmare!”

As they rounded a corner, the hospital bed slammed into the wall behind them hard enough to send dust raining down from the ceiling.

Marisol pointed frantically. “There—stairs!”

A red EXIT sign flickered above a door at the end of the corridor.

Emily shoved the door open—and froze.

The stairs didn’t lead up or down.

They spiraled into darkness like a twisted corkscrew, repeating endlessly, without landing or railing.

“That’s not real,” Emily whispered.

“It doesn’t matter!” Marisol cried. “It might take us to a door!”

“Or it might take us to hell!” Emily snapped.

“It’s better than staying here!”

The grinding grew louder—closer.

The hospital bed barreled around the corner, restraints flapping wildly.

Emily grabbed Marisol’s hand. “Fine! We’re taking the nightmare stairs!”

They darted into the stairwell.

Marisol slammed the door behind them.

The grinding stopped instantly.

Emily frowned. "Did... did it leave?"

"No." Marisol stepped back from the door like it might explode. "It's thinking."

"That's WORSE."

They turned to face the stairs.

Emily wiped sweat from her forehead. "Okay. We go until we find something that looks like a door. Or a portal. Or whatever cursed IKEA exit this place has."

Marisol nodded shakily.

They stepped onto the first stair.

It creaked loudly—too loudly—as if the entire stairwell held its breath.

Second stair.

Third stair.

The air grew colder.

Emily's breath puffed visibly in front of her face. "Is it supposed to get colder?"

"No," Marisol whispered. "That means—"

A loud metallic clang shattered the silence behind them.

Emily's blood froze.

The door at the top of the stairwell shook violently.

CLANG.

Something slammed into it from the other side.

CLANG.

A dent appeared in the middle of the metal.

Marisol grabbed Emily's wrist. "Run!"

They bolted down the spiraling stairs—down, down, down—the steps twisting so tightly that Emily grew dizzy. The stairwell kept looping back on itself like they were running in circles.

“Emily!” Marisol shouted, her voice sharp with terror. “Look!”

Ahead of them, around the next turn—

A door.

Not a hospital door.

A **red wooden door** with gold trim like something out of an old theater or opera house.

Light spilled from beneath the frame, pulsing softly.

Emily felt a surge of hope. “YES! A door! Come on!”

They raced toward it—

CRASH.

The stairwell door above burst open.

Emily didn’t need to look back to know the hospital bed had forced its way inside.

The sound of scraping metal wheels careened down the metal stairs like a demon being dragged by chains.

“Marisol—MOVE!”

Marisol sprinted faster, nearly tripping on the last steps. Emily shoved her forward as they reached the red door.

Marisol grabbed the knob—it was cold, almost icy—and twisted.

Nothing.

“It’s locked!” she gasped.

Emily swore. “Of COURSE it is!”

The metal scraping thundered closer.

Emily pushed Marisol aside, gripped the knob with both hands, and slammed her shoulder into the door—

Once.
Twice.
Three times.

“OPEN!” she screamed. “OPEN, damn it!”

The pressure on the knob gave suddenly and the door swung inward.

Emily didn’t wait. She grabbed Marisol, yanked her through, and threw her weight into slamming it shut behind them.

The door clicked.

Marisol collapsed to her knees, shaking.

Emily slid down against the door, chest heaving.

Silence.

No bed.
No scraping.
No metal.

Just darkness—and the faint flicker of gold light.

Emily forced her breathing to slow. “Okay... okay... we’re alive. I think.”

Marisol nodded weakly, wiping tears from her eyes.

Emily glanced around, letting her eyes adjust.

They were in a hallway. Narrow. Elegant. Deep red wallpaper peeling in curling strips. Gold sconces flickered with candle-like bulbs, casting long shadows.

A soft violin played somewhere distant—a slow, haunting melody.

Emily straightened. “Where the hell are we now?”

Marisol rose unsteadily. “We’re still inside the Station’s world. Every door leads deeper. You don’t escape until the Station decides you’re done.”

Emily clenched her jaw. “Well too bad. I decide when I’m done. And I’m not leaving without Jeremy.”

Marisol looked at her with a fear Emily didn’t understand.

“You don’t get it,” she whispered. “Some people don’t find who they’re looking for.”

Emily stepped forward, fire in her voice.

“Then we’ll be the exception.”

But as they began walking down the narrow, red-lit hallway...

...a shadow moved just behind them.

Not human.

Tall.

Silent.

Following.

Chapter Five – The Hallway That Watches

The hallway stretched ahead like an artery—narrow, red, pulsing faintly with the flicker of the gold sconces. The violin music grew louder as Emily and Marisol walked, slow and careful, the sound echoing off the walls like a funeral waltz.

Emily kept glancing behind her.

The shadow she’d seen before was gone.

Or hiding.

“Marisol,” Emily whispered, “is something following us?”

Marisol didn’t answer at first. Her shoulders were rigid, her steps small and deliberate, like someone afraid to disturb the air.

“Marisol.”

“Yes,” she said softly. “It follows everyone.”

Emily swallowed. “Why?”

“Because this is a place that remembers fear,” Marisol said. “And it wants to see yours.”

Emily stiffened. “Well it can get in line behind everything else in this nightmare.”

Marisol didn't smile.

As they continued forward, the violin music deepened, shifting from a gentle waltz to something sharper, discordant—like too many notes being forced into a song that didn't want them.

Emily rubbed her arms. "Okay, we're in Haunted Theater Land now. Please tell me doors exist here too."

"There are always more doors," Marisol said. "But the places get worse."

Emily shot her a look. "You really need to work on the part where you reassure people."

Marisol lowered her eyes. "I'm sorry."

Emily sighed. "No. I—sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

Silence stretched between them.

The hallway curved slightly, and the walls began to tilt inward—subtly at first, then more noticeably, until the corridor felt like it was leaning toward them, listening.

Emily pointed weakly. "Um. That wasn't happening before, right?"

"No," Marisol whispered. "This place shifts faster than the woods."

"Yeah, I got that memo."

They kept moving, shadows bending strangely along the walls, stretching unnaturally as if reaching for them.

Then—voices.

Soft at first.

Murmurs. Whispers just ahead.

Emily froze. "Do you hear that?"

Marisol nodded. "They're coming."

"Who?"

Marisol's lip trembled. "The others."

The violin cut off abruptly.

In the silence that followed, footsteps began to echo.

Slow.
Measured.
Many of them.

Emily grabbed Marisol's wrist. "Hide?"

"There's nowhere to hide," Marisol whispered. "Hallways never give you hiding places."

"Then we run."

Marisol hesitated. "If we run... sometimes they run too."

Emily's jaw tightened. "Then we run faster."

They sprinted down the corridor just as figures appeared at the far end—silhouettes at first, then more defined as they stepped into the dim light.

Patients.

Dozens of them.

Hospital gowns, bare feet dragging, IV poles trailing behind them.

Their heads hung at unnatural angles.

Some moved in jerks and spasms.
Others walked in slow, perfect unison.
All of them whispered in a single, breathy chorus:

"Unauthorized... unauthorized... unauthorized..."

Emily didn't look back again.

She just ran.

The hallway tightened further, tilting sharply like a sinking ship. The floor buckled beneath their feet. The sconces flickered violently, bulbs popping one by one.

Emily's breath hitched. "Door! We need a DOOR!"

Marisol shouted, "There—left!"

To their left, a panel of the wall bulged outward, seams forming where none existed before. A wooden door pushed itself into reality—warped and malformed, but a door nonetheless.

Emily skidded to a stop and grabbed the knob.

Locked.

“Oh for the love of—”

She slammed her shoulder into it.

Nothing.

Marisol tugged at her sleeve. “Emily—look!”

The patient figures were closer now, their whispers overlapping into a hiss:

“Unauthorized. Unauthorized. Unauthorized.”

Dark liquid dripped from their IV bags.

Pale fingers reached out.

Feet dragged faster.

Emily kicked the door—hard.

It rattled.

“Come ON!”

Marisol pressed her hand against the doorframe, whispering something in a language Emily didn’t recognize. The wood shivered.

Emily hit it again.

CRACK.

The frame split.

Emily shoved Marisol through first, then forced herself inside just as fingers brushed the back of her hoodie.

She slammed the door shut and collapsed against it, chest heaving.

On the other side, the whispers intensified—then faded, as if the crowd had passed by, searching elsewhere.

Emily waited until the air fell still.

Then she stood up slowly and looked around.

This wasn’t a hallway.

It was a **room**.

A wide one. Circular. Deep red carpet. Heavy velvet curtains draped over tall windows—though the windows showed nothing but black, like someone had painted over them.

In the center of the room sat a single grand piano.
Glossy. Black. Perfect.
Lit by one spotlight from above.

Emily blinked. "Okay. Haunted opera house deluxe edition."

Marisol stared at the piano like it terrified her. "We shouldn't be here."

Emily stepped closer. "Why not?"

Marisol's voice dropped to a tremble.

"Because this world... it remembers him."

Emily's heart skipped. "Jeremy?"

Marisol nodded slowly.

"This is where he came."

Emily moved toward her, gripping her shoulders. "Marisol—did you SEE him? Is he alive? Is he—"

Before Marisol could answer, the piano lid snapped open with a violent *bang*.

Emily jumped back.

A single note played on its own.

Low. Resonant.
Like something beneath the keyboard had breathed across the strings.

The spotlight shifted.

Not toward the piano.

Toward the curtains behind it.

Emily's pulse thundered.

"What... what is it?" she whispered.

Marisol backed away, eyes wide with horror.

The curtains fluttered.

Something moved behind them.

Tall.

Thin.

Shifting slowly.

A voice—deep, echoing, disembodied—rolled through the room:

**“Unauthorized patient...
you are not who I was promised.”**

Emily's blood turned to ice.

Marisol grabbed her hand. “Emily. We have to run.”

Emily's voice trembled. “What is that?”

“The one who watches the doors,” Marisol whispered. “The one the Station sends when someone breaks the rules.”

Emily felt the shadow behind the curtains lean forward.

“Where is the boy?”

Emily's breath caught.

It knew Jeremy.

It was *looking* for him.

Emily squeezed Marisol's hand, fear hardening into determination.

“We're leaving,” she whispered. “Right now.”

But when they turned—

All the doors in the circular room had vanished.

All but one.

A lone, narrow door with no handle.

A door that seemed to breathe.

The voice behind the curtains hissed:

**“Run.
If you can.”**

Emily didn't need to be told twice.

She grabbed Marisol, and together, they sprinted for the breathing door—
—as the curtain behind them slowly began to rise.

Chapter Six – The Door That Breathes

Emily didn't look back.

Not at the rising curtain.
Not at the shadow unfolding behind it.
Not at the thing that demanded Jeremy's whereabouts like it already owned him.

She just ran.

The breathing door loomed ahead—narrow, pulsing slightly, as if air moved in and out of its wooden surface.

Marisol clung to her arm, stumbling to keep up. “Emily—Emily, wait—”

“Nope!” Emily barked. “No talking! Only running and then possibly screaming!”

Behind them, the curtain finished rising.

A deep, guttural exhale rippled through the room—so heavy it bent the air.

Emily felt the vibration in her ribs.

Then the voice came again, louder this time:

**“You were not chosen.
The boy was chosen.
Return him.”**

Emily practically threw herself at the door. “TOO BAD! HE’S MINE!”

The door pulsed faster, as if startled.

Emily grabbed Marisol’s hand and yanked it open—

A rush of cold, wet air exploded out, slamming into them like a tidal wave. Emily stumbled but kept her grip on Marisol, dragging her over the threshold.

They both fell through—

—into darkness.

For a moment, there was no floor. No ceiling.
Only falling.

Wind whipped Emily's hair. Her stomach lurched. Marisol screamed—short, sharp, terrified.

Then—

SPLASH.

Ice-cold water swallowed them whole.

Emily fought upward, lungs burning, kicking through the freezing dark until her head broke the surface.

She gasped and choked, gulping air.

They were in a **lake**.

A vast, moonlit lake surrounded by towering cliffs. Fog drifted across the water, thick and swirling.

Marisol surfaced beside her, coughing violently. Emily grabbed her, keeping them both afloat.

“What—kind of—door—leads to THIS!?” Emily sputtered.

Marisol wiped water from her face, shivering. “A bad one. A very bad one.”

Emily's jaw clenched. “You're saying that like we've had ANY good ones.”

Marisol drifted closer, arms trembling. “Emily... I didn't want to tell you before but... the Station is changing the worlds faster than usual.”

Emily's brow furrowed. “What does that mean?”

“It means the boy—the friend you're looking for—it means **he's close.**”

Emily's eyes widened. “You sensed him?”

Marisol nodded shakily. “Yes. But so did... it.”

Emily's stomach lurched. “The curtain-creature?”

"That wasn't even its true form," Marisol whispered. "Just one of its masks."

Great. Fantastic. Exactly the vibes she wanted on a freezing ghost lake.

A faint ripple echoed behind them.

Emily turned sharply. "What was that?"

Marisol didn't answer.

Then—another ripple.

Then a third.

Growing closer.

The water around them vibrated.

Emily's blood went cold. "We need to move. Now."

Marisol pointed toward a faint light on the distant shore—an orange flicker barely visible through the mist.

"A fire," she gasped. "Someone else is here."

Emily tightened her grip around her friend's shoulder and kicked harder. "Then we swim. I don't care if it takes an hour—"

A **low, vibrating groan** rumbled beneath them.

Emily screamed, "WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT!?"

Marisol's voice shook. "The lake world has a guardian."

"A *what*?"

"A creature that keeps people from reaching the shore."

Emily's eyes widened. "WHAT KIND OF PUBLIC TRANSIT IS THIS!?"

Marisol didn't have time to answer.

Something massive brushed against Emily's leg.

Her heart nearly exploded.

She kicked wildly, pulling Marisol with her. "DON'T STOP MOVING!"

The fog thickened around them. Waves surged, small but violent. Emily's breaths came short and frantic.

The fire on shore flickered again—closer now, maybe only fifty yards.

Emily pushed harder. “We’re almost there!”

Another ripple.

Another groan.

Closer.

Something surfaced behind them—just a silhouette through the mist:

Long.

Thin.

Serpentine.

Watching.

Emily whispered, “Do. Not. Look. Back.”

Marisol whimpered. “Emily—”

“Don’t look—”

The creature let out a guttural, watery snarl.

Both girls screamed.

Emily dragged Marisol, kicking with everything she had left, toward the shore. The fire’s glow grew brighter, clearer.

A figure stood next to it.

Tall.

Human.

Shadows flickering over their face.

Emily blinked through the spray. “JEREMY?!”

The figure whipped toward her.

“Emily!?” a voice shouted.

Her heart nearly gave out.

She recognized that voice.

Jeremy.

Alive.

Emily choked out a sob. “JEREMY! WE’RE COMING!”

The creature behind them roared—closer now, the water rising around them like something massive prepared to breach.

Jeremy sprinted toward the shoreline. “SWIM! EMILY! HURRY!”

Emily dug deep, kicking through the frozen water, muscles screaming, lungs on fire.

Just twenty more yards.

Ten.

Five—

Something huge surged out of the lake behind them, blotting out the moon.

Emily didn’t look. She just pushed Marisol ahead, forcing her toward Jeremy.

They hit the shallows hard—knees smashing into rocks, hands scrambling through mud.

Jeremy grabbed Emily around the shoulders and yanked her out of the water just as Marisol collapsed beside them.

Emily coughed violently, trying to breathe, trying to process what was happening, trying not to break down completely.

Then Jeremy pulled her fully into his arms.

Emily froze.

Then she leaned into him, shaking.

“Holy shit,” Jeremy whispered into her hair. “Emily—Em, I thought—I thought you were gone. I thought—”

Emily hit his arm. “I should kill you. You dragged me into a cursed subway demon world, you absolute *nerd!*”

Jeremy laughed through tears. “Yeah. Yeah, that’s fair.”

Their moment was cut short as the lake creature slammed back into the depths, sending a wave crashing onto the shore.

Marisol crawled away from the water, trembling violently.

Jeremy grabbed both their hands. “Come on. We can’t stay out in the open.”

Emily wiped her face. “How long have you been here?”

Jeremy's expression darkened.

"...Long enough."

Emily stiffened. "Jeremy... what happened to you?"

Jeremy looked toward the fog.

Then back at Emily.

And for the first time since she'd known him, she saw fear in his eyes.

"The Station chose me," he whispered. "But I wasn't supposed to bring anyone else."

Emily's blood ran cold.

Marisol stared at him.

Then quietly said:

"You didn't bring her.
The Station did."

Emily's stomach twisted. "What does that mean?"

Jeremy swallowed hard.

"It means, Em... if the Station pulled you here, it's because it wants something from you too."

Chapter Seven – What the Station Wants

Emily sat beside the fire Jeremy had built—small, flickering, fighting against the fog that curled around them like grasping fingers. Her clothes dripped lake water onto the dirt, steam rising where droplets hit the flames.

Jeremy looked different.

Not physically—still messy hair, still that dumb hoodie he'd worn when he disappeared—but his eyes were older. Sharper. Like he'd seen too much in too little time.

Emily hugged her knees. "Start talking. Now."

Jeremy swallowed. “Emily, I swear, I didn’t want you to follow. I didn’t want anyone to end up here because of me.”

Emily’s voice cracked, half-laugh, half-sob. “Well congrats. Your ghost train field trip sucked.”

He looked down. “I know.”

Marisol sat apart from them, staring at the lake. Her face was pale, haunted in a way Emily didn’t fully understand. She hugged her arms around herself like she needed to hold something in.

Jeremy glanced at her, then back at Emily. “How did you find me? The Station shouldn’t have shown you a path here.”

Emily scoffed. “It didn’t show me anything. I just... followed a nightmare train to a platform from hell, got chased by something with claws, fell through two worlds, ran from demon patients, almost drowned, and yeah—found you next to a campfire like you’re waiting for a marshmallow roast.”

Jeremy winced. “Emily...”

“No,” she snapped. “Don’t ‘Emily’ me. You left. You vanished. You texted me some weird cryptic crap and then disappeared off the map. And I ended up here because I wasn’t going to sit on my ass while my best friend got eaten by whatever the hell lives in this place.”

Silence.

Then Jeremy’s voice—small, guilty. “I didn’t just wander in.”

Emily’s stomach dropped. “What do you mean?”

Jeremy’s gaze drifted to the lake, where faint ripples still disturbed the black water.

“The Station chose me,” he said. “It... marked me somehow.”

Emily blinked. “Marked?”

He nodded. “That day I texted you, I wasn’t joking about the Thirteenth Station. I’d been researching it for months. There were rumors online, stories in old transit archives, stuff hidden in city records. I thought it was an urban legend.”

He rubbed the back of his neck.

“But then—things started happening.”

“Like what?” Emily whispered.

Jeremy exhaled shakily. "I started... seeing the train."

Emily frowned. "What?"

"In reflections. In windows that shouldn't have shown anything. Once in the middle of a crosswalk—silent, like it was waiting. And every time, it was a little closer."

Emily's chest tightened. "Jeremy..."

"I tried to ignore it," he said, voice cracking. "Until one night I fell asleep on the regular line and... woke up on the wrong train."

Emily stiffened. "The Thirteenth."

He nodded. "Yeah."

Emily's heart twisted painfully. "So you didn't go on purpose. It took you."

Jeremy shook his head. "Not at first. But once you're marked—once the Station decides you're supposed to see it—there's no hiding from it."

Emily's voice was barely a whisper. "Why you?"

Jeremy didn't answer.

Not because he didn't know.

But because he didn't want to say.

Marisol spoke quietly from her spot near the shore. "The Station chooses people who don't know what they're looking for. People who are lost. People who want answers... or escapes."

Emily turned toward her. "And you? Why did it choose you?"

Marisol's expression flickered with something that looked like grief.

"It didn't choose me," she murmured. "I chose it."

Emily's blood chilled. "You... got on the train willingly?"

Marisol nodded.

"My world ended the day I lost someone I loved. The Station offered me a door." She looked down at her hands. "I walked through."

Jeremy frowned. "How long have you been here, Marisol?"

Marisol didn't look up. "Long enough that I forgot my real age."

Emily felt a pang of sympathy she didn't expect.

Marisol continued softly, "This place doesn't just trap people. It changes them. Some become wanderers, like me. Some become part of the worlds." She swallowed hard. "And some become tools of the Station."

Emily shivered. "Tools?"

Jeremy whispered, "Like the thing behind the curtain."

Marisol nodded. "That was one of them. A Collector."

Emily's heart thudded painfully. "It said you weren't who it was promised."

Marisol wrapped her arms around herself. "Collectors come when someone breaks the Station's rules. When someone tries to alter the path the Station laid out."

Emily stared at Jeremy. "What rules did you break?"

Jeremy swallowed hard. "I ran."

Emily's breath hitched. "You tried to escape."

"I didn't know what else to do!" Jeremy said, voice raw. "The first world it dropped me in... something happened there. Something followed me. I panicked. I bolted through the nearest door."

Marisol shook her head. "Running makes the Station angry. It means you refuse the lesson it's trying to give you."

Emily's voice trembled. "Lesson? Lesson about *what*?"

Marisol looked straight at her, eyes deep and sad.

"About yourself," she whispered.

Emily felt a cold wave of dread wash over her.

She stood abruptly. "No. No. We're not doing this existential horror bull. We're leaving. We're going home. All three of us."

Jeremy rose too. "Emily—"

"No!" She jabbed a finger into his chest. "You listen to me. You don't get to give up. You don't get to accept that this hell-train decides our fate. You're Jeremy—my best friend—the guy who ate stale vending-machine sandwiches unironically and made spreadsheets of his favorite fictional universes. You don't just disappear and become a prisoner."

Jeremy's eyes softened. His voice cracked. "Em... I'm trying. I swear I'm trying. But this place—it's not a maze. It's a mirror. And every world shows you something worse."

Emily clenched her fists. "Then we break the mirror."

Marisol stood slowly. "It isn't that simple. The Station doesn't want you to break anything. It wants something from you."

Emily exhaled sharply. "Then what does it want?"

Marisol hesitated.

Then—

"It wants you to choose."

"Choose what?"

Marisol looked between her and Jeremy.

Her voice was barely audible.

"Between saving him...
and saving yourself."

The fire sputtered.

The fog thickened.

And somewhere deep in the lake, something massive stirred in the dark.

Chapter Eight – The Choice the Station Demands

The fire crackled, its glow warping in the fog until the shadows looked like hands reaching inward. Emily stood still, heart hammering so loudly it felt like the lake itself could hear it.

Jeremy stared at Marisol.

Emily stared at Jeremy.

And Marisol stared at the ground, as if afraid to look at either of them.

Emily's voice was barely a whisper.

"Choose... between saving him and saving *myself*? What does that even mean?"

Marisol hugged her arms tighter. “Every person the Station takes carries a different weight. A regret. A fear. A desire. Something unresolved. It tests you with those things. Then it decides whether you’re ready to leave.”

Emily’s jaw tensed. “Are you saying saving Jeremy means failing some test?”

“No.” Marisol shook her head. “The Station’s test isn’t logical. It’s… personal. Emotional. It pushes you against your deepest fear and waits to see which path you take.”

Emily scoffed. “Well that’s stupid.”

But her voice shook.

Jeremy stepped closer, wiping water from his hair. “Emily… what are you afraid of?”

“What?” she snapped, too quickly.

“What scares you the most in the entire world?” he asked softly.

Emily wanted to tell him to shut up.

To drop it.

To let her focus on escaping.

But the Station was listening.

Marisol knew it.

Jeremy knew it.

And deep down, Emily knew it too.

She exhaled shakily. “Losing people.”

Jeremy blinked. “Em—”

“No, let me finish.” Her voice cracked. “Everyone leaves. My dad. My mom. Friends. People who said they’d stay. And every time I get close to someone, every time I care too much… it’s like I’m waiting for them to vanish.”

Jeremy’s expression softened painfully.

“And you,” Emily continued, her throat tightening, “you were the one person who didn’t. And then you did. So yeah. My biggest fear? Losing you.”

Jeremy looked gutted. “Emily… ”

Marisol took a shaky step forward. “That’s exactly what the Station wants.”

Emily shot her a glare. “Why? So it can torture me with it?”

“No.” Marisol’s voice trembled. “So it can use it.”

Emily frowned. “Use it how?”

Marisol pointed toward the lake.

The fog parted.

A second fire burned in the distance.

Emily froze.

“That wasn’t there before.”

“No,” Marisol whispered. “It wasn’t. The Station is giving you a path... and another.”

Jeremy’s face paled. “Em... I think this is it.”

Emily’s breath hitched. “What does that mean?”

Marisol closed her eyes. “One fire leads to safety. The other leads to him.”

Jeremy grabbed Emily’s wrist. “Don’t. Don’t listen to this. There’s always a third option. There has to be.”

But Marisol shook her head. “There isn’t. Not here.”

Emily’s heart pounded so hard she felt dizzy. “Which one is which?”

Marisol gave her a look that was somehow apologetic and terrified.

“That’s what you choose.”

Emily stared between the two flames.

The closer fire—where they stood now—felt warm, real, grounding.

The one in the distance flickered oddly, like it breathed.

Emily whispered, “So if I choose the wrong one...”

Marisol finished the sentence quietly:

“You might leave without him. Or die trying to stay.”

Jeremy stepped between them. “Emily. Look at me.”

She did.

His brown eyes—always bright, always full of energy and stupid jokes—looked different now. Tired. Fragile. Scared in a way he tried to hide.

“You don’t owe me your life,” he said. “If you get the chance to go home—take it. Please. I couldn’t live with myself if you got stuck in here because of me.”

Emily scoffed. “Bold of you to assume I’d let you be the tragic sacrifice.”

She pushed his shoulder. It was gentle, but her voice trembled.

“You idiot,” she whispered. “You didn’t drag me in here. I came because I can’t lose you.”

Jeremy swallowed hard. “Em...”

Marisol looked away, voice breaking. “People who choose to save others never pass the Station’s test.”

Emily turned sharply. “Then the Station can suck it.”

“Emily,” Marisol begged, “you don’t understand—if you fail a test badly enough, the Station doesn’t send you home. It keeps you. It turns you into part of the world you break.”

Emily froze.

“Like the patients,” she whispered. “Like the bed. Like the thing behind the curtain.”

Marisol nodded slowly.

Jeremy grabbed both Emily’s hands. “Listen to me. Whatever the Station wants from you—it’s not worth becoming like that. Promise me you won’t throw yourself away.”

Emily felt tears burn at the back of her eyes.

“I can’t make that promise,” she whispered.

Jeremy’s expression crumbled.

A soft wind curled around them.

The fire at their feet flickered low.

The distant fire flared brighter, taller, roaring with ghostly light.

A voice—faint, everywhere and nowhere—whispered through the fog:

“Choose, Emily.
Choose.”

Emily wiped her face with the back of her hand.

“No,” she whispered to the Station. “Not yet. I’m not choosing anything yet.”

She stood.

Jeremy stood.

Marisol stood.

Emily squared her shoulders.

“We’re going together,” she said. “To whichever one is real.”

Marisol’s eyes widened. “Emily, that’s—”

“Dangerous?” Emily snapped. “So is everything here!”

Jeremy gave a small, broken laugh. “Honestly, she’s got a point.”

Emily grabbed Jeremy’s sleeve, then Marisol’s.

“We stay together,” she said firmly. “Until we know which one leads home.”

Jeremy nodded.

Marisol hesitated—then nodded too.

Emily took a breath.

Then stepped toward the fog—

And somewhere deep in the lake behind them, the creature rose again.

Watching.

Waiting.

Because it knew something Emily didn’t:

There is no choice without consequence.

Chapter Nine – The Two Fires

Emily moved forward slowly, fog swirling around her shins like living threads. Every step felt heavier, as if the air itself tried to pull her back toward the safer fire.

Jeremy stuck close to her right side.

Marisol hovered on her left, trembling with each distant groan from the lake behind them.

Two fires.

Two paths.

Neither marked.

Neither trustworthy.

Emily clenched her jaw. "We move together. Nobody runs ahead. Nobody gets left behind."

Jeremy offered a weak smile. "You know, for someone whose coping mechanism is sarcasm, you make a terrifyingly good leader."

Emily elbowed him. "Keep talking and I'll feed you to the fog."

The banter helped. A little.

But the closer they walked toward the line where the two fires diverged—one faint and flickering behind them, the other rising like a beacon ahead—the heavier Emily's chest felt.

Marisol slowed. "Emily... be careful. The Station has never shown two endings this close together. It's... unusual."

Emily frowned. "Unusual how?"

Marisol didn't answer.

Jeremy stepped in. "Marisol. Tell her."

Marisol swallowed. "It usually means the Station is... conflicted."

Emily blinked. "Conflicted?"

"Yes." Marisol hugged her arms. "It doesn't know what it wants from you. Not yet."

Emily snorted. "Well, great. The eldritch public transit system has commitment issues."

Jeremy snickered under his breath. "Classic."

But Marisol only stared forward, troubled.

"The Station doesn't like indecision. It punishes confusion."

Emily swallowed hard. "Well too bad."

The fog parted.

Two paths emerged.

Path One: The Fire Behind

Dim. Warm. Gentle.

It flickered quietly like a campfire in a safe backyard.

The ground there felt solid.

Real.

Path Two: The Fire Ahead

Bright. Towering.

Flames twisting and stretching into shapes that didn't obey physics.

The ground there pulsed faintly, like a heartbeat.

Emily shivered. "Okay. Thoughts?"

Jeremy scratched the back of his neck. "The first one looks... normal-ish. Quiet. Comfortable."

Marisol shook her head. "That's why it's dangerous."

Jeremy frowned. "How? We almost died three times already. I could really use comfortable."

Marisol's voice softened. "The Station uses comfort to trap people. If you let go of your fear... if you choose too easily... you can get stuck inside a 'false ending.' A world built only to keep you."

Emily felt her skin prickle. "Like a cage."

Marisol nodded. "A beautiful one."

Jeremy took a step nearer to the brighter fire. "So then the big scary one is... what? The real ending?"

Marisol hesitated. "It's a challenge, not an ending."

Emily raised a brow. "And what's the challenge?"

Marisol shook her head. "Every world is different. It might test your courage. Or your regret. Or what you're willing to sacrifice."

Emily's stomach twisted. "Uh-huh. And how often do people fail these challenges?"

Marisol went silent.

Jeremy's voice dropped. "Marisol?"

"...Most of them," she whispered. "Most people fail."

Emily let out a long, shaky breath. "So our choices are: terrifying death-path or emotional manipulation trap?"

Marisol nodded.

Emily threw her hands up. "AMAZING. LOVE THAT FOR US."

Jeremy squeezed her shoulder gently. "You don't have to make the call alone."

Emily's irritation softened. "I know."

Jeremy stepped past her, eyes narrowed. "I say we take the bright one. The Station keeps trying to split us up. The safe one feels like bait."

Emily considered it.

Marisol trembled. "If you choose the bright fire, you must be willing to face what it shows you. The Station won't hold back. It doesn't like half-truths."

Emily turned to her. "What about you? What do you think?"

Marisol's lip quivered. "The bright one is right. But it's cruel."

Emily nodded slowly. "Then cruel it is."

She stepped forward, placing her foot onto the path toward the bright fire.

The fog recoiled.

The ground rumbled.

Something old and unseen stirred beneath her foot.

Jeremy grabbed her hand.

Marisol grabbed her sleeve.

Together, they walked.

The flame ahead towered higher with each step, burning white at its core, like a piece of the sun had been dropped into the fog.

But the closer they got...
the quieter everything became.

No lake.
No creature.
No wind.

Only silence.

Jeremy whispered, “Em... something’s wrong.”

Emily stopped.

Marisol gasped. “Emily—look.”

She did.

The fire ahead...
wasn’t a fire anymore.

It was a **door** made of flame.

A door shaped like two burning panels.

A door that opened inward as soon as Emily looked at it.

Light spilled out in a blinding wave—white, warm, but too intense to be real.

Jeremy shielded his eyes. “Why does it look like—”

Emily’s throat tightened.
She knew why.

It looked like a doorway to home.
To safety.
To everything she’d ever wanted to believe in.

Marisol shook her head violently. “Emily—don’t look into it! Don’t let it show you something you want!”

But it was too late.

The light pulsed—once, twice—
—then formed an image.

A street corner drenched in sunlight.
Students walking.
Cars passing.

And Jeremy.
Sitting on the curb.
Laughing.
Alive.
Safe.
Human.

Emily's chest cracked open.

"No," Marisol whispered. "Emily—it's not real. It's showing you what you'll lose."

Jeremy grabbed Emily's shoulder. "It's a trap. Don't go in."

But Emily couldn't breathe.

The vision shifted.

Now Emily stood beside him—older.
Smiling.
Whole.

A future she'd never allowed herself to imagine.
A future free of fear.
A future where the Station had never touched them.

Emily reached out—

Jeremy grabbed her wrist hard. "Emily! Emily, DON'T—"

The fiery doorway pulsed like a heart.

And as Emily blinked, the illusion inside changed again.

Now the doorway showed something else:

Emily. Alone.
Walking away from Jeremy.
Leaving him behind in the lake world.
Escaping.
Surviving.
Free.

Emily's hand shook violently.

Because the Station wasn't showing her hope.

It was showing her the cost.

Marisol pulled at her arm. “Emily! You must decide!”

Jeremy voice cracked. “Em—look at me. LOOK AT ME. Don’t look at it.”

She did.

His eyes were wet.

Terrified.

Begging.

“Whatever choice you think it wants,” he whispered, “choose the one that doesn’t involve losing yourself.”

Emily’s heart pounded—

The flames roared—

The doorway widened—

The world shook—

And Emily stepped forward.

Chapter Ten – What Lies Beyond the Burning Door

The moment Emily stepped forward, the world reacted.

The ground vibrated beneath her boots.

The fog twisted into spirals, pulling toward the fiery doorway like it was inhaling the entire lake world.

Jeremy cursed and lunged after her, grabbing her arm.

“Emily—STOP!”

She didn’t.

She couldn’t.

The flames didn’t burn her.

They parted for her, curling around her hand like soft warmth instead of fire.

Marisol screamed. “EMILY! DO NOT TOUCH IT—THE FIRST THING YOU TOUCH DECIDES YOUR PATH!”

Emily hesitated—just long enough for the doorway to shift again.

The illusion inside changed.

Now Emily saw:

A bright kitchen, morning sun spilling across the counter.

Coffee mugs lined up.

An open window.

A laugh—hers.

Another laugh—Jeremy's.

They looked older.

Comfortable.

Alive.

Emily's heart ached so violently she nearly doubled over.

"I... I want that."

Jeremy squeezed her wrist. "Em—let go of the fire. It's not real."

She blinked—then the vision twisted.

Her and Jeremy—older—laughing—

Then Jeremy flickered out.

Vanished.

And Emily remained.

Alone.

A dark apartment.

Cold.

Still.

Heartbroken.

The Station whispered through the flame:

"Choose yourself."

Emily stepped back in horror.

"NO," Jeremy snapped. "Don't listen to it. You hear me? DON'T."

The fire pulsed.

Another image formed—one that struck Emily like a physical blow.

A hospital bed.

Her mother—pale, dying.

Emily as a little girl—crying, begging her not to go.

Her mother whispering:

“Emily... save yourself.”

Emily staggered.

Tears blurred her vision.

“Em,” Jeremy said, voice breaking, “that’s not real. That’s not her. It’s using what you’re scared of. It’s cheating.”

Emily shook her head. “No. It’s right. I always... lose people. Every time I care—” Her voice cracked. “They leave. They die. Or they disappear. Maybe the Station is warning me what happens if I keep holding on.”

“No,” Jeremy whispered, voice raw. “Em, I’m still here.”

The doorway roared brighter.

The images shifted again:

Jeremy drowning in the lake.

Jeremy swallowed by shadow in the hospital.

Jeremy in the curtain room—dragged away by hands Emily couldn’t fight.

Every version ended the same:

Emily surviving.

Jeremy not.

She fell to her knees.

“Stop,” she whispered. “Please stop—”

Marisol grabbed her shoulders from behind.

“Emily,” she said urgently, “listen to me—this is not a prophecy. It’s a threat. The Station is trying to break you.”

Emily looked up at her, trembling. “Why? Why me?”

Marisol’s eyes filled with tears.

“Because you have the kind of heart the Station hates.”

“What kind of heart?” Emily whispered.

Marisol swallowed. “One that refuses to abandon what it loves.”

The doorway flared violently.

Wind howled through the world.

The lake churned like an ocean in a storm.

The vision changed one final time—

Emily standing on an empty subway platform, holding a single phone in her hand.

Jeremy gone.

Marisol gone.

No train.

Only silence.

Above her, the digital sign flickered:

STATION 13: PASSENGER: EMILY.

STATUS: ALONE.

Emily sobbed and covered her face. “I don’t want this—”

Jeremy pulled her into his arms.

Held her tight.

Spoke into her hair with a voice that cracked in half.

“Emily, please listen to me. You don’t have to save me. You just can’t let this thing tell you who you are.”

Emily’s voice trembled violently. “But I can’t lose you.”

He pulled back, eyes shining.

“But you also can’t lose *yourself* trying to hold on.”

Marisol knelt beside them, placing her small hands over theirs.

“The Station wants you isolated. Hopeless. Uncertain. That’s the real test.”

Emily wiped her eyes with shaking fingers. “Then what do I choose?”

Marisol whispered:

“You choose what scares you more.”

Emily stared at the burning doorway.

“I’m terrified of losing him.”

Marisol nodded. “And even more terrified of losing yourself. So the answer isn’t inside the fire.”

Emily froze.

Because she understood now.

The Station didn’t want her to choose a fire.

The Station wanted her to choose **fear**.

Whichever fire she stepped toward—it wanted her heart broken in the process.

Emily stood slowly.

Jeremy reached for her. “Em?”

She stepped backward—away from both fires.

Marisol gasped. “Emily—!”

Emily raised her voice, speaking clearly into the fog, into the flames, into the Station itself.

“No,” she said. “I’m not choosing either of your paths.”

The world went silent.

No fog.

No wind.

No sound.

Only the crackle of the one remaining fire.

Jeremy stiffened. “Em... I don’t think it likes that.”

Emily squared her shoulders. “Good.”

The ground shook violently.

The flames in the doorway flared—then flickered—then darkened.

A voice rose from everywhere and nowhere:

**“EMILY QUINN.
REFUSAL IS NOT A VALID CHOICE.”**

Emily shouted back at it:

“Watch me.”

The ground split open beneath their feet.

The world shattered.

The lake exploded into white.

The fire collapsed.

The sky cracked like glass.

Jeremy grabbed her hand.

Marisol grabbed her other.

And all three of them were ripped out of the lake world—

—into something far, far worse.

Chapter Eleven – The World Between

Emily hit the ground hard enough to knock the breath from her lungs.

Her vision blurred—white, then black, then white again—until shapes resolved around her. The air smelled like dust and ozone, like the aftermath of lightning striking too close.

She pushed herself up, head spinning.

And froze.

There was **no sky**.

No lake.

No fog.

No fire.

Just a vast, endless expanse—flat and smooth—like a floor made of glass or polished stone stretching into infinity.

Above her, instead of a sky, hung enormous panels—rectangular, floating, each showing flickering images like windows into other worlds:

A forest swaying in red mist...
A hospital corridor drenched in shadow...
A subway platform where the signs melted into symbols...
A child's bedroom full of breathing shadows...
A field of snow under a sky cracked open like a wound...

Each panel glowed faintly, humming like a power line.

Emily whispered, "Where... are we?"

Jeremy rose beside her, gripping his knee. "This looks like the world's creepiest Apple Store."

Even in terror, Emily snorted.

Marisol stood last—and when she did, her face went pale with recognition.

"No," she whispered. "No no no, we shouldn't be here. This is wrong."

Emily steadied her. "Marisol—what is this place?"

Marisol stepped back like the very air burned. "This is the place between. The Station's spine. The space it uses to connect its worlds."

Emily blinked. "Like... a control room?"

"No." Marisol shook her head. "Like a heart."

Jeremy rubbed his arms. "So we're standing *inside* the Station? Like... inside the ghost train dimension?"

"Yes," Marisol breathed. "And nothing living is ever supposed to be here."

Emily shivered. "How do we get out?"

Marisol didn't answer.

Instead, she stared upward toward the floating panels like someone staring at gravestones.

Emily followed her gaze—and noticed something chilling.

Every panel...
Every flickering world...
Every impossible window...

...had **someone standing in it.**

A silhouette.

Tall.

Still.

Watching.

Some shapes were human-like. Others were wrong—too many limbs, faces blurred, bodies shifting under the surface of the windows like reflections in rippling water.

Jeremy grabbed Emily's arm. "Tell me those are just shadows."

Marisol shook her head. "Those are Collectors."

Emily's voice dried up. "The curtain thing?"

"Some of them."

Marisol swallowed. "Collectors live between the worlds. They enforce the rules. They don't normally come into the worlds unless something breaks."

Emily frowned. "And we broke something."

Marisol nodded miserably. "The moment you refused the choice, the Station collapsed the world. That shouldn't happen. It pulls you here only when it wants to judge you."

Emily stiffened. "Judge us?"

"Yes." Marisol shook violently. "This is where it decides what to do with you."

Jeremy stepped in front of Emily. "Okay, back up. Judge us for what?"

Marisol's voice was barely audible.

"For resisting."

A deep hum vibrated through the floor—so low Emily felt it in her teeth.

The nearest floating panel flickered violently.

The image shifted.

The figure inside turned—

—and Emily realized it wasn't a silhouette.

It was the man behind the curtain.

His long, jointed silhouette pressed against the panel's window, sinking as if trying to crawl through. His face—if it had one—was a blank sheet of stretched skin.

Emily stumbled back. "Oh my god—"

Jeremy grabbed her hand. "Don't look at it!"

More panels flickered.
More silhouettes leaned forward.

And then—

A **doorway** appeared behind them.

Not one of fire.
Not one of wood or metal.

A doorway made of darkness.
A perfect black rectangle cut into the white floor, edges rippling like ink.

Something stood inside it.

Not fully visible.
Not fully human.

A voice echoed from the doorway—deep, layered, impossible to locate:

“Passenger Emily Quinn.”

Emily froze.

“You refused your path.”

Her chest tightened. “I—yeah, I did. Because your paths were rigged.”

Jeremy whispered sharply, “Em—maybe don’t sass the extradimensional train god?!”

Emily ignored him.

The voice continued:

“You interfered in another passenger’s trial.”

Emily stepped forward. “I’m not abandoning him.”

The ground shook.

Panels overhead cracked.

Collectors leaned closer like hungry dogs.

The Station’s voice deepened further:

“Then answer.”

“Why should you be allowed to leave?”

Emily's heart slammed against her ribs.

Jeremy whispered, trembling, “Just... tell it the truth.”

Emily swallowed.

Every Collector watched.

Marisol held her breath.

Jeremy squeezed her hand.

Emily said:

“Because I didn’t come here for myself. I didn’t come here for a second chance or an escape or a test. I came here because I refuse to let this place take someone I care about. And because if you’re really judging me for that, then you’re a bigger coward than anything living in your worlds.”

Jeremy whispered hoarsely, “Em—”

Emily stepped closer to the black doorway.

“If I walk out of here without him, then I fail anyway. So if you want a reason why I should be allowed to leave—*that’s* the reason.”

The world went still.

Panels froze mid-flicker.

Collectors stopped moving.

Silence swallowed everything.

Then—

The Station spoke:

“You cannot save him.”

Emily’s face hardened. “Watch me.”

“You cannot save her either.”

Emily blinked. “Her?”

The voice changed—softer, almost curious.

“Passenger Marisol Vega has been trapped here for years.”

Emily's eyes widened. "Years?"

Marisol stepped back, trembling violently.

Jeremy whispered, "Marisol...?"

The Station continued:

"She is not a passenger."

"She is part of the Station."

Emily's stomach dropped. "What—"

Marisol shook her head desperately. "No—no—please don't listen—I didn't choose this—"

Collectors stirred in the panels.

The Station's voice deepened:

"Passenger Marisol Vega is your trial."

Emily froze.

Jeremy whispered, voice cracking, "What does that mean?"

Before Emily could answer—

—the ink doorway exploded outward—

—and the world shattered again.

Chapter Twelve – Marisol's Secret

Emily hit the ground *again*—this time hard enough that stars burst behind her eyes. Jeremy crashed down beside her with a painful grunt.

When the ringing in her ears faded, the world came into focus.

They were back in a **subway tunnel**.

But not like before.

The walls were cracked, breathing faintly like ribs drawing in air. The rails pulsed with dim orange light, as if molten metal flowed beneath them. The overhead lights flickered violently, their sparks drifting upward instead of down.

A sign overhead glitched in and out:

— STATION █ —
— 13 —
— PASSENGER ANALYSIS MODE —

Emily pushed onto her elbows, panic jolting through her. “Jeremy—Marisol—?”

Jeremy sat up, clutching his side. “Present. Winded. Extremely done with gravity.”

Emily almost laughed—then froze.

Marisol wasn’t beside them.

Jeremy blinked, scanning the tunnel. “Where—?”

A soft sound drifted down the tracks.

A gasp.

A stifled sob.

Emily turned.

Marisol sat on the rails, knees pulled to her chest, head buried in her arms.

Emily stood, wobbling. “Marisol!”

Marisol didn’t move.

Jeremy touched Emily’s shoulder. “Careful. Something’s off.”

They approached slowly.

When Emily reached her, Marisol finally raised her head.

Her eyes—normally dark, human—now glowed faintly with orange light, the same color humming through the rails.

Emily’s breath caught. “Marisol...?”

“I didn’t want you to know,” Marisol whispered. “Not like this.”

Her voice shook—fear, grief, guilt all wrapped together.

Emily knelt in front of her. "Know *what*?"

Marisol lifted a trembling hand.

The tunnel reacted.

The rails brightened beneath her palm, vibrating with a pulsing rhythm like a heartbeat. The walls shuddered in response, as if awakening.

Jeremy stumbled back. "Oh—holy—Marisol, what are you *doing*?"

Marisol pulled her hand away, and the glow dimmed.

She didn't look at them—she looked ashamed.

"The Station didn't just trap me," she said softly. "It made me part of itself."

Emily felt the ground tilt beneath her. "What does that mean?"

Marisol gestured weakly to the rails. "I can feel its worlds. Its paths. Its passengers. I'm a piece of its system. A living key."

Emily's stomach twisted. "That voice said you were my trial."

Marisol nodded miserably. "Because the Station already claimed me. I'm... I'm the rule you broke."

Jeremy moved closer, voice trembling. "That's why you always knew where the doors were. Why you knew how the worlds worked."

Marisol hugged herself tightly. "I didn't want to be this. I tried to help people escape. I tried to pull them out before the Station took them. That's why it hates me. That's why it uses me."

Emily felt something inside her crack. "Uses you how?"

Marisol's eyes flickered brighter.

"When someone enters the Station trying to save another person..."

She swallowed hard.

"...the Station uses me to test them."

Emily's breath caught. "Test me?"

Marisol nodded painfully.

"The Station wants to know if you'll abandon me to save yourself... or sacrifice yourself to save Jeremy... or break completely trying to save us both."

Jeremy whispered, "That's sick."

Marisol began to cry quietly.

"I'm so sorry. I tried to hide it. I didn't want to be your trial. I didn't want to be anyone's."

Emily reached out, cupping Marisol's shaking hands. "Hey. Look at me."

Marisol looked up—eyes glowing but full of human fear.

"You're not a test," Emily said fiercely. "You're a person."

"No," Marisol whispered. "Emily... I'm not sure I am anymore."

The lights overhead flickered violently—buzzing, crackling, sparking upward.

A deep rumble rolled through the tunnel.

Jeremy grabbed Emily's arm. "Em... something's coming."

Emily turned—and her blood turned to ice.

At the far end of the tunnel, a shape unfolded from the darkness.

Tall.

Wrong.

Familiar.

The **Collector** from behind the curtains.

But not a silhouette.

Not a shadow.

Its true form.

Multiple limbs bending at unnatural angles.

A head with no face—skin stretched smooth like wet cloth.

Its body flickered in and out of reality as if glitching through time.

Jeremy stumbled back. "Nope. Nope. I'm not doing this. NOPE."

Marisol's voice was a broken whisper. "It's here for me."

Emily stepped in front of her. "No. It's here for *all* of us."

The Collector tilted its faceless head.

A sound—wet, crackling, harsh—ripped through the tunnel.

A voice—layered, distorted—echoed from it:

**“PASSENGER MARISOL VEGA.
RETURN TO YOUR STATION.”**

Marisol sobbed. “Please—please don’t make me—”

Emily snapped. “NO!”

She stood tall, shaking but unyielding.

“She’s with us. And she’s not going anywhere.”

The Collector twitched, limbs bending backward, forward, sideways—all at once.

**“MARISOL VEGA HAS FRACTURED HER FUNCTION.
RESET IS REQUIRED.”**

Emily stepped between them. “Over my dead body.”

The Collector’s head tilted again—as if examining her.

Then it spoke with chilling calm:

“THAT CAN BE ARRANGED.”

Jeremy whispered, “Emily—run.”

Emily didn’t move.

Marisol grabbed her hand. “Emily—please—you can’t fight it. The Station never loses.”

Emily squeezed her hand tightly.

“I’m not fighting the Station,” she said softly.

“I’m fighting for you.”

The Collector lunged—

And the entire tunnel exploded into orange light.

Chapter Thirteen – Reset

Orange light swallowed the tunnel like a detonating sun.

Emily threw her arms over her face, bracing for heat—

—but there was no heat.

Only force.

A shockwave slammed into her chest and hurled her backward. She skidded across the trembling floor, coughing as sparks flickered in the air like dying fireflies.

When her vision cleared—

Jeremy was sprawled to her right, dazed.

Marisol was kneeling directly in front of the Collector.

Her entire body glowed.

“Marisol!” Emily shouted.

Marisol winced but did not turn.

The Collector loomed over her, limbs rearranging themselves with each movement. Its faceless head tilted like a creature studying a malfunctioning machine.

Its voice crackled from everywhere:

“RESET PROTOCOL INITIATED.”

The ground beneath Marisol pulsed like a heartbeat.

Emily scrambled to her feet. “STOP!”

Her voice cracked in desperation. “LEAVE HER ALONE!”

She grabbed a loose metal rod jutting from the tunnel wall and swung it with everything she had—

It passed *through* the Collector like smoke.

Emily stumbled back, horrified. “You’ve got to be kidding me—!”

Jeremy grabbed her arm and pulled her behind a support column. “We can’t fight that thing physically! Look at it—it’s not even in full reality!”

The Collector turned its head toward them.

It *heard* him.

It moved with a glitching stutter—closer, then further, then closer again—in the span of a heartbeat.

Jeremy's eyes widened. "Oh hell no—"

But the creature did not strike.

Not yet.

Instead, its voice filled the air:

**"PASSENGER EMILY QUINN.
YOU HAVE INTERFERED IN THE TRIAL OF MARISOL VEGA."**

Emily shouted back, shaking: "Because she's not a *trial*! She's a person! She deserves freedom!"

The Collector twitched, limbs cracking as they reformed.

"ANOMALY IDENTIFIED."

Marisol cried out—her back arching, orange light pulsing through her veins.

Emily pushed off the wall, trying to reach her. Jeremy grabbed at her sleeve—

She tore free.

"Emily, DON'T—!" he yelled.

But Emily didn't stop.

She knelt beside Marisol, grabbing her shoulders. The glow burned her palms but she held tighter.

"Hey. Hey—look at me."

Marisol's luminous eyes fluttered open. "Emily... you can't save me. You have to let it reset me."

"No," Emily whispered fiercely. "I'm not losing you."

"You don't understand," Marisol gasped. Tears glowed like embers down her cheeks. "Reset doesn't mean killing me... it means erasing me. Forgetting I ever existed. Erasing me from the Station. From the worlds. From you."

Emily's blood turned to ice.

"Reset removes the parts of me that disobeyed," Marisol choked. "The part that helped people. The part that cared. The part that is *human*."

Emily shook her head violently. "No. Absolutely not. You're not going anywhere."

The Collector's voice boomed:

"RESET IN TEN SECONDS."

Emily stood and faced it directly.

"I won't let you erase her."

The world shook.

Collectors in distant panels flickered into view—watching, trembling, reacting to her defiance.

Jeremy shouted from behind a pillar, "EMILY, I'm begging you—don't provoke it—!"

Emily ignored him.

"Why?" she yelled at the creature. "Why does Marisol deserve this? Because she tried to help people? Because she did something you never do? BECAUSE SHE CARED?"

The Collector's limbs lowered.

It leaned down.

Slow.

Silent.

Menacing.

"MARISOL VEGA IS NOT HUMAN."

Emily's anger flared hotter. "Maybe not anymore—but she CHOSE to be good. She chose to help. That means more than whatever twisted code you want to shove her into!"

The Collector paused—hands trembling.

"...she is broken."

"...she is not complete."

Emily stepped closer.

"Neither am I," she said quietly.

The Collector stilled.

Emily's voice cracked:

“I’m broken too. Jeremy’s broken. Real people aren’t perfect—they’re messy. They make mistakes. They get scared. They get hurt. That doesn’t mean they should be erased.”

Marisol sobbed, glowing brighter.

Emily lifted her chin.

“If you want her,” she whispered, “you go through me.”

Jeremy shouted, “EMILY WHAT THE—”

The Collector surged forward, rising to its full terrifying height. Limbs stretched to the ceiling, cracking as the tunnel lights burst.

Emily didn’t move.

A massive, clawlike appendage reached toward her—descending like a guillotine—

Marisol screamed.

Jeremy screamed.

Emily closed her eyes.

“I’m not afraid.”

And suddenly—

The Collector froze.

Every joint locked.

Every limb halted.

The entire tunnel held its breath.

Emily opened her eyes.

The creature hovered inches from her face.

Unmoving.

Its head tilted in a slow, unnatural motion.

Then—

For the first time—

Its voice softened:

“...irregular response.”

“...emotion does not align with expected outcome.”

“...fearlessness detected.”

Emily whispered, “I’m not fearless. I’m terrified. I just refuse to let fear choose.”

The Collector recoiled—like her words physically struck it.

“...trial corrupted.”

“...path unstable.”

“... recalculating.”

Marisol collapsed, the glow flickering out.

Jeremy rushed to her side.

Emily stepped back as the Collector writhed, limbs folding in on themselves like a collapsing spider.

Panels overhead cracked—images distorting—Collectors trapped within glitching violently.

The Station’s voice boomed from every direction:

“PASSENGER EMILY QUINN HAS BROKEN THE TRIAL.”

Emily winced at the volume.

“Good,” she spat. “Maybe it deserved to be broken.”

Silence fell.

Then:

“COMMENCING CONSEQUENCE.”

Emily’s breath faltered. “What—”

The tunnel behind her began to dissolve into shadow.

Jeremy lifted Marisol into his arms. “EMILY! RUN!”

Emily turned—

And saw what the Station had decided.

The tunnel was collapsing into a black void—erasing everything behind them.

And it was coming fast.

“GO!” Jeremy shouted, sprinting up the tracks.

Emily ran after him.

The Collector began to melt into static.

The rails ahead pulsed faintly—

—signaling a door forming somewhere ahead.

Emily dared a glance back.

The darkness swallowing the world had one message forming inside it:

A PASSENGER WHO BREAKS A TRIAL MAY NOT LEAVE WITHOUT A PRICE.

Emily's heart hammered.

She sprinted harder.

Because she knew what that meant.

The Station would not erase Marisol now.

It would not erase Jeremy.

It would erase **something else**.

And she didn't know what.

They ran—toward the forming door—

as the Station's consequence thundered toward them.

Chapter Fourteen – The Price of Defiance

They ran.

Emily's lungs felt like fire, her legs like lead, but the oncoming void didn't care. It swallowed the tunnel behind them with the steady inevitability of a closing jaw.

Jeremy held Marisol tightly against his chest, arms trembling under her weight, but he didn't slow down.

“Emily—!” he yelled, breathless. “How—far—is—that—door!?”

Emily didn’t look back. “JUST RUN!”

The rails pulsed ahead—weak, then stronger—guiding them like a dying heartbeat. The tunnel lights flickered wildly overhead, bursting into sparks that drifted upward instead of down.

The Station wasn’t just collapsing the tunnel.

It was **unmaking it**.

And Emily could feel the heat of the nothingness creeping closer, gnawing at the back of her mind like cold teeth.

Her heart slammed violently. “Jeremy—FASTER!”

“I’m trying!” he coughed.

Marisol stirred in his arms, her voice thin and trembling. “Emily… the door… it’s not stable…”

Emily glanced ahead.

Marisol was right.

The door was forming slowly at the end of the tunnel—like a projected image glitching into existence. A ragged rectangle of sparking lines, its edges flickering between dozens of shapes:

A wooden frame.

A steel hatch.

A pane of shattered glass.

A subway door.

A child’s bedroom door.

A stone arch dripping with moss.

It couldn’t decide what it wanted to be.

Emily’s throat tightened. “It’s glitching—why is it glitching?!”

Marisol whispered, “Because the Station hasn’t chosen your consequence yet…”

The void behind them roared.

Jeremy’s eyes widened. “I VOTE THE CONSEQUENCE IS ‘WE GET A FREE RIDE HOME’—”

Emily grabbed his sleeve and yanked him forward. “JEREMY—MOVE!”

The rails heated under their feet. The air vibrated around them like a live wire. Shadows bent in unnatural directions.

The Station was angry.

Not just inhumanly angry—*systemically* angry.

Logic breaking.

Rules unraveling.

The world glitching because Emily did something it was not built to accommodate:

She refused the narrative.

She broke the trial.

And now it wanted something back.

The void surged again—closer, louder, a tidal wave of darkness.

Emily choked. “Holy—RUN!”

All three sprinted the last stretch.

The door was only half-formed now, sparks strobing around it, symbols flashing across its shifting frame:

PASSENGER QUINN: ERROR

TRIAL: CORRUPTED

PENALTY: PENDING

DOOR ROUTING: RECALCULATING...

Jeremy shouted, “RECALCULATE FASTER—!”

Emily reached the door first.

She slammed both hands against its shifting surface. “OPEN! OPEN, damn you!”

It flickered violently.

A shockwave blasted her backward—she hit the ground hard, rolling.

“EMILY!” Jeremy dropped to his knees beside her. “You okay?!”

“Door’s locked,” she gasped. “It’s waiting for something—it wants—”

She froze.

Because suddenly—

The ground beneath Marisol and Jeremy lit up.

The rails under their feet glowed white-hot.
Symbols crawled across the metal like living handwriting.
The air crackled.

Jeremy stared down. "Uh—guys? This feels kinda... BAD."

Marisol's eyes snapped open fully—glowing again, but dimmer now. Weak.

"Oh no," she whispered. "It already chose."

Emily scrambled forward. "Chose WHAT?!"

Marisol looked at her with devastation.

"The price."

Emily's heart slammed. "What price—?"

Jeremy's body jerked—like strings had been attached to his limbs.
He clutched his chest. "Emily—something's—wrong—"

"JEREMY!" Emily screamed, reaching for him.

Marisol grabbed her wrist. "Emily—wait!"

"NO!" Emily tore away, reaching again—

And then she saw it.

A faint orange tether had appeared around Jeremy's chest.

No—*through* it.

Connecting him to the rails beneath his feet.

Jeremy gasped, doubling over. "Em—I can't—I can't move—"

Marisol's voice cracked. "The Station chose him."

Emily's blood froze. "What does that MEAN?!"

Marisol's eyes filled with tears. "It means the Station wants to take him back. Make him part of itself—just like it did to me."

The world shook violently.

Jeremy screamed.

Emily lunged forward, grabbing his shoulders. "I've got you—Jeremy—I've got you!"

His body trembled uncontrollably. "Em—you need to—GO—before it—gets you—too—"

"NO!" she sobbed. "I won't lose you! Not again!"

Jeremy looked up at her, eyes shining with panic and something like acceptance.

"Em," he whispered. "Please. Let me go."

Emily's world shattered.

"No," she whispered. "I won't choose that. I WON'T."

Jeremy tried to force a smile, but pain cut through it. "You... you already proved you're braver than this place. I'm proud of—"

Emily cut him off, gripping his cheeks so he'd look at her.

"I'm not leaving you," she said, voice breaking. "Not ever. I swore I wouldn't let this place take you—and I meant it."

The rails glowed brighter, burning the air.

The void behind them roared, devouring the tunnel.

Marisol screamed over the noise:

"EMILY—LISTEN—YOU HAVE ONE CHANCE—ONLY ONE—"

Emily shouted back:

"TELL ME WHAT TO DO!"

Marisol extended both glowing hands toward the rails, her voice trembling with fear and power.

"You have to BREAK THE TETHER!"

Emily stared at the orange cord wrapped around Jeremy's chest—flickering like a nerve exposed to open air.

"But how?!" she cried.

Marisol screamed, voice echoing with something more than human:

"WITH SOMETHING STRONGER THAN FEAR!"

The void swallowed the tunnel behind them.

Jeremy screamed.

Emily made her choice.

She grabbed the tether with both hands—
fire searing her palms—
the Station shrieking through the walls—
Jeremy shouting her name—

And Emily pulled.

Hard enough to tear worlds.

Chapter Fifteen – Pulling Against a God

The moment Emily grabbed the tether, it felt like plunging her hands into molten wire.

She screamed—but didn’t let go.

The orange cord burned through her skin, scorching down to the bones of her palms. Sparks flew in violent bursts—flashes of memories, images she didn’t recognize, voices that weren’t hers.

Jeremy’s pain.

Marisol’s fear.

The Station’s hunger.

Jeremy convulsed, his knees buckling. “Emily—STOP—! It’ll kill you!”

“GOOD!” she shouted back, tears streaming from her eyes. “If that’s the price, THEN I’LL PAY IT!”

The tether lurched violently, pulling Jeremy backward, dragging him across the rails like he weighed nothing.

He dug his heels into the ground, but the Station yanked harder.

The void swallowed more of the tunnel behind them—gaining speed, creeping closer like a tidal wave of oblivion.

Marisol’s voice boomed strangely—no longer a whisper, but echoing with the Station’s own resonance:

“EMILY—HOLD ON—DON’T LET IT TAKE HIM—”

Emily screamed as the tether ripped again, slicing deeper into her palms. She wrapped it around her forearm, bracing her entire body.

“I'M NOT—LOSING—HIM!”

Jeremy's vision blurred—he stared at Emily like she was the last piece of the world he cared about.

“Em—please—” he choked. “You can't fight all this—”

Emily leaned into the pull, muscles shaking violently.

“I don't need to fight ALL of it,” she cried through clenched teeth.

“I just need to beat YOU.”

Jeremy barked a pained laugh, tears falling. “I hate you—so much—when you're stubborn—”

“Takes one to know one!” she gasped.

Marisol pressed her hands to the rails, channeling every stolen shred of power she had left. The ground beneath them lit up—glowing symbols crawling outward like vines.

The tether crackled.

For a split second—

It weakened.

Emily heaved with everything inside her—

Fear.

Love.

Rage.

Grief.

Every moment she'd ever cared about someone and lost them.

Every time life tried to take someone from her.

Every time she swore she wouldn't let it happen again.

She screamed, raw and feral:

“YOU CAN'T HAVE HIM!”

The tether snapped.

A shockwave blasted through the tunnel—

rails exploding upward—

lights bursting—

air rippling like a sonic boom.

Jeremy flew forward—straight into Emily’s arms. They fell to the floor in a tangled heap.

Emily collapsed on top of him, sobbing, shaking uncontrollably. Jeremy pulled her tight against his chest with trembling hands.

“You did it,” he whispered hoarsely. “Em... you did it...”

Emily’s voice cracked. “I’m not letting them take you. Ever.”

Jeremy pressed his forehead to hers. “I know.”

But their relief lasted barely a heartbeat.

Because the Station screamed.

A sound like metal twisting and worlds collapsing.

Panels overhead shattered.

Collectors flickered in agony.

The entire tunnel seemed to turn inside-out.

Marisol fell to her knees, glowing violently as the Station funneled its rage through her unwilling body.

“Emily—Jeremy—RUN!” she cried. “I—I can’t hold it—”

Emily looked at her in horror. “Marisol, what’s happening—?!”

Marisol’s voice broke into static.

“My connection—it’s trying to rebind me—I can’t—”

Her back arched.

Her glow intensified.

Her veins lit like molten wires.

Jeremy grabbed Emily’s arm. “We have to help her!”

But Marisol shook her head violently, tears blazing as they fell.

“No! Get away from me—GET AWAY—before it—”

Her eyes flashed pure orange.

Her voice deepened—no longer her own:

“CONSEQUENCE: ESCALATION.”

Emily’s blood ran cold.

“That’s not Marisol...”

“NEW TRIAL: COLLAPSE.”

Jeremy’s grip on Emily’s arm tightened. “Em... we need to MOVE—”

The walls cracked open.

Darkness surged inward like a living storm.

The rails buckled, twisting into spirals.

The door up ahead shattered like glass.

The world around them began to fall apart piece by piece.

Emily tried to pull Marisol forward. “COME WITH US—NOW!”

Marisol shoved her away with sudden force.

Emily hit the ground, gasping.

Marisol’s voice—her real voice—broke through the static for a split second:

“Emily... I’m sorry...”

Emily crawled forward. “NO—DON’T—”

Marisol screamed—

—and the Station swallowed her.

Her body pixelated like a corrupted file.

Her outline blurred into static.

Her scream distorted.

She reached out—just once—toward Emily.

Then collapsed into light.

And disappeared.

Emily froze.

Jeremy froze.

The tunnel was silent.

Then the Station whispered, cold and final:

“THE PRICE HAS BEEN PAID.”

Emily’s heart shattered.

“No,” she whispered. “No no no no no—MARISOL—”

Jeremy pulled her back as the void surged again.

“EMILY—WE HAVE TO RUN—NOW!”

Emily refused.

She reached forward toward the space Marisol had just occupied—toward the fading orange afterglow—

“Marisol...”

But there was nothing left.

Not even dust.

Just the Station’s consequence.

Taking exactly what Emily fought to protect.

Taking the one person Emily had refused to sacrifice.

And Emily finally understood:

The Station didn’t punish her by taking Jeremy.

It punished her by taking the person she saved as well.

The void roared toward them.

Jeremy dragged Emily to her feet, her legs barely moving, her heart barely beating.

But a single thought burned through the grief:

I’m getting her back.

I don’t care what I have to break.

I’m getting her back.

She ran beside Jeremy—

as the Station’s final warning echoed above them:

“NEXT STOP: RECKONING.”

Chapter Sixteen – The World of Echoes

Emily didn't remember running.

Her legs moved, but everything else—the tunnel, the rails, the roaring void—blurred into white noise. The world flickered like a corrupted video file. Jeremy's hand gripped hers tightly, dragging her forward as reality collapsed behind them.

But Emily felt nothing.

Not the wind.

Not the heat of the void.

Not even fear.

Her mind was swallowed by one truth:

Marisol was gone.

Taken.

Erased.

Paid as the Station's "price."

Something inside Emily had split open—raw, empty, burning.

Jeremy kept shouting something—her name, probably—but the sound barely registered.

The tunnel around them twisted, bending into spirals. Rails melted into black water. Signs overhead flickered between languages that didn't exist.

Everything was falling apart.

Everything except the grief.

Emily's breath shook.

Her knees buckled.

Jeremy caught her before she fell. "Emily—EMILY—stay with me—!"

She pushed him away weakly, her voice breaking. "She's gone... Jeremy, she's gone..."

Jeremy's face twisted with pain. "I know. I know. But we can't stop here. We have to keep moving—"

"What's the point?" Emily whispered, numb. "She was our guide. Our only chance. She—she didn't even get to live. She was *made* to be trapped. And she still helped us."

Her voice cracked in half.

“And look what it did to her.”

Jeremy grabbed her shoulders. “Em—listen to me—Marisol made her choice. She saved us. Now we save each other. That’s what she wanted.”

Emily stared at him, tears streaming silently.

“Why does it always take the kind ones?” she whispered.

Jeremy didn’t have an answer.

The void roared again—closer, monstrous.

A door finally materialized ahead—a tall, black archway carved from obsidian-like stone.

Jeremy pulled her toward it. “Come on—Emily—if we stay here, we die.”

Emily didn’t resist.

She couldn’t feel enough to resist.

They stumbled through the arch—

—and the collapsing tunnel vanished.

At first, Emily thought they were in darkness.

Then the world shifted.

The ground beneath them glowed with soft, ghostly blue light. Mist drifted inches above the surface, swirling around their ankles. The air felt thick, not with danger—

—but with memory.

Jeremy looked around uneasily. “Where... are we?”

Emily didn’t answer—not because she didn’t know.

But because she *did*.

She recognized this place immediately.

This wasn’t a world the Station created.

It was a world it **collected**.

This was the world of echoes.

The world for those erased.

Emily clenched her fists. "This is where they go."

Jeremy blinked. "They?"

"People the Station resets," Emily whispered. "People like Marisol."

Jeremy's face went pale. "Em—if she's here—"

"She is," Emily said, voice trembling. "I can feel it."

She didn't know why.

She didn't know how.

But the moment she stepped into the world of echoes, her grief twisted into something sharper.

A pull.

A certainty.

Marisol's absence left a bruise on Emily's heart—but that empty space tugged in a direction.

Emily walked forward.

"Em—wait!" Jeremy grabbed her arm. "We don't know what's out there. We don't know the rules. We don't know the dangers."

Emily met his eyes.

"Jeremy... I don't care."

He swallowed hard.

After a moment, he nodded and walked beside her.

The world around them glowed faintly brighter with each step.

The floor was flat like polished stone—but rippled softly like water. Their reflections came and went beneath their feet—sometimes true, sometimes distorted.

Some distorted reflections weren't theirs.

Shapes moved under the surface.

Shadows shaped like people.

Whispers drifted by—too faint to decipher.

Jeremy stiffened. "Okay. That's creepy."

Emily didn't stop walking.

The further they went, the more this world shifted.

The mist thickened.

The blue glow deepened.

And the silhouettes beneath the floor grew more detailed—faces forming, hands pressing upward, mouths moving in silent cries.

Jeremy flinched. “Emily—we should NOT be here.”

“I don’t care,” she said flatly.

A low hum vibrated across the world.

Whispers rose.

Not from below.

From everywhere.

The Station’s voice—fragmented, glitching—echoed outward:

“EMILY QUINN.

YOU WERE WARNED.”

Emily looked up, fury rising. “I’m done listening.”

The whisper deepened.

“YOU CANNOT TAKE BACK WHAT HAS BEEN PAID.”

Emily stepped forward. “Watch me.”

“YOU WILL BREAK.”

Emily’s eyes burned.

“I already have.”

The silence that followed rippled like water.

Then—something new happened.

A shape formed ahead.

Small.

Human-sized.

Kneeling.

Hair falling over their face.

Emily's heart stopped.

"...Marisol?"

The figure didn't look up.

Jeremy whispered, voice shaking with hope and terror. "Em—she's—she's here—"

Emily took a step closer.

Then another.

The figure trembled.

Lifted their head.

And Emily felt her soul tear open.

Because it *was* Marisol.

But her eyes weren't glowing orange anymore.

They weren't glowing at all.

They were blank.

Empty.

Void.

Emily whispered, breaking, "Marisol...?"

Marisol tilted her head, confused—her expression soft and childlike.

Like she didn't recognize Emily at all.

Then she spoke—

—and her voice wasn't hers.

It was hollow.

Echoing.

"Passenger, you do not belong here."

Emily's blood ran cold.

Jeremy grabbed her arm.

"Emily—she's been reset—she doesn't remember you—"

Emily fell to her knees.

Marisol stood slowly, swaying, head tilted like a puppet waiting for instructions.

Emily whispered her name again. "Marisol... please... it's me."

Marisol blinked.

Then said:

"Identify yourself."

Emily's throat closed.

"I'm Emily."

Marisol stared at her.

The world held its breath.

Then Marisol lowered her head.

And whispered:

"I am sorry.

I am not allowed to know you anymore."

Emily broke.

She collapsed into Jeremy's chest, sobbing helplessly as the Station's voice whispered through the world of echoes:

"THIS IS THE PRICE."

Chapter Seventeen – The Girl Who Forgot Herself

Emily's sobs echoed across the world of blue mist, swallowed instantly by the endless hush of the echo realm. Jeremy held her tightly—not saying anything, not trying to fix it—because there was nothing to fix.

Not yet.

Not like this.

Marisol stood a few feet away, still and silent, her posture loose and unnatural, like her joints weren't sure how to be human anymore. Her hair drifted weightlessly around her head, as if the air here didn't obey the rules of gravity.

Her face...

Her face was the worst part.

Expressionless.

Blank.

Like someone had smoothed away every emotion she'd ever learned to show.

Jeremy whispered, his voice shaking, "Emily... I'm so sorry..."

Emily pulled out of his arms, wiping her eyes with the back of her shaking hand.

"I'm getting her back."

Jeremy swallowed. "Em... you saw what it did—"

"I SAID," Emily snapped, trembling with grief and exhaustion, "I'm getting her back."

The world responded.

The mist thickened.

The floor rippled under her feet.

Whispers drifted up through the glowing blue air like breaths.

"Reckless."

"Impossible."

"Against protocol."

Emily ignored them.

She took a step toward Marisol.

"Marisol," she called gently.

No reaction.

Emily tried again—voice cracking. “Marisol... look at me.”

Slowly, Marisol lifted her head.

Her eyes were still blank. Hollow. Drained of everything that made her *her*.

Her voice came out flat:

**“Passenger unidentified.
Purpose unclear.”**

Emily flinched.

That voice wasn’t Marisol’s.

It was the Station—wearing her skin, teaching her to speak like a machine.

“Marisol,” Emily whispered desperately, “you do know me. You do. You helped me. You saved me. Please... please don’t let it erase that.”

Marisol blinked.

Her brow twitched—just slightly.

Almost a human reaction.

Jeremy stepped beside Emily carefully. “Look at her. Something’s still there. Something’s flickering.”

Emily nodded, swallowing hard.

“Marisol,” she said softly, “do you remember the lake world? The fire? The tunnel? Any of it?”

Marisol tilted her head.

“...lake... world?”

Emily’s heart kicked painfully. “Yes. Yes, that! Do you remember it?”

Marisol’s fingers trembled at her sides.

“...fire...”

Emily leaned forward, hope burning through the grief. “Yes! You sat with us. You warned us. You told me—”

Marisol interrupted, voice hollow:

“Fire is a hazard. Fire is not permitted on Station grounds.”

Emily froze.

Tears stung her eyes again.

Jeremy winced. "Shit..."

Emily tried again.

"Okay—okay, what about your name? Do you know it?"

Marisol blinked.

She opened her mouth.

Emily held her breath.

"My designation is **Echo-3**," Marisol said.

The world fell out from under Emily's feet.

"No," Emily whispered. "That's not who you are..."

Marisol repeated, monotone:

"Designation Echo-3.

Purpose: storage of corrupted passenger data.

Function: containment."

Her gaze drifted upward.

"Emotional signatures not permitted."

Her voice softened slightly—almost thoughtful.

"Emotion is what breaks the Station."

Emily's breath caught. "Emotion is what saved us."

Marisol tilted her head again—this time slower. Almost curious.

"Emotion causes deviation."

Her voice flickered—human, then hollow.

"Deviation causes collapse."

Another flicker.

"Collapse is... dangerous."

Emily froze.

Jeremy whispered, "Emily... she's glitching."

Not just glitching.

Fighting.

Emily stepped closer.

Marisol didn't recoil.

She didn't react at all—except for the faintest tremor in her fingers.

Emily reached out her hand.

"Can I touch you?" she asked quietly.

Jeremy whispered harshly, "Em—we don't know if she's stable enough—"

But Marisol spoke first.

Her voice trembled with static:

"Permission... granted."

Emily's chest tightened so hard she nearly fell.

She moved slowly, gently placing her palm against Marisol's cheek.

Marisol closed her eyes.

The first human expression she'd shown since being taken.

But the moment Emily made contact—

FLASH

A shockwave of images exploded in her mind.

NOT memories.

Fragments.

Marisol as a young girl—

Running down a hallway.

Laughing with someone.

Crying under a blanket.

Holding someone's hand.

Losing someone.

Falling into a train station.

Standing before a Collector.

Becoming something she never chose to be.

Emily gasped, stumbling backward.

Jeremy caught her. "What happened?!"

Emily's voice shook. "I... I saw her. Pieces of her. Her real memories..."

Marisol clutched her head, teeth clenched. "Unauthorized—access—detected—"

Emily forced herself upright again. "That means she's still in there. She's still MARISOL. She's not gone."

Marisol looked up—

Eyes flickering.

Blank.

Then orange.

Then blank again.

Her voice cracked—half human, half static:

"Emily...?"

Emily nearly collapsed.

Jeremy whispered, "Holy shit—Marisol—"

Marisol reached toward them with a trembling hand—

Then the world shifted violently.

Blue mist surged upward.

The floor cracked like ice.

Reflections beneath their feet screamed silently.

And the Station's voice boomed across the realm:

"PASSENGER IS ATTEMPTING TO RESTORE A CORRUPTED FILE."

Emily snarled, "YOU BET I AM."

"RESTORATION IS NOT PERMITTED."

Emily stepped forward, fire in her chest.

"I don't care what you permit."

The Station's growl deepened:

"YOU WILL LOSE YOURSELF."

Emily wiped her eyes, voice steady:

“Then I’ll break again.”

The mist around Marisol thickened—but this time, it wrapped around her like tendrils pulling her backward.

She cried out, reaching for Emily—

“Em—Emily—help me—please—”

Emily lunged.

Jeremy grabbed her arm. “EMILY, WAIT—!”

Emily tore free.

She dove toward Marisol—

—and grabbed her wrist just before the mist swallowed her.

Marisol’s eyes widened in terror.

Emily’s grip tightened.

“I’ve got you,” she whispered. “I’m not letting go again.”

The Station roared:

“CONSEQUENCE: ESCALATION LEVEL TWO.”

The world split open beneath them.

Marisol screamed.

Emily screamed with her.

And the echo realm shattered like glass.

Chapter Eighteen – The Core of the Station

The world shattered.

Not like breaking glass—
but like a sound cut into pieces.

Emily fell through a crack in reality, gripping Marisol's wrist with all her strength. Wind screamed across her ears, tugging at her clothes, whipping her hair around her face as the world became a roaring vortex of light and shadow.

Jeremy fell through behind her, tumbling, reaching for both of them.

"EMILY—DON'T LET GO—I!"

"I'M NOT!" she shouted back, voice raw.

But the Station was pulling Marisol down.

Dragging her.

Trying to reclaim what Emily had stolen.

Marisol's fingers slipped—

"No—NO—I!" Emily tightened her grip until pain shot up her arm. "Marisol—LOOK at me!"

But Marisol couldn't.

Her eyes flickered: empty → orange → empty → orange, static tearing her voice apart as she screamed.

"Em—Emily—stop—you're hurting—"

"I DON'T CARE!"

And then—

THUMP.

They hit ground.

Hard.

Dust exploded around them. Emily rolled, coughing, eyes burning as the world stopped spinning.

Jeremy groaned nearby. "My spine... is in eight different dimensions..."

Emily didn't laugh.

She whipped around.

“Marisol?”

Marisol lay crumpled, trembling, curled on her side like someone in the throes of a seizure. Her fingers twitched. Her mouth opened in a silent cry.

“Marisol—!” Emily rushed to her.

Jeremy scrambled next to her, face pale. “Where... where are we?”

Emily looked up.

And her breath stopped.

They were standing in a vast chamber—
circular, miles tall, lit by pulsing orange veins of light embedded in the walls.

The walls themselves were made of moving panels—
windows into different worlds—
each flickering between scenes.

The ruined hospital.

The lake.

The nightmare curtain room.

A snowy forest.

A crumbling city.

A child’s bedroom breathing in the dark.

A hallway full of silhouettes.

Every world they had visited.

And dozens they hadn’t.

This was the Station’s heart.

The core.

And they were standing inside it.

Jeremy whispered, horrified, “This... this is where it runs everything.”

Emily nodded slowly. “We’re inside the machine.”

At the center of the chamber rose a towering structure—like a tree made of black metal and ghostly wires. It pulsed with orange light, each pulse sending tremors across the floor.

And at its base—
suspended by three glowing tethers—
was a shape.

No.

A person.

Jerking.

Twitching.

Bound like a puppet held upright by invisible hands.

Emily's blood froze.

The shape looked like a woman—hair hanging around her face like soaked curtains, limbs dangling lifelessly. Each time the orange light pulsed, her body twitched violently.

Jeremy whispered, dread thick in his voice:

“Is that... another passenger?”

Emily didn't answer.

Because she recognized something about the shape.

The posture.

The trembling.

The broken stillness.

Marisol.

Older.

Younger.

Worn.

No—

Not Marisol.

Someone before her.

Someone who became Echo-1.

Or Echo-2.

Or Echo-0.

Emily's stomach turned.

This was what the Station *did* to people it claimed.

It didn't just erase them.

It turned them into code.
Into infrastructure.
Into pieces of itself.

Marisol groaned in pain, pulling Emily's attention back to her.

Emily knelt beside her. "Marisol—hey—hey, look at me."

Marisol's eyes flickered open.

Empty.

Then orange.

Then empty again.

"Em... I... I can't... hold it..."

"You don't have to," Emily whispered, holding her shoulders. "Just breathe. Just stay with me."

Jeremy glanced around the chamber, panic rising. "Emily, we are so far past the point of no return. This thing can do anything to us."

Emily brushed hair from Marisol's face.

"We're getting her out."

Jeremy swallowed. "How? Emily, look at her—look at where we are—we can't even twitch without this place rearranging us."

Emily shook her head. "There's always a way."

Jeremy exhaled shakily, trying to steady himself. "Emily... I know you want to save her. I do too. But you can't keep breaking yourself for people."

Emily turned sharply.

Her voice shook, but not with fear.

"With all due respect, Jeremy—shut up."

Jeremy blinked, startled.

Emily's tears were silent, hot, blurring her vision.

"I spent my whole life losing people. My parents. Friends. People who left. People who died. I am DONE being helpless. I am DONE letting the universe decide who I get to keep."

Marisol blinked slowly, whispering through static:

“Emily... don’t... break... for me...”

Emily leaned close, forehead to Marisol’s.

“I’m not breaking,” she whispered.

“I’m choosing.”

Suddenly—

A deep, seismic voice filled the chamber:

“EMILY QUINN.”

Emily froze.

Jeremy’s breath hitched.

Marisol’s body tensed violently, eyes glowing bright orange.

The Station’s voice reverberated from the glowing tree at the center:

“YOU HAVE ENTERED THE CORE.”

Emily stood, glaring straight at the pulsing structure. “Yeah. I noticed.”

“THIS REALM IS NOT FOR PASSENGERS.”

Jeremy muttered under his breath, “We’ve heard that before...”

Emily shouted back, “Then stop bringing us here!”

The Station ignored her.

Its voice shook the walls:

“YOU HAVE BROKEN A TRIAL.”

“YOU HAVE INTERFERED WITH A RESET.”

“YOU HAVE DAMAGED A FUNCTION.”

“YOU HAVE ENTERED A FORBIDDEN SPACE.”

Emily’s fists clenched. “And I’d do it again.”

The walls trembled.

Panels cracked.

The bound, suspended figure twitched violently.

Jeremy grabbed Emily's arm protectively. "Emily—don't—"

But Emily stepped forward, voice rising:

"I'm done playing by your rules."

The Station answered:

"THEN YOU WILL LEARN MINE."

The chamber darkened.

Orange veins split the floor.

And Marisol screamed in agony.

Emily dropped to her side instantly. "Marisol—PLEASE—stay with me—!"

Marisol's body spasmed, her hands clawing at the ground. "Emily—I—don't want to—forget—"

"You won't!" Emily sobbed. "I won't let you!"

The Station thundered:

"THE RESET IS NOT COMPLETE."

Emily glared upward.

"Then undo it!"

Silence.

Then—

"...the reset cannot be undone."

Emily's soul cracked.

Jeremy swallowed hard. "Emily..."

But the Station wasn't done.

"BUT A NEW FUNCTION MAY BE ASSIGNED."

Emily froze.

"...what?"

The Station pulsed.
The chamber shook.
The tethered puppet twitched.

“PASSENGER MARISOL VEGA CAN BE GIVEN A NEW PURPOSE.”

Emily whispered, trembling: “What... purpose?”

The answer came like a blow:

“SHE CAN BECOME A GUIDE.”

Emily blinked. “A... a guide?”

Jeremy stepped closer. “A guide to what?”

The Station replied:

“TO ESCAPE.”

The chamber went silent.

Emily’s heart stopped.

The Station spoke again, slow and final:

“MARISOL VEGA CAN SHOW YOU THE WAY OUT.”

Emily’s breath hitched.

“But,” the Station added,

“ONLY IF YOU GIVE UP SOMETHING IN RETURN.”

Emily stared upward.

“What do you want?”

The Station answered with chilling simplicity:

“YOU.”

Chapter Nineteen – Passenger Exchange

For a moment, Emily couldn't breathe.

The Station's demand echoed through the core chamber like a sentence carved into stone.

"YOU."

Jeremy staggered back. "No. No—no no NO. Emily, don't you even THINK about—"

Emily barely heard him.

Her pulse roared in her ears. Her body felt weightless, as if the ground beneath her was gone and she stood only on the question itself.

You. It wants YOU.

Marisol lay trembling beside her, halfway between life and erasure, whispering fragments of her name as if trying to remember it.

"E... mi... ly...? Em...?"

Emily knelt beside her, running her trembling fingers over Marisol's brow.

"It's okay," Emily whispered. "I'm here."

Jeremy grabbed her shoulder sharply, pulling her back. "EMILY—look at me."

She didn't.

She couldn't.

Not yet.

Jeremy took her face in his hands, forcing her to meet his eyes.

"Emily Quinn, if you agree to whatever this thing is offering—if you let it swap you for her—it will eat you alive. It will erase you. You'll become Echo-4 or whatever the hell comes next, and I—" His voice broke. "I can't lose you."

Emily swallowed, her throat tight. "Jeremy... it's not about what it does to me."

"YES IT IS!"

"It's about her," Emily snapped, voice cracking raw.

Marisol's breath hitched.

Jeremy shook his head violently. "And what about YOU?! What about what she would want? You think Marisol wants you to trade places with her? She'd fight you until her last breath!"

Emily looked down.

Marisol's hand twitched toward hers.

Jeremy continued, voice shaking:

"You can't save everyone by setting yourself on fire!"

Emily whispered, "Maybe this time I can."

Jeremy's face collapsed into grief. "Emily... don't do this."

She pulled out of his grip, standing on shaky legs.

The Station felt her decision shifting.

The entire chamber pulsed—
light blazing brighter—
panels flickering—
the tethered shadows groaning under the weight of the Station's attention.

The Station spoke again, each word slow and absolute:

"IF YOU TAKE HER PLACE, SHE WILL BE FREED."

Emily clenched her jaw. "What does that mean?"

"HER MEMORIES WILL BE RESTORED."

"HER HUMANITY RETURNED."

"HER PATH OPENED."

Emily's heart hammered.

This was what she wanted.

But the Station wasn't finished.

"YOU WILL BECOME THE NEW ECHO."

The chamber darkened.

The tethered silhouette behind the core twitched violently—as if responding to the title.

"YOU WILL CONTINUE HER FUNCTION."

Emily felt cold from the inside out.

Her voice barely rose above a whisper. "You want me to replace her."

“TO BALANCE THE SYSTEM.”

Jeremy cursed under his breath.

Emily stepped closer to the core, fists shaking. “What happens to me exactly?”

The Station answered without mercy:

“YOU WILL BE ERASED.”

“YOUR MEMORIES WILL BE STORED.”

“YOUR FORM WILL BE ALTERED.”

“YOUR IDENTITY WILL DISSOLVE.”

Emily's breath shook violently.

Jeremy pulled her back. “Emily—listen to me. This isn’t sacrifice. It’s suicide.”

Emily whispered, “Maybe those are the same thing sometimes.”

Jeremy looked like she’d stabbed him. “Please... don’t.”

He grabbed both her hands, clinging to them with desperate strength.

“You fight so hard for everyone but yourself,” he said, voice trembling. “I get it. I get why. But you don’t owe your life for hers.”

Emily’s tears blurred everything. “She saved us. Twice. She helped us when she didn’t even have a name. Now she’s trapped because of me!”

“No,” Jeremy said fiercely. “She’s trapped because the Station is cruel. Because it PARTS people and eats the pieces that make them human. You didn’t cause that.”

But Emily shook her head.

“I held her hand. I pulled her out of the echo world. I forced the reset to break. That’s why the Station punished her.”

Her voice cracked entirely.

“That’s MY fault.”

Jeremy cupped her face, forehead pressed to hers. “You don’t throw your life away because you feel guilty. That’s not saving her. That’s letting this place win.”

Emily closed her eyes.

And Marisol whispered behind her:

“Em... ily...?”

Emily turned.

Marisol reached out blindly, her eyes flickering—none of the hollow calm from before.

Just confusion.

Fear.

Fragile humanity trying desperately to break through.

Emily fell to her knees again, taking her hand.

Marisol whispered, “I’m... cold...”

Emily sobbed. “I know. I know, sweetheart—I’ve got you.”

The Station’s voice softened—almost gentle:

“CHOOSE.”

Jeremy knelt beside Emily, grabbing her shoulders.

“We can find another way,” he insisted. “We can break this place. We can steal her back without trading you!”

Emily shook her head.

“I don’t think there IS another way.”

Jeremy’s eyes filled with tears.

“Em... please...”

Emily turned to him, heart splitting in two.

“I’m sorry.”

“No—no—Emily—”

She squeezed his hand.

“You’re my best friend,” she whispered, “and I love you for never giving up on me.”

Jeremy shook his head violently, crying. “Don’t you dare—don’t you DARE say goodbye to me—”

Emily leaned close.

“This isn’t goodbye.”

She stood.

Facing the core.

Facing the Station.

“I accept,” she said softly.

Jeremy screamed.

Marisol whispered her name.

And the Station responded:

“INITIATING EXCHANGE.”

The chamber exploded in light

Chapter Twenty – The Exchange

Light swallowed everything.

Not warm light.

Not gentle.

But blinding and violent—

like a star exploding around them.

Emily's feet left the ground.

Her body rose toward the core, pulled upward by invisible strings that hooked into her ribs, her spine, her throat. She couldn't scream. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't do anything but feel the Station's will burrow into her like cold fingers.

Jeremy's voice echoed far below:

“EMILY!!! LET HER GO! LET HER GO, YOU—MONSTER!”

Emily tried to look down—

and through the haze, she saw him:

Jeremy leaping upward, reaching for her—
only for the orange barrier to slam him back.

He hit the ground hard, sliding across the glowing floor.

“EMILY—!” His voice shattered.

Emily wanted to answer.

But she couldn’t move her mouth.

Couldn’t speak.

The Station held her entirely in its grip.

Her vision flickered—
flashing between the core chamber and a white blankness.

Her memories began rising like film strips unspooling:

Her mother in a hospital bed.
Her father packing a suitcase.
Jeremy handing her a stolen candy bar in seventh grade.
A dog she loved for one summer.
Marisol’s smile—
soft, tired, real—
the moment she told Emily to choose herself.

The Station whispered inside her skull:

“MEMORY EXTRACTION INITIATED.”

Emily’s chest tightened.
She fought.
But the Station’s grip only tightened.

A second voice—Marisol’s—croaked from below:

“Stop... STOP—let her go—!”

Jeremy’s voice broke entirely:
“EMILY, PLEASE—DON’T LET IT TAKE YOU!”

Emily struggled—every muscle screaming—
but the light constricted tighter.

Her thoughts blurred.
Her name echoed faintly, slipping from her grasp.

She felt herself tearing—
not physically—
but mentally.
Spiritually.

Like her identity was unraveling.

**EMILY QUINN – EXTRACTING
FEAR PROFILE
ATTACHMENT PROFILE
CORE MEMORY FILES
ERROR CORRECTION: INITIATING**

Emily gasped as something sharp pierced through her mind—
the Station trying to decide what parts of her to keep
and what parts to erase.

The Station continued:

“YOU WILL BE REASSIGNED AS ECHO-4.”

Her pulse froze.

That was it.

That would be the end of her.

Her body shook violently.

Images stuttered in front of her eyes:

Her mother's hand on her cheek.
Jeremy crying at her doorstep the night his sister moved away.
Marisol standing in the foged lake world, soft and sad, saying:

“The Station chooses people who don't know what they're looking for.”

Emily whispered back into the blinding void:

“I know what I'm looking for.”

The Station ignored her.

“EXCHANGE 20% COMPLETE.”

Emily felt herself slipping further.

Pieces of her life evaporated.

Moments she'd never get back faded like dissolving paint.

Her grip on her own name weakened.

Below her, Jeremy scrambled to his feet—
a wild, desperate determination in his eyes she had never seen before.

He slammed his fists into the orange barrier.

“GIVE HER BACK!”

The barrier didn't crack.

But Jeremy didn't stop.

He slammed again.

Again.

AGAIN.

Blood smeared across his knuckles.

“EMILY—LOOK AT ME!” he screamed through the barrier.

She tried.

Her gaze flickered downward.

Jeremy pressed both hands to the barrier, trembling, sobbing openly.

“YOU COME BACK TO ME, EMILY QUINN,” he shouted, voice cracking so hard it hurt.

“You come BACK. DO YOU HEAR ME?”

Emily's heart cracked.

The Station pulsed:

“EXCHANGE 40% COMPLETE.”

Marisol crawled toward them—

slow, shaking, collapsing every few feet—

but fighting the Station's pull with everything she had left.

“Emily,” she rasped, reaching out with a trembling hand,
“don't let it erase you... please...”

Emily tried to speak—

to say *I'm sorry*

or *I love you*
or *I'm scared*
or *I'll try*—

—but the Station silenced her voice.

Her memories stuttered faster now.
Her childhood bedroom.
Her first bike.
Her first real friend.
Her first heartbreak.
Jeremy's laugh.
Marisol's tears.

Each one flickered—
and vanished into the core.

It hurt more than any physical wound.

She felt herself thinning—
becoming light—
becoming nothing.

“EXCHANGE 55% COMPLETE.”

Her heart fluttered weakly.

Emily Quinn was dissolving.

“I’m sorry,” she tried to mouth.

Jeremy slammed his forehead against the barrier. “NO—don’t—DON’T—EMILY,
PLEASE—NOT LIKE THIS!”

The Station hummed louder.

Emily’s vision cracked into static.

She saw through dozens of eyes—
other Echos—
lost, hollow, forgotten—
and felt the future being carved for her.

“EXCHANGE 60%—”

And then—

Something broke.

Not the barrier.
Not the core.

Something inside Marisol.

She screamed—
a sound torn out of her
from the place where her humanity and her programming collided—
and her eyes blazed WHITE.

Not orange.
Not blank.

White
like lightning tearing apart a storm.

Emily froze in mid-air.

Jeremy's breath hitched.

The Station paused.

“...ERROR.”

Marisol rose unsteadily, glowing brighter and brighter—
fighting the core's pull—
fighting the Station's order—
fighting her own reset.

Her voice cracked between human and machine:

“YOU. CAN'T. HAVE. HER.”

The Station boomed:

“INTERFERENCE DETECTED.”

Marisol screamed back, eyes blazing:

“I CHOOSE NOT TO BE YOUR FUNCTION!”

Light exploded from her.

The chamber shook.

The tethered puppet above them convulsed violently—
straining, cracking, tearing free of its bindings.

Panels shattered.
Windows into worlds blinked out.
Collectors flickered and vanished.

The core dimmed—
just a moment—
but long enough.

Emily gasped—
air rushing back into her lungs—
and dropped.

She fell straight toward the barrier.

“EMILY!” Jeremy screamed—
—and caught her.

They crashed to the glowing floor together.

Emily coughed, shaking uncontrollably.

Her memories flickered back into her skull like slamming doors.

Her name.
Her life.
Her people.

All hers again.

Jeremy held her so tightly it hurt.

“I’ve got you,” he sobbed. “I’ve got you—I’ve got you—I’ve got you—”

Emily clutched his shirt with trembling fingers.

“I... I almost wasn’t me,” she whispered.

“I know,” he whispered, forehead pressed to hers. “I know.”

The Station roared—
furious—
shaking the entire core chamber.

Marisol staggered toward them, still glowing faintly, but fading fast.

Emily reached for her.

“Marisol—!”

Marisol smiled softly.

Weakly.

Human.

For the first time since the reset.

“Emily... run.”

The chamber cracked open.

The core ignited.

The Station screamed—

“RETRIBUTION LEVEL: MAXIMUM.”

Chapter Twenty-One – Retribution

The Station’s scream was not a sound.

It was a **force**—a violent, living pressure that punched through the air and fractured the chamber’s walls like they were made of glass instead of worlds.

Emily barely had time to grab Marisol’s arm before the floor split beneath them.

Jeremy hauled Emily backward. “MOVE—GO GO GO—NOW!”

They ran—

And the core erupted.

Pillars of orange-white fire shot upward like volcanic jets, ripping through floating panels. Every window to every world shattered in a cascade of broken light. The silhouetted Collectors inside them fizzled out like extinguished stars.

Emily shielded Marisol with her body as a shockwave barreled past, sending razor-sharp fragments of worlds skittering across the floor.

Marisol hissed in pain. The glow around her flickered. Her legs buckled.

Emily didn't hesitate—she hooked Marisol's arm over her shoulder and dragged her forward. "Stay with me—please—just stay awake."

Marisol's voice wavered. "Emily... you shouldn't... I can't hold this form—much longer—"

Jeremy sprinted beside them, wild-eyed. "Who cares—just keep moving!"

Behind them, the core pulsed in furious rhythm.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

Each pulse sent a shock through the chamber, making the walls ripple like liquid metal.

Then—

The core **spoke**.

Not through words.

Through overwhelming, crushing intent.

Emily's bones rattled. Her teeth buzzed. Her vision blurred.

Jeremy collapsed onto one knee. "Em—! Em, I...I can't—"

Emily grabbed his hoodie, yanking him up. "DON'T YOU STOP. NOT NOW."

But the pressure doubled.

Tripledd.

Her knees buckled.

Her vision went white at the edges.

Marisol screamed, clutching her head. "It—it's rewriting the chamber—Emily—RUN—"

"I CAN'T RUN IF YOU'RE NOT WITH ME!"

The Station's fury manifested in the air—

Dark tendrils of shadow erupted from the walls, slamming into the floor and pulling themselves forward like grotesque limbs. Each tendril moved with purpose—searching.

Reaching.

Jeremy stumbled. "WHAT—WHAT THE HELL ARE THOSE?!"

Marisol's breathing hitched. "Manifestations... of the Station's will... they're made to drag deviants back... to be erased—"

Emily tightened her grip on her. "Not happening. Not again."

A tendril slammed down inches from her foot, leaving a crater.

Emily leapt back, dragging Marisol with her.

Another tendril swung at Jeremy—he dove under it, sliding across the glowing floor.

"EMILY!" he shouted. "DO YOU HAVE ANY KIND OF PLAN OR SHOULD WE JUST DIE CREATIVELY?!"

Emily's voice trembled. "I'm WORKING ON IT!"

A tendril lunged at her again—

And Marisol shoved her away.

Emily fell hard.

"MARISOL—!"

Marisol screamed as the tendril wrapped around her waist, lifting her off the ground. Her skin flickered—human to echo—human to echo—as she fought it.

"LET HER GO!" Emily lunged forward.

Jeremy grabbed her arm. "Emily—WAIT—!"

Emily ripped free, sprinting toward Marisol.

Marisol's eyes were wide with agony—but still so painfully human.

"Emily—DON'T—" she choked. "It wants ME. It'll take YOU TOO—RUN—"

Emily didn't stop.

"I'm NOT leaving you!"

She leapt toward the tendril—and grabbed Marisol's hand.

The tendril pulsed in response—tightening around Marisol, trying to pull her back into the core.

Emily screamed in rage, pulling the opposite direction with all her strength.

“NOT AGAIN—NOT AGAIN—NOT AGAIN—”

Jeremy slammed into Emily’s side, adding his weight, his arms circled around both of them.

Together they pulled—

—and the tendril **fractured**.

A crack shot through it like breaking stone.

Marisol screamed. Emily screamed back, pulling harder, until—

SNAP.

The tendril disintegrated into smoke.

Marisol collapsed into Emily’s arms, shaking violently.

Emily cupped her face. “Are you okay? Marisol—talk to me—”

Marisol blinked, stunned, breathless. “You—you pulled me free...”

Emily’s voice cracked. “I’ll always pull you free.”

Marisol’s eyes watered—human again.

Completely.

Jeremy stared. “Emily, that was—holy hell—”

But they had no time.

The Station roared—

a furious, wounded animal.

The entire chamber convulsed.

Panels on the walls exploded.

The tethered puppet at the center broke into pieces of white light.

The core lurched like a failing heart.

Marisol gasped, grabbing Emily’s sleeve.

“Emily—the Station—it’s—collapsing the core. It’s ending the entire system!”

Jeremy paled. “Meaning what? Like... we die-die?”

Marisol nodded weakly. "If the core collapses, all worlds collapse. The Station will reset EVERYTHING."

Emily froze.

Reset everything.

Erase every passenger.

Every world.

Every echo.

Every living thing inside the system.

Emily clenched her fists. "Then we get out."

Marisol laughed once—a small, broken sound. "There is no exit from the core."

"Then we make one," Emily said.

Marisol blinked. "Emily—"

"I'm DONE letting this place tell me what's possible."

The core's light dimmed—

the final sign of an incoming collapse—

Marisol's voice shook. "Emily... only a guide can open a path out of the core."

Emily stared at her.

"You're a guide now," she whispered.

Marisol's hand trembled in Emily's.

"B...but I don't know how..."

Emily squeezed her fingers.

"You don't have to know how," she said softly.

"You just have to TRY."

Jeremy nodded. "We believe in you."

Marisol looked between them—

fear, hope, confusion, love, all flickering at once—

She placed her glowing hand on the floor.

A ripple of white light spread outward.

The chamber froze.

For a moment—

Everything stopped collapsing.

The Station went silent.

Marisol's voice whispered into the quiet:

“Please... open a door... any door... I don't care where... just take us... someplace the Station can't reach...”

Her glow dimmed—

Emily grabbed her shoulders. “You can do this. I know you can.”

The floor rippled again.

Lights converged.

And—

A doorway began to form.

Weak.

Shaking.

Barely stable.

But **real**.

Jeremy stared in awe. “Holy—she's doing it—Emily she's actually—”

The Station shattered the air with a scream.

The core flared.

The chamber began to collapse again—

Not slowly.

Not gradually.

Instantly.

Everything exploded into fire and shadow.

Emily grabbed Marisol with one arm and Jeremy with the other.

“RUN!”

They sprinted toward the forming door—
the last door—
their only hope—

But the Station wasn’t going to let them reach it.

The ground cracked open beneath them.

Something massive surged forward from the broken core—
a shape Emily recognized too well.
A twisted figure with too many arms.
A faceless head.

A Collector.

Not one.

All of them.

Thousands.

All climbing out of the collapsing worlds.

All reaching.

Jeremy screamed: “EMILY—NOW OR NEVER—!”

Emily hurled herself toward the door—

A Collector lunged—

Marisol grabbed Emily’s wrist—

Jeremy grabbed her other—

And all three of them dove—

through the collapsing doorway—

just as the Station tore the chamber apart.

Chapter Twenty-Two – The Quiet Between Worlds

Falling.

Emily didn't know how long they fell.

Seconds.

Minutes.

Forever.

There was no wind. No gravity. No sensation of direction. Only the feeling of being pulled through a narrow place that wasn't meant for human bodies.

Jeremy's fingers were locked around hers so tightly they hurt.

Marisol's other hand trembled weakly in Emily's grip, flickering between warm and cold as her form stabilized and destabilized in waves.

Then—

light burst around them,
cold air rushed across Emily's face,
and—

They hit ground.

Hard.

Emily landed on her side with a painful grunt, air knocked violently from her lungs. Jeremy hit next, rolling across a bed of brittle grass. Marisol landed last—softly, as if something slowed her fall at the last second.

Dust drifted around them.

Silence.

Real silence.

Emily groaned, pressing her palm to the ground and pushing herself up. The air was crisp. Cold. Not fog. Not static. Not poison.

Just... air.

Jeremy sat up, clutching his ribs. "Ow. Ow. Ow. Everything is ow."

Emily tried to laugh—but the sound came out more like a sob.

She forced her breathing to slow, grounding herself.

They weren't in the core anymore.
Or the lake.
Or the nightmare hospital.
Or any place she recognized.

But this felt... real.

Not perfect.
Not manufactured.

Real.

Dirt. Grass. Chill. Silence.

She turned toward Marisol—

—and her breath caught.

Marisol lay curled on her side, breathing shallow and uneven. Her fingers twitched. The glow around her body had faded to almost nothing.

Her eyes fluttered open.

“...Emily?”

Emily crawled to her instantly. “I’m here. I’m right here.”

Marisol exhaled shakily, tears slipping down her temple. “I thought... I thought it took you...”

Emily pulled her gently into her arms. “It almost did.”

Jeremy scooted closer, voice rough. “You saved her. You broke the whole damn Station doing it.”

Marisol shut her eyes, overwhelmed.

“I don’t know how I did that,” she whispered. “I didn’t think I... I didn’t think I had anything left.”

Emily held her tighter. “You had yourself left. That’s more than the Station ever planned on.”

Marisol trembled.
Not from fear.
From having feelings again.

Emily brushed hair from her face gently. “Do you remember anything? Anything from before the core?”

Marisol frowned.

Then flinched.

Fragments flickered across her eyes—memories, tones of voice, sensations, faint and incomplete.

“I remember...”

She swallowed.

“...being cold. And being lost. And then...”

Her gaze lifted slowly—

settling on Emily’s face.

“...someone held my hand.”

Emily’s heart pulled painfully.

“I remember...” Marisol whispered, “...your voice telling me I mattered.”

Emily’s throat tightened. “You do.”

Marisol blinked rapidly, overwhelmed by emotion returning too fast.

Jeremy wiped his eyes discreetly. “Well, if we’re done emotionally destroying each other, maybe we should figure out where the hell we are now?”

Emily exhaled, forcing herself to look around.

They were in a wide, open field of pale blue grass—swaying gently though there was no wind. The sky overhead was too bright, too still. There were no clouds, no sun—just a soft glow.

Far ahead, a line of dead trees formed a crooked horizon. Beyond them, something like a railway line cut through the landscape, rusted and broken.

Emily frowned. “This doesn’t look like any Station world we’ve seen.”

Marisol closed her eyes, sensing the air. “...This place isn’t part of the active line.”

“Meaning?” Jeremy asked.

Marisol opened her eyes slowly.

“This is a broken world.”

Emily stiffened. “Broken how?”

Marisol hugged her knees. “Every world in the Station begins as something. A memory. A fear. A story. A moment in time. But when a world collapses or is abandoned...”

She gestured weakly at the empty landscape.

“...it becomes this. A place between deletion and existence. What the Station forgets, ends up here.”

Jeremy’s eyes widened. “So we’re in a trash dimension?”

Marisol nodded faintly. “Yes. But stable trash. Quiet. Safe, for the moment. The Station can’t see us here.”

Emily’s body sagged in relief. “We need that. We need a break.”

Jeremy flopped onto his back. “I’m going to lie here until my bones solidify again.”

Emily smiled softly—exhausted, hollow, but alive.

Then she turned back to Marisol.

Marisol wasn’t relaxing.

She stared at her hands. Turning them over slowly. Watching them flicker along the edges.

As if unsure they belonged to her.

Emily touched her shoulder. “Hey. Talk to me.”

Marisol swallowed, voice trembling. “Emily... what am I now? Am I... still someone? Or am I just... leftovers?”

Emily’s eyes softened. “You’re Marisol.”

Marisol let out a shaky breath. “I don’t feel like her.”

“Then we’ll find her together,” Emily said gently.

“Piece by piece.”

Marisol’s eyes watered.

Jeremy sat up and cleared his throat. “Also, not to brag, but you literally glowed like a divine apocalypse angel when you saved Emily. So whatever you are, it’s kind of awesome.”

Marisol blushed—
a soft, human blush.

Emily’s chest tightened affectionately.

Marisol whispered, “Emily... I don’t know how long I can stay like this. The Station will rebuild. It will look for me. For us.”

Emily nodded. "Then we keep moving before it notices."

Jeremy sighed. "On broken bones."

Emily snorted. "We'll walk slowly."

Marisol's brows pulled together.

Her voice was small.

"Emily... what if it finds us again?"

Emily took Marisol's hands in hers.

"Then it finds all three of us," she said firmly. "Because I'm not leaving either of you behind."

Marisol stared at her for a moment—eyes shimmering with gratitude and fear.

Then she leaned into Emily's shoulder.

Jeremy smiled tiredly.

"Not gonna lie, it feels good being alive with both of you."

Emily squeezed their hands.

For the first time since entering the Station, the world around them felt still.

Not safe.

Not free.

But still.

A moment to breathe.

A moment to choose the next step.

Emily looked across the dead trees, toward the broken railway.

"Whatever happens next," she murmured, "we face it together."

Neither Jeremy nor Marisol argued.

But deep in the pale grass, something shifted.

Watching.

Waiting.

The Station wasn't done with them.

Not even close.

Chapter Twenty-Three – The World That Should Not Exist

For a long moment, none of them spoke.

Emily helped Marisol stand—slowly, carefully—while Jeremy steadied himself against a crooked tree trunk. The air in the broken world was crisp, thin, and carried a faint static hum beneath the windless silence.

The pale blue grass whispered around their legs as if exhaling.

Emily scanned the empty horizon. “We need shelter. Food. Water. Anything.”

Jeremy raised a brow. “In a world the Station threw away? Might as well ask for room service.”

Marisol leaned into Emily for balance, her glow almost entirely gone now. Her voice came out soft and distant.

“This place... it used to be something. Before the Station emptied it.”

Emily brushed dirt from Marisol’s cheek with her sleeve. “Can you tell what it was?”

Marisol closed her eyes. Her fingers twitched like she was listening to something only she could hear.

“I hear...”

She paused, frowning.

“...voices. Echoes of voices. Like footsteps on snow.”

Jeremy squinted. “So we’re standing in the afterimage of someone’s memory?”

Marisol nodded faintly.

“Yes. The Station overwrote this world with something else long ago. What’s left is... the impression. Like a dream the system forgot.”

Emily tightened her grip on Marisol’s waist. “We can’t stay here forever. This place looks stable, but if the Station resurges—”

“It will find us,” Marisol whispered. “Eventually.”

Emily exhaled slowly. “So we move.”

They walked through the blue grass, staying close. The dead trees rose in twisted shapes—some bent backward like they'd been snapped in half, others reaching upward like skeletal hands.

Jeremy pointed at the horizon. "There. Tracks."

Emily saw them too.

A rusted railway line stretching crookedly across the landscape. Half-sunk into the earth. Abandoned. Silent.

A broken reminder of the thing hunting them.

They approached cautiously. The steel was warped, melted in places, as if exposed to impossible heat.

Emily knelt, touching it lightly.

Warm.

Not with heat.

With memory.

She recoiled slightly. "It's pulsing."

Marisol knelt beside her, brushing her fingers over the metal.

Her pupils dilated.

"It's not dead. It's dormant."

Jeremy stepped back. "Like a stingray buried under sand?"

Emily gave him a look. "A stingray that eats souls, maybe."

Marisol nodded faintly. "This was once a gateway track. Before the Station abandoned this world. Tracks don't truly die—they just... sleep."

Emily frowned. "Can it wake up?"

Marisol hesitated.

"...yes."

Emily and Jeremy shared a look of exhausted dread.

Jeremy pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fantastic. So the train to hell goes dormant like a bear, and we're walking in its den."

Emily ignored him, turning to Marisol.

“Can we use it?”

Marisol blinked. “What?”

“The track,” Emily said. “Can it take us somewhere else? Somewhere safer? Maybe closer to a stable station, or an exit point?”

Marisol looked conflicted.

“I don’t know. I’ve never... used a dead track. But if this one still remembers its purpose, then...”
She swallowed.

“It might open a path.”

Jeremy frowned. “To where? A world? A platform? A pit of nightmares?”

Marisol lowered her voice.

“...to whatever it was connected to before it broke.”

Emily stood. “Then that’s better than staying out in the open.”

Jeremy sighed. “I hate that you’re right.”

Emily offered Marisol her hand.

Marisol took it—tentatively, gratefully.

Together, they followed the broken tracks deeper into the pale forest.

As they walked, the landscape grew stranger.

The sky brightened, then dimmed, then brightened again without moving.

Trees bent toward them as if listening.

The ground shifted colors under their feet—pale blue to faded grey to faint lavender.

Jeremy whispered, “This place is glitching.”

Emily murmured back, “This place is dying.”

Marisol suddenly froze.

Emily stopped instantly. “What? What is it?”

Marisol’s eyes were wide, focused on something ahead.

Emily followed her gaze—and saw it too.

A structure rose between the skeletal trees, half-collapsed, half-suspended in air:

A train station platform.

Broken.

Tilted.

Floating several feet off the ground like someone had forgotten to finish rendering it.

The sign above the archway flickered:

STATION █ — DECOMMISSIONED

Jeremy blinked. "Decommissioned? The Station *retires* worlds?"

Marisol nodded solemnly. "When a passenger breaks too many rules, or a world becomes unstable, the Station removes it from the system. Closes it. Deletes it."

Emily felt her pulse quicken. "But this one wasn't deleted."

"No," Marisol whispered. "Something interrupted it."

Jeremy frowned. "Something like... us?"

"No," Marisol whispered, voice trembling. "Something older."

Emily stepped forward cautiously, helping Marisol stay upright.

"Come on."

They approached the platform.

Up close, the broken world felt even stranger. The stairs to the platform flickered in and out of existence. The bench on the left side floated an inch off the ground. A trash can stood—but its shadow fell in the wrong direction.

Marisol reached toward the archway.

Her hand glowed faintly.

Emily tensed. "Marisol? What's happening?"

Marisol whispered, voice distant:

"It remembers me."

Jeremy swallowed. "Is that good or bad?"

Marisol didn't answer.

Instead, the archway flickered violently—
and the platform lights sparked to life.

A sound echoed across the wasteland.

Soft.
Far away.
Haunting.

A whistle.

Emily's blood ran cold.

Jeremy froze. "Emily... tell me that's NOT what I think it is."

Marisol's hand shook.

Emily grabbed both their wrists.

The whistle came again—
closer this time—
low and mournful—

And the rails beneath their feet **rumbled**.

Marisol whispered:

"It's waking up."

Emily swore under her breath. "We need to get on the platform—NOW!"

They rushed up the glitching stairs, stumbling onto the half-collapsed concrete.

The whistle came again—
so close now it vibrated the air.

Jeremy grabbed Emily's arm. "Emily—look!"

Emily turned—

And saw a shape emerging through the pale fog:

A train.

But not like the other Station trains.

This one was old.
Damaged.

Half-transparent.
A ghost of a locomotive dragging itself across dead rails.
Its lights flickered like dying stars.

Marisol covered her mouth.

Emily whispered:

“...It’s the original train.”

Jeremy whispered back, horrified:

“The first one?”

Marisol nodded.

Emily felt her heart stop.

Because the original train meant one thing:

The **origin world** of the 13th Station
was coming straight for them.

Chapter Twenty-Four – The First Train

The ghost-train groaned across the dead rails, metal scraping metal in a sound that felt like someone dragging a coffin lid shut.

Emily stepped backward instinctively, pulling Marisol behind her as the spectral locomotive drifted into view. It wasn’t fully solid—parts of it flickered, phasing in and out, like a memory trying to remember itself.

Broken windows.
Rust eating through the steel.
A fractured headlamp dangling by a wire.
Ghost-light pooling where wheels should be.

Jeremy whispered, “Jesus Christ...”

The train hissed to a halt.

Not the sharp hydraulic hiss the new Station trains made.
This one exhaled like something tired.
Something ancient.

Emily felt her chest tighten. Whatever this train was, it shouldn't exist. Nothing this old should still move on dead rails.

The door slid open crookedly, metal scraping the frame, sparks flickering.

A cold wind spilled out.

Marisol shivered.

Emily steadied her. "Marisol... what is this?"

Marisol stared at the open doorway, face drained of color.

"This is where it began," she whispered.
"The first world the Station ever created."

Emily frowned. "Created for what?"

Marisol swallowed.
"For someone who needed it."

Jeremy raised an eyebrow. "You mean like therapy? Or torture?"

Marisol shook her head.
"No. The first passenger. Before the Station had structure. Before the numbered lines. Before the Echos. It all started with one person who couldn't let go of something."

Emily's breath caught.
"The Station was made for one person?"

Marisol nodded, trembling.

"Yes."
"And I think this is their train."

The lights inside flickered, casting long shadows across the broken platform.

Jeremy stepped between the girls protectively. "Whatever that means, I'm voting we don't get on—"

The ground shook violently—
a tremor that traveled up the rusted rails and into the platform.

Marisol collapsed to her knees, clutching her chest.

“Ah—! The Station—it’s pulling on me—Emily—!”

Emily dropped down beside her. “Hey—HEY—stay with me.”

Marisol’s body flickered at the edges.

Not becoming an Echo.

Becoming something lost.

Something the Station desperately wanted back.

Jeremy knelt fast. “What’s happening?”

Marisol gasped through shaking breaths.

“It knows where we are. It’s trying to reel me in—to rewrite me—before I stabilize.”

Emily’s heart pounded.

There was no time.

No safe spot to run to.

The barren world around them was collapsing at the edges—the sky rippling, trees bending, the grass dissolving into static.

The Station had found them.

The whistle blew again—this time from the **broken world itself**, echoing through the horizon as if something enormous was waking under their feet.

The rails flashed bright red.

Marisol screamed.

Emily grabbed her face in both hands. “Marisol—look at me. LOOK AT ME.”

Marisol forced her eyes open, tears streaking her cheeks.

“Emily... I don’t... want to disappear again...”

“You won’t,” Emily said fiercely. “Not as long as I breathe.”

Jeremy scanned the collapsing forest. “We need shelter—NOW.”

Emily looked at the ghost train.

At the open door.

At the ancient world waiting inside.

The answer was obvious.

And terrible.

She looked back to the others.

“We go in.”

Jeremy recoiled. “Emily, THAT THING is older than every nightmare we’ve been through.”

“I know.”

“This is literally the birthplace of the Station—”

“I KNOW.”

He stepped closer, voice cracking. “Emily… if we get on that train, I’m not sure we’re getting off.”

Emily put a hand on his shoulder.

Her voice was quiet.

Steady.

Terrified.

Determined.

“Jeremy. We don’t have a choice.”

He closed his eyes for a moment.

Then nodded.

Marisol was fading faster now. The collapse behind them was spreading, turning grass to white void.

Emily wrapped Marisol’s arm over her shoulders. “Come on. One step at a time.”

Together, they helped her to her feet.

The three of them approached the open door.

Jeremy swallowed. “Ladies first… I guess.”

Emily stepped inside.

Everything changed.

Inside the First Train

The air was colder.

Still.

Heavy, like it remembered grief.

The carriage lights flickered softly—warm, gold, nothing like the sharp orange of the modern Station worlds. The seats were upholstered in deep red velvet, torn and faded but dignified.

Emily exhaled. “It feels... human.”

Jeremy nodded slowly. “Like someone actually *rode* this.”

Marisol leaned on Emily, closing her eyes. “This world was based on a memory. Not a fear.”

Emily touched the wooden railing beside her.

It hummed faintly.

A *memory* trying to breathe again.

Jeremy whispered, “Where do we go now?”

Before Emily could answer—

The train lurched.

The door slammed shut.

Marisol’s eyes snapped open.

“No—no no no—!”

Emily grabbed her hand. “Marisol—what’s wrong?”

Marisol stared out the window—
horror creeping onto her face.

The broken landscape was gone.

Replaced by—

Snow.

Falling gently.

Softly.

Endlessly.

Jeremy pressed his forehead to the glass. "This... this isn't the void anymore."

Emily whispered, "Where are we?"

Marisol's voice trembled.

"We're inside a life."

Emily turned. "Whose life?"

Marisol didn't answer.

She didn't need to.

From the front of the train, a faint silhouette appeared—
a person standing just out of view—
head bowed, hands clasped behind their back as if waiting.

Jeremy's voice cracked. "Tell me that's not an Echo."

Emily shook her head slowly.

"No.

That's someone else."

The figure turned slightly.

Not enough to see their face.

Just enough to acknowledge them.

The temperature dropped.

Emily felt her heart thud hard against her ribs.

Marisol clutched her arm.

Jeremy whispered:

"I think that's the first passenger."

The lights flickered.

The train sped up.

Snow blurred into white streaks.

And the figure finally spoke.

Soft.
Tired.
Lonely.

“You shouldn’t have come here.”

Chapter Twenty-Five – The First Passenger

The figure didn’t turn all the way around.

He stood at the front of the carriage like a ghost that learned how to stand straight. His coat was long, old-fashioned—wool, dark charcoal, frayed along the edges. Snow dusted the shoulders though the train was sealed.

Emily opened her mouth.

No words came out.

Jeremy stepped protectively in front of her anyway—shaking but stubborn.
“O-okay—hello—sir—ghost—whatever you are—”

Emily grabbed his sleeve. “Jeremy—shh.”

Marisol flinched behind Emily, clutching the metal pole for balance.

The man’s voice echoed softly through the carriage.

“You shouldn’t have come here.”

Emily swallowed. “We didn’t have a choice.”

The man finally turned his head—just enough for Emily to see the corner of his face.

Sharp jawline.
Unshaven.
Eyes a dull, exhausted brown that should’ve belonged to someone alive.
Someone grieving.

Not someone mythic.

Not someone who had become the seed of a nightmare.

His gaze locked onto Emily.

“You forced open a door that hasn’t opened in a very long time.”

His voice was quiet.

Human.

Not like the Station’s booming commands.

Not like the Echos’ fractured whispers.

Emily stepped toward him, gently pulling Marisol along. “Who are you?”

He hesitated.

As if remembering took effort.

Then, softly—

“I was the first.”

Jeremy muttered, “Well that’s comforting.”

Emily shot him a look. “Not helping.”

Jeremy lifted his hands. “I can’t help it, I’m nervous!”

Marisol whispered, voice trembling with recognition:

“...you’re the origin. This train—the Station—everything came from you.”

He nodded once.

Emily’s heart thudded.

“You’re... the first passenger,” she said.

“I was,” he corrected. “A long time ago.”

Emily took a slow breath.

“Why did the Station start with you?”

The man turned his eyes back toward the snowy window.

A soft smile—painful, broken, full of memory—crossed his lips.

“Because I needed to go somewhere.”

Emily frowned gently.

“Where?”

He didn’t answer.

Instead, he walked forward, and the train's lights followed him—glowing brighter, then dimmer, like they were tuning themselves to his presence.

He stopped by an empty seat.

"My whole life," he murmured, "I waited for a train that could take me someplace where the pain made sense."

Jeremy whispered under his breath, "...oh."

Emily stepped a little closer. "You built the Station?"

"No."

He shook his head.

"I only rode its first echo."

"Echo?" Emily repeated.

He closed his eyes.

"The Station wasn't built. It was... born."

He tapped his temple.

"From me."

Marisol gasped.

Emily squeezed her hand, steadyng her.

The man continued, voice soft as drifting snow:

"When you hurt long enough... when grief corrodes the edges of your mind... sometimes the world you see rearranges itself to survive."

A pause.

"And if that grief is deep enough... it becomes a place."

Emily's breath caught.

"You created the Station with your pain."

He nodded.

"And it kept growing. Feeding. Adapting. Collecting."

Jeremy stared at him. "So... you're like...the dad of the most messed up subway system in existence."

The man gave a small, almost amused breath.
“Something like that.”

Emily moved closer. “If you started it... can you stop it?”

Silence.

Then—

“No.”

Emily blinked. “Why not?”

“Because I’m not in control anymore.”

His expression darkened.

“The Station hasn’t listened to me in decades. Maybe centuries. Time doesn’t move correctly in these worlds.”

Emily’s pulse quickened.

“What does it want now?”

The man finally turned fully toward them.

And for the first time, they felt the pull of something vast behind his tired eyes.

“It wants completion.”

Jeremy frowned. “Completion of what?”

The man looked at Marisol.

Then Emily.

“Of what it started with me.”

Emily stepped protectively in front of Marisol.

“Why her?”

He studied Marisol a long moment.

“Because she became something the Station could not predict.”

Marisol swallowed. “An Echo that broke its function.”

He smiled softly. “A glitch.”

Jeremy muttered, “We’re risking our lives for a glitch?”

Emily elbowed him. "Hey."

Marisol blushed faintly—humanly.

The man placed his palm on a wooden beam. The train responded, humming mournfully.

"The Station doesn't want its echoes to evolve. But she did. And when she touched you—"

He looked at Emily.

"—the Station adapted its purpose."

Emily stiffened.

"What purpose?"

"To correct the error."

"...me?"

He nodded.

"And her."

Emily took a step forward, voice sharp.

"Then tell me how to stop it."

The man watched her with weary admiration.

"You can't stop the Station. But you can end your part in it."

Emily frowned. "Meaning?"

"Find the memory that birthed me. The core I left behind. Rewrite it."

Jeremy blinked. "Rewrite... your trauma?"

The first passenger's voice dropped into a whisper.

"Yes."

Emily's heart sank.

"But... we don't even know where your original world is."

The man looked out the window at the snow.

"It's coming."

The lights flickered.

The train slowed.

Emily felt it before she saw it—

A world forming around them.

A world ancient, fragile, and humming with unbearable sorrow.

The man stepped aside.

“You’re about to see the reason the Station exists.”

Marisol clutched Emily’s arm.

Jeremy exhaled shakily.

And outside, through the swirling snow, a shape appeared:

A small rural platform.

A lamppost flickering.

A bench covered in frost.

A single suitcase sitting abandoned in the snow.

Emily whispered:

“...this is your memory.”

He nodded.

“My last one.”

The train came to a stop.

Door opening with a slow, icy moan.

He looked at Emily with tired eyes.

“If you want to end the Station... you must walk into the moment that created it.”

Emily stared out at the lonely platform.

The cold breathed like grief itself.

Jeremy swallowed hard. “Em. We really doing this?”

Emily nodded slowly.

“Yes.”

She squeezed Marisol’s hand.

“We’re doing this together.”

The man stepped aside.

“Then go.”

Emily took the first step toward the door.

And the moment her foot touched snow—

The world **changed**.

Chapter Twenty-Six – The Memory That Never Let Go

The snow swallowed Emily’s boot with a soft *crunch*.

Cold wrapped instantly around her ankles, snapping across her skin like needles of ice. She shivered—not from the temperature, but from the **weight** of the place.

This wasn’t a world.

This wasn’t even a Station echo.

This was a **wound**.

Jeremy stepped out behind her, breath turning to fog. “Okay... this feels wildly not normal.”

Marisol hesitated before stepping onto the snow. The flakes that landed on her flickered—some melting, some going right through her as if she wasn’t fully anchored.

Emily tightened her grip on Marisol’s hand before she drifted away mentally or physically. “Stay with me, okay?”

Marisol nodded, though her eyes were distant—like she could *hear* something that Emily and Jeremy couldn’t.

The first passenger did not step out with them.

He remained inside the train’s doorway, a shadow framed by warm light.

He didn't move.
Didn't blink.

Just **watched**.

As if afraid of his own memory.

Emily turned her gaze back toward the platform.

A single lamppost flickered overhead, struggling to stay lit. The bench beneath it was coated in thick frost, untouched by footprints or time.

And beside it...

A small suitcase.

Old leather.
Buckled shut.
Frozen to the ground.

Emily approached slowly.

Jeremy whispered, "Does... does anyone else feel like touching that thing is going to make something explode?"

Marisol didn't answer.

She was staring at the bench.

No—
not at the bench.

At the **ghost** sitting on it.

A translucent figure.
Head bowed.
Hands clasped tightly in their lap.
Snow falling straight through them.

Emily's heart lurched as she approached.

A man.

A younger version of the first passenger.

Same jawline.
Same posture.
Same quiet misery collapsed into a single moment in time.

Jeremy stepped backward. “Nope—nope nope nope—this is some paranormal therapy session level eight.”

Emily ignored him.

“Marisol,” she whispered, “what do you see?”

Marisol touched her temple.

“He’s waiting,” she murmured. “For someone who never came.”

Emily’s chest tightened.
“Someone he loved?”

Marisol nodded—slow, sad. “Someone the world took from him.”

The ghost on the bench shivered.
Not from cold.

From heartbreak.

The wind picked up.
Soft.
Then stronger.

Snow swirled around them like a rising storm.

Emily knelt near the bench, her breath shaky. “This is the moment the Station was born.”

Marisol whispered, “He was stuck here. Trapped in grief. So his mind created a door... and stepped through it.”

Jeremy scratched his head. “So... instead of therapy, he built a reality-warping subway network that eats people?”

Emily glared.
“Not helping.”

Marisol’s eyes softened.
“He didn’t build it for anyone else. Just for himself. But grief doesn’t stay contained.”

Emily swallowed.

The ghost's fingers twitched. Slowly, mechanically. Like he was trying to pick up the suitcase but couldn't. Like the memory wouldn't let him.

Emily whispered, "We need to find what he's waiting for."

The wind answered.

A distant sound.

Crunching snow.

Movement.

Jeremy stiffened. "Uh... guys?"

From the far end of the platform, a figure approached through the blizzard.

A woman.

Bundled in a dark coat.

Snow in her hair.

Head down.

Dragging a heavy bag behind her.

Emily's breath hitched.

"Is that her?"

The first passenger's ghost lifted its head slowly.

Marisol whispered, "This was the last moment before she died."

Jeremy froze. "Wait—WHAT?"

Marisol lowered her voice.

"She never made it onto the train. This world... this moment... it's him waiting for her—and the moment he realized she wasn't coming."

Emily's heart twisted so sharply it hurt.

The woman approached closer.

Emily stepped toward her—

and walked straight **through** her.

She stumbled forward, gasping.

Cold shot up her spine.

Marisol grabbed her arm. "She's not real. Not anymore. She's just a memory."

Emily turned. The woman kept walking, passing through time on a loop that refused to break.

She passed the ghost on the bench—

He never looked up.

He never saw her.

He never realized she was there.

The woman kept walking—

past the bench.

past the suitcase.

past the lamppost—

and into the tracks.

Emily's heart stopped.

“No—”

The woman stepped onto the rail—

A horn blasted through the storm—

bright and violent—

Emily covered her ears.

Jeremy shouted, “EMILY—DON’T WATCH—!”

But she couldn’t look away.

The woman turned toward the oncoming headlights—

And the world **glitched**.

The snow froze midair.

The lights dimmed.

The woman’s face flickered—

between shapes—

between memories—

between versions of someone loved.

Emily gasped.

“She’s every person he ever lost.”

Marisol whispered, “...yes.”

The train’s lights grew blinding.

Emily screamed.

“STOP—STOP—PLEASE—!”

The memory did not stop.

It couldn’t.

This was the moment that broke him.
The moment that created the Station.
The moment designed to replay forever.

There was impact—
but no sound.
Only a shockwave of white light.

Then—

Silence.

When the snow settled, the woman was gone.

The ghost on the bench stared at his empty hands.

He whispered, broken:

“...I should have gone with you.”

Emily’s eyes burned with tears.

He stood—slowly—and walked into the open train that waited for him.
Into the door that wasn’t real.
Into the place his grief created.

And as he vanished—

The world around Emily cracked.

Snow turned into white static.
The lamppost bent.
The ground split beneath her feet.

Marisol screamed, “THE MEMORY IS COLLAPSING—EMILY—WE HAVE TO GO—!”

Jeremy grabbed her wrist.
“MOVE—NOW—!”

Emily backed away—
but the Ghost Passenger suddenly appeared in front of her.

Face hollow.
Eyes ancient.

He whispered:

“You saw the truth. Now you must carry the end.”

Emily’s breath shook.
“The end of what?”

“...of the Station.”

He lifted a shaking hand and pressed something into her palm—

A cold item.
Metal.
Small.

Emily looked down—

A train token.

Old.
Copper.
Inscribed with a number:

0

The Ghost Passenger whispered:

“It begins where it ends.”

The world shattered—
and Emily, Jeremy, and Marisol were hurled backward—

straight out of the memory.

Chapter Twenty-Seven – The Passenger With No Number

Emily hit the ground hard.

Grass.

Cold air.

A sky flickering between blue and white static.

She gasped, coughing as the world snapped back into itself. Jeremy rolled beside her with a grunt. Marisol landed light but stumbled, clutching her head.

The broken world had returned—but it wasn’t stable anymore.

The trees bent sharply, twisting like warped metal. The sky rippled like a glitching screen. The frozen horizon began dissolving at the edges.

Jeremy staggered upright. “I’m gonna say it—this world looks WAY worse than before.”

Emily didn’t answer.

She opened her fist.

The copper token lay in her palm, glowing faintly in the dim light.

0

Not a platform number.

Not a sector.

Not a trial.

A beginning before beginnings.

Jeremy leaned over her shoulder. “That looks like something cursed and important.”

Marisol stared at it in awe—and fear.

“That... shouldn’t exist.”

Emily clenched it tighter. “He gave it to me.”

Marisol shook her head. “No one should have been able to give you anything from inside a deprecated memory. That world shouldn’t have... touched reality.”

Emily looked up. “What does it mean?”

Marisol hesitated.

“It means the Station has a root you can reach.”

Jeremy blinked. “Meaning we can shut the whole thing down?”

Marisol swallowed.

“Meaning the first passenger gave you access to the Station’s *origin code*.”

Emily’s heart kicked painfully.

“So I can rewrite it.”

Marisol nodded.

“Yes.”

Jeremy threw his hands up. “So the world’s most traumatic subway system is running on emotional programming?!”

Emily ignored him.

She stared at the token.

It felt cold.

Too cold.

Like it had been sitting inside a dying memory for centuries.

Marisol touched her arm.

“Emily... the Station is going to come for you.”

“It already has.”

“No.” Marisol shook her head.

“I mean *you* specifically. Not us. The token binds itself. It chooses. Now the Station will try to reclaim you the same way it reclaimed its own memories.”

Emily gripped the token so tightly her knuckles went white.

Jeremy stepped closer. “Then we don’t let it.”

But the world shook violently—cutting him off.

A tremor.

Then another.

The sky overhead split open with a jagged crack—
like a glass window breaking inward.

Marisol gasped. “No—no—NO—Emily—we need to move—”

Emily turned in shock.

A massive shadow crawled across the horizon.

A shape too large to understand at first.
Too wrong.

Like a train—

but upside down.

Its cars twisted backward.
Its windows glowing orange like eyes.
Its wheels spinning into nothing.

It moved across the sky, not the ground.

A world that obeyed no physical law.

Emily whispered, horrified:

“...is that another Station train?”

Marisol shook her head violently.

“That’s not a train. That’s the *system* coming to reclaim its lost core.”

Jeremy backed up. “Guys—we gotta RUN.”

They ran.

Through the twisting grass.
Across the cracking ground.
Toward the broken station platform they’d come from.

But the rails ahead ignited—
bright orange—
splitting open.

A shockwave blasted toward them.

Marisol’s knees buckled.
Emily grabbed her instantly.
Jeremy shielded them both as debris flew.

The broken sky-train screeched overhead, its sound like tearing metal and screaming voices. It didn’t follow physics. It didn’t need to.

This was the Station unhinged.

Reaching for them.

Reaching for *her*.

Emily's ears rang. "Marisol—what do we do?!"

Marisol's hair flickered static. "The token—it's calling the Station. Like a beacon. We need to get somewhere the Station can't collapse us."

Jeremy shouted, "And WHERE THE HELL IS THAT?!"

Marisol pointed forward—
toward a distant shape forming between the lightning cracks in the sky:

A door.

A huge, rusted, industrial door rising out of the ground like a monument.

Emily's chest tightened.

"It looks like... a service gate."

Jeremy squinted. "A service gate for WHAT—Hell?!"

Marisol grabbed Emily's hand.

"It's the maintenance level. The Station's deepest layer. The only place not controlled by the trials. Not bound by worlds."

"Can we shut it down from there?" Emily asked.

Marisol nodded weakly.

"It's the only place you can reach the original core."

Emily tightened her arm around Marisol's waist. "Then that's where we're going."

Behind them, the sky-train shrieked—
its form flickering, unraveling—
growing larger as it descended.

The ground shook hard enough to knock them forward.

Jeremy pulled Emily and Marisol up. "GO—NOW—MOVE!"

They sprinted.

Grass turned to static.

Static turned to ash.

Ash turned to nothing.

The broken world was dissolving behind them at terrifying speed.

The service gate grew larger—
towering, rusted, ancient, humming with power.

Emily reached it first, slamming her free hand onto the metal.

It pulsed beneath her palm.

Recognizing the token.

Accepting it.

The gate shuddered.

Jeremy yelled, “OPEN IT, EMILY—OPEN IT—NOW!”

Emily raised the token.

A beam of white light surged from the copper disk—

and the service gate roared open.

Heat blasted outward.

Dust.

Darkness.

Machinery.

A world beneath all worlds.

Marisol’s knees gave way.

Emily caught her mid-fall.

“I’ve got you—don’t you dare fade on me—”

Marisol whispered, trembling, “Emily...this next layer... it’s worse than anything we’ve seen...”

Emily nodded, breath shaking.

“I don’t care.”

Jeremy grabbed them both and hauled them inside. “Then close it BEFORE THAT THING GETS HERE!”

Emily spun—

The sky-train was descending.

Fast.

Screaming.

Unraveling the broken world as it came.

She slammed the token into the gate's lock.

The doors snapped shut—

Just as the sky-train crashed against the metal—

BOOM

The entire maintenance layer shook.

Silence.

They stood in absolute darkness.

Emily's heart pounded.

Jeremy whispered, "I hate this. I hate everything."

Marisol's hand found Emily's in the dark.

Emily squeezed it.

"Let's finish this."

Chapter Twenty-Eight – The Maintenance Layer

Darkness wasn't the right word.

This place wasn't *dark*—
it was **empty**,
as if the concept of light had never been invented here.

Emily blinked hard, trying to adjust, but the black swallowed everything. Her breath echoed back at her with no sense of distance.

Marisol squeezed her hand, her voice trembling.
"Stay close. This layer... it was never meant for passengers."

Jeremy muttered, "Great. Love hearing that when I can't see the floor I'm standing on."

Emily tightened her grip on Marisol and reached back to find Jeremy's jacket sleeve.

The three of them stood linked, a single fragile chain in a place that felt like it would erase them if they let go.

Then—

A faint hum.

Low. Mechanical. Ancient.

And a soft glow ignited beneath their feet.

Emily gasped.

They were standing on a narrow metal walkway suspended over an endless abyss of machinery—gears the size of buildings turning silently in the dark, rails weaving and unweaving themselves like living veins, lights flashing in patterns that made no sense.

Jeremy whispered, “...we’re inside the brain of the Station.”

Marisol nodded weakly.

“Yes. The part where worlds are created, stored, recycled... or destroyed.”

Emily swallowed.

Something about the air felt wrong—dusty, electrical, like static clinging to her skin.

Ahead, the walkway stretched forward into a tunnel of flickering lights.

The sound of distant grinding reverberated like a pulse.

Emily pointed. “We go that way.”

Jeremy sighed. “Of course we do.”

They moved carefully—Emily leading with Marisol tucked under one arm, Jeremy watching their backs.

The deeper they walked, the louder the machinery grew.

Clank.

Shift.

Click.

Whirr.

Like a massive clock struggling to keep time.

Emily’s breath fogged slightly, as if the temperature dropped with every step.

Marisol's voice shook. "The Station is... rebuilding itself."

Emily frowned. "How fast?"

Marisol closed her eyes.

"...fast enough that we don't have much time."

Jeremy made a strangled noise. "WHY would anyone build a subway system whose brain looks like a biomechanical hellscape?!"

Emily whispered, "Because one broken person needed it. And now it wants to stay alive."

Marisol looked up at Emily, her eyes flickering faintly.

"Emily... the token is guiding you. You feel it, don't you?"

Emily hesitated.

Then nodded.

"At first it was just cold. But now... it's like it's pulling me forward."

"Use it," Marisol whispered. "Let it show you the way."

Emily took a steady breath and loosened her grip on Marisol just enough to hold the token before her.

The copper disc warmed in her palm—
then glowed.

A thin line of white light extended from it, forming an arrow pointing down the walkway.

Jeremy blinked. "That's convenient."

Emily cracked a shaky smile. "For once, yeah."

They followed the ghost-light path deeper until the walkway ended at a massive circular hatch—
bigger than a train car—
covered in locks, wires, and sigils.

Marisol whispered, horrified, "This is the rewrite chamber."

Jeremy frowned. "Meaning?"

Emily's breath hitched.

"It's where the Station decides the purpose of every world. Where it reassigned passengers."

Marisol nodded.

“Where Echos are made.”

Jeremy’s face drained. “So... like the torture room where the Station programmatically murders your personality?”

Emily didn’t answer.

She pressed her free hand against the cold metal.

Marisol whispered urgently, “Emily—wait—this chamber might respond to you now because of the token. But if it links to you fully, it might try to rewrite *you*.”

Emily’s stomach tightened.

She turned to Marisol.

“You said this is the only place where I can reach the original core.”

Marisol nodded. “Yes. But the core might reach *you* back.”

Jeremy grabbed Emily’s wrist.

“No. Nope. Not happening. We just went through absolute hell to KEEP you from being rewritten.”

Emily met his eyes—soft but firm.

“And now we’re going to rewrite the Station instead.”

Jeremy swallowed hard.

“Emily...”

She squeezed his hand. “You’re not losing me.”

The chamber trembled—
a deep, seismic rumble.

Marisol stepped back, eyes wide.

“It’s waking up. The rewrite cycle is restarting.”

Emily turned the token.

It burned in her palm.

Her breath caught—
then steadied.

“Stand behind me,” she whispered.

Jeremy moved to her right.
Marisol to her left, gripping her arm like a lifeline.

Emily lifted the token.

White lines crawled across the hatch, lighting up in sharp patterns—
like circuitry engraving itself in real-time.

Metal scraped.

Bolts turned.

A deep boom echoed through the layer as the hatch unlocked.

Slowly, painfully, it opened—

Revealing a chamber shaped like a giant sphere, filled with floating screens flashing fragments of worlds:

The lake.
The hospital.
The snowy platform.
The nightmarish city.
The core.

And at the center—

Suspended in a web of orange light—

was a pulsing black mass of code.

The original wound.

The grief-memory that started everything.

Emily stepped inside.

Jeremy whispered, “Emily... that thing feels wrong.”

Marisol nodded, voice barely above a breath.
“It’s the core of the Station. Pure emotion—pure loss—pure creation. Once Emily interacts with it... the Station will know exactly where we are.”

Emily tightened her fists.

“It already does.”

She stepped forward—

And the core pulsed.

The entire chamber shook violently.

Screens shattered.

Lights flickered.

The machinery roared.

Jeremy grabbed Emily's arm. "WHOA—WHAT DID YOU JUST DO?!"

Emily stared at the swirling black mass.

"It reacted to the token."

Marisol's voice trembled. "Emily... whatever happens next—you have to be ready."

Emily nodded once.

And held out the token.

The chamber froze.

The core flickered.

A deep, ancient voice filled the air, vibrating through Emily's bones.

"PASSENGER IDENTIFIED."

Emily held her ground.

"TOKEN — ORIGIN LEVEL — ACCEPTED."

Jeremy whispered, "Oh no. That sounds too official."

Emily took a breath so deep it hurt.

The voice continued:

"DO YOU WISH TO REWRITE THE STATION?"

Emily's heart stopped.

Her pulse thundered in her ears.

Jeremy squeezed her shoulder.

"Emily... think before you answer."

Marisol whispered, "This is the only way to end it."

Emily closed her eyes.

Then opened them.

Clear.

Steady.

Determined.

"Yes."

Silence.

Then—

"OFFER REQUIRED."

Emily blinked.

"What?"

The core pulsed.

"THE SYSTEM CANNOT BE ERASED WITHOUT EQUIVALENT EXCHANGE."

Jeremy swore under his breath. "Here we go again—what does it want THIS time?"

The core answered:

"TO END THE STATION, YOU MUST GIVE UP ONE OF THREE."

Emily's breath hitched.

Marisol grabbed her hand.

Jeremy stepped closer protectively.

The core boomed:

"YOUR MEMORIES."

Emily flinched.

"OR—YOUR IDENTITY."

Her knees weakened.

"OR—"

The core pulsed violently, shaking the chamber.

“PASSENGER 21: MARISOL VEGA.”

Marisol gasped.

Jeremy shouted, “NO—NO—HELL NO—THAT IS NOT AN OPTION—”

Emily’s heartbeat thundered painfully.

Her memories.

Her sense of self.

Or Marisol.

The chamber waited.

The Station waited.

Emily shook uncontrollably.

But she already knew the answer.

She always had.

Emily lifted the token—

and chose.

Chapter Twenty-Nine – Equivalent Exchange

The chamber fell silent.

Not the peaceful kind.

Not the kind that brings comfort.

This silence was a **void**, waiting to consume whatever Emily said next.

The core pulsed in a slow, final rhythm—
like a heartbeat made of darkness.

Jeremy grabbed Emily’s wrist hard.
“Emily. Think. THINK. You can’t just—”

She didn't look at him.

Her eyes were on Marisol.

Marisol... who stared back at her with trembling lips and wide, terrified eyes.

"Emily," Marisol whispered, voice cracking, "don't you dare."

Emily's throat tightened painfully.

"I'm not choosing you."

Marisol froze.

Jeremy sagged in relief—until Emily said the next sentence.

"I'm choosing me."

Jeremy's voice broke.

"Oh no. No—no no no—"

Marisol clutched Emily's arm. "Emily, STOP—don't—don't you do that—"

The core spoke again, monotone and merciless:

"IDENTITY OR MEMORY. CHOOSE ONE."

Emily swallowed hard.

Her hands shook.

Her breath trembled.

Her vision blurred at the edges.

She forced out the words.

"I choose—"

But she couldn't finish.

Her heart twisted violently.

Identity.

Everything she is.

Gone.

Memories.

Everything she's lived.

Gone.

Emily closed her eyes.

And the truth hit her with devastating clarity:

Marisol had already lost herself once.

Jeremy had almost lost her moments ago.

Emily couldn't—*wouldn't*—let either of them live through her erasure.

She took a shaky breath.

"I choose... my memories."

Marisol froze.

Jeremy made a strangled sound. "EMILY—NO—"

The core pulsed.

"CONFIRMED."

Emily felt her body jolt, like cold electricity shot through her veins.

Marisol grabbed her face, desperate.

"Emily—listen to me—STOP—this isn't heroic—this is torture—"

Emily smiled—heartbreaking and soft.

"No. It's a restart."

Jeremy pulled her into a fierce, shaking hug.

"Em—please—please don't do this—"

Her voice broke.

"I need you both alive."

Jeremy held her tighter, crying openly.

"You'll forget us. You'll forget *yourself*. You'll forget everything you survived."

Emily whispered into his shoulder,

"And if forgetting everything means you and Marisol get to remember?

Then it's worth it."

Marisol sobbed.

"Emily—please—let ME take the exchange. I'm not even whole—let ME—"

Emily shook her head, pressing her forehead against Marisol's.

“You already gave up everything once. I won’t let you do it again.”

The core brightened.

“MEMORY EXTRACTION INITIATED.”

Jeremy screamed, “NO—STOP—STOP—YOU CAN’T TAKE HER—”

Marisol clung to Emily’s shirt, shaking violently.

“Emily—EMILY—look at me—please—don’t leave me again—”

Emily’s tears finally fell.

“Marisol… you saved me from being erased.”

She cupped her cheek.

“It’s my turn.”

The chamber trembled violently as the extraction began.

Emily’s fingers twitched.

Her knees buckled.

Jeremy caught her. “Em—Em, stay with us—please—”

But she was already fading.

Thoughts blurring.

Memories slipping.

Names dissolving.

Jeremy’s voice cracked.

“No—no—Em—stay—don’t forget—don’t forget—”

Emily blinked.

Jeremy’s face wavered.

Marisol’s form flickered.

She struggled to speak—
to get out one last sentence.

“Marisol… Jeremy… I—”

Her voice broke apart.

She tried again.

“I… I…”

The core roared.

A white light exploded outward—
blinding—
burning—
erasing.

Jeremy screamed her name.

Marisol clung to her desperately.

Emily's eyes unfocused.

Her breath hitched.

“Who... am... I...?”

Her legs gave out entirely.

Jeremy caught her before she hit the floor—
holding her like she was made of glass,
crying into her hair.

Marisol collapsed beside them, sobbing uncontrollably.

Emily lay limp in their arms—
eyes blank,
breathing shallow,
mind emptied of everything she had fought for.

The core spoke one final sentence:

“EXCHANGE COMPLETE.”

And the Station began to die.

Walls cracked.
Screens shattered.
The machinery screamed in collapsing metal.

The world fell apart around them.

But all Jeremy could do was whisper against Emily's forehead:

“I'm here. I'm here. God, please—Emily—I'm here.”

Marisol took Emily's hand in both of hers, pressing it to her face.

She whispered, voice breaking:

“I’ll remember for you.”
“I’ll carry what you lost.”
“I promise.”

The chamber became a collapsing storm of light.

And with Emily unconscious between them, Jeremy and Marisol dragged her toward the final door—

the exit the core had unlocked—
the one that would take them out of the Station forever.

They didn’t look back.

Because Emily couldn’t.

Chapter Thirty – The Last Stop

Light.

Actual sunlight.

Warm.

Soft.

Golden.

Emily’s eyelids twitched as it washed over her face, unfamiliar and comforting all at once. A breeze moved across her skin—gentle, natural. Grass rustled nearby. Birds sang somewhere overhead.

She inhaled.

The air tasted real.

Alive.

Jeremy’s voice reached her first—soft, shaking.

“Em...? Hey. Hey—Emily... please wake up.”

Emily frowned faintly.

Her name felt distant.
Like a word she used to know, floating near her but out of reach.

She forced her eyes open.
And the world came into focus.

A quiet hill.
A morning sky.
Trees swaying in the wind.
A broken train station far in the distance—half ruins, half memory.

And beside her—
Jeremy.

His face streaked with dried tears, hair messy, clothes torn from the collapse they barely escaped. He leaned over her, relief flooding his expression so forcefully it nearly broke him.

And on her other side—
Marisol.

Eyes red.
Hands trembling.
But alive.
Human.
Fully herself.

Both of them watching her like she was the axis of the universe.

Emily blinked at them.

Then whispered:

“...hi?”

Marisol choked on a breath, covering her mouth as tears fell fresh.

Jeremy laughed—a broken, hysterical sound—and grabbed Emily’s hand, squeezing it like a lifeline.

“Oh my god—Em—oh my god—you’re awake—”

Emily looked between them.

Confused.

Concerned.

Lost.

“...do I... know you?”

Marisol’s face crumpled.

Jeremy closed his eyes for a moment, steadyng himself before answering. “Yeah. You know us. Or... you used to.”

Emily frowned. “Used to?”

Marisol swallowed, voice cracking.

“You... gave up your memories. To destroy the Station.”

Emily blinked slowly.

It felt like hearing someone describe a movie she hadn’t seen.

“I did?”

Jeremy nodded heavily. “Yeah. You saved us. The whole system shut down. The worlds collapsed without pulling us with them. We made it out because of you.”

Emily watched him carefully.

He was looking at her like she hung the stars.

Marisol wiped her eyes.

“You freed me, Emily. I’m not an Echo anymore. I’m just... me.”

Emily studied her face.

There was something familiar about her.

Not a memory—

a feeling.

Soft.

Warm.

Like a place she’d once called home.

Emily’s voice trembled.

“Are you... both okay?”

Jeremy gave a half-sob, half-laugh. “Yeah. Now we are.”

Emily sat up slowly, wincing as dizziness washed over her. Marisol braced her gently without thinking. Her hands lingered on Emily's shoulders—warm, grounding.

Jeremy sat beside them, wiping his face roughly. "We're... outside. Like... the real outside. No trials. No Collectors. No nightmare worlds. Just Earth."

Emily looked around again, her breath catching.

The world felt gentle.

For the first time.

"Where... are we?"

Marisol glancing around. "Somewhere outside a decommissioned line in the real world. The structure's ancient. But the portal dumped us near it."

Emily bit her lip.

"Oh."

Jeremy tilted his head, studying her worriedly. "What's the last thing you remember?"

Emily thought hard.

Harder.

But the memories slid through her fingers like sand.

"I... remember snow," she whispered.

"And a voice. And someone telling me to... choose."

Jeremy nodded slowly.

"That was real."

Marisol added softly, "We're safe now. That's what matters."

Emily looked down at her hands.

"...Am I the same person?"

Marisol hesitated.

Jeremy answered first.

"Yes. But... also no."

He tried to smile.

“Still sarcastic, though. That’s probably permanent.”

Emily blinked.

Then—unexpectedly—
a tiny laugh escaped her.

Marisol gave a soft, awestruck smile.

Emily touched the grass between her fingers.

Real.

She was sitting in a world that didn’t shift or glitch.
A world that wasn’t built from pain.

She whispered, “What do I do now?”

Jeremy glanced at Marisol.
Then back at Emily.

“You live,” he said softly.
“That’s what you get to do now.”

Marisol took Emily’s hand gently. “And we’ll help you remember. Or help you make new memories. You won’t do this alone.”

Emily looked between them—
and felt something warm in her chest she didn’t have a name for.

Not memory.

Something deeper.

Something like trust.

She squeezed both their hands.

“Okay,” she whispered.
“Let’s go home.”

Jeremy’s breath hitched.

Marisol wiped her cheeks.

And the three of them stood—
Emily unsteady, Jeremy supporting her, Marisol holding her hand—
and walked away from the ruins of the 13th Station.

Behind them, the broken entrance flickered one last time.
A single warm light glowed inside the tunnel.

Then went out.

Forever.

Emily didn't look back.

She didn't need to.

Because this time—

The train had truly stopped.