

THE
TOKEN
OF
TIME

THE KEY IS AWAKENING.



MESSENGER STUDIES

The Token of Time

INTRODUCTION - *The Clock of Witnesses*

There are moments in a nation's life when time seems to pause—when the noise of the present quiets just long enough for the past to lean in and speak. Most people never notice these moments. They hurry past them, distracted by the demands of ordinary days. But every so often, someone does notice. And when they do, history has a way of opening its doors.

For Kayden and Kylee, the moment came on a warm Friday evening in early summer, just as the sun dipped low over the plains of South Dakota. Their small town was preparing for America's 250th anniversary, and banners fluttered from lampposts along Main Street. The old courthouse lawn was already filling with folding chairs for the weekend celebration. Children chased each other between food trucks. A brass band rehearsed patriotic tunes that drifted through the air like echoes from another century.

But inside the Butler home, the atmosphere was different—quieter, steadier, older.

It was nearly Sabbath.

Kayden, fifteen, moved through the living room with the calm precision of someone who had done this many times before. He checked the time, made sure the lamps had fresh oil, and helped close the curtains as the last light faded. His mind worked like a well-oiled machine—methodical, observant, always noticing the details others missed.

Kylee, fourteen, hummed softly as she arranged the table. She had a way of bringing warmth into a room without trying. Her hands moved quickly, gracefully, as though she were painting invisible strokes of color into the air. She still called her father "Poppa," a habit she never outgrew, and one he secretly hoped she never would.

Their mother, Kay, finished preparing a simple meal—clean, wholesome, nothing fancy, just the kind of food their family had always eaten. Their Poppa—Don—stood by the window, watching the last sliver of sunlight slip behind the horizon. He had homeschooled the children ever since the "Craziness" began—when the schools had stopped teaching reading and arithmetic and started teaching things that had

nothing to do with education at all. Pulling them out had been the easiest decision he ever made.

And the best.

The children had flourished.

They learned Scripture deeply.

They honored the Sabbaths and Feasts with joy.

They understood the Names with reverence.

They asked questions—good ones.

They grew strong in ways the world no longer understood.

As the final rays of sunlight faded, Poppa lit the lamps. The warm glow filled the room, soft and steady. Sabbath had begun.

And that was when the town clock stopped.

The sound was subtle—just a faint metallic click from the courthouse square. But Kayden heard it. He always heard things others missed. He stepped to the window and looked out.

The clock's hands had frozen at the exact moment Sabbath began.

Kylee joined him, her eyes narrowing. "Poppa... look."

The brass face of the clock shimmered—just for a moment—as though catching a light that wasn't there. And in that shimmer, both children saw it:

Ancient Hebrew letters, faint but unmistakable, glowing along the rim.

Letters they had studied.

Letters they had traced.

Letters they knew.

The room felt suddenly still, as though the air itself were holding its breath.

Kayden whispered, “That’s not possible.”

Kylee whispered back, “Then why did we both see it?”

Poppa turned from the lamps, sensing the shift in the room. “What is it?”

But the glow had already faded.

The clock face looked ordinary again.

The moment had passed.

Or so it seemed.

Neither child slept well that night. Something had awakened—something old, something waiting. And though they didn’t yet know it, the frozen clock was not a malfunction.

It was an invitation.

A doorway.

A summons from the past.

And before the next Sabbath arrived, Kayden and Kylee would step through it—into a journey that would carry them across centuries, through the heart of America’s story, and into the very patterns of Scripture they had been raised to honor.

Time had paused.

And history was about to speak.

direction do you want to go next, Poppa?

CHAPTER ONE - *The Sundown That Changed Everything*

Kayden Butler woke before the sun, the way he always did. It wasn’t an alarm that stirred him, or even habit. It was something quieter—an instinct he couldn’t explain, a sense that the world was shifting beneath the surface. He lay still for a moment, listening to the soft hum of the house, the distant call of meadowlarks outside, and the faint creak of the windmill turning in the morning breeze.

He sat up slowly, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. His room was simple—books stacked neatly on the desk, a map of early America pinned to the wall, a small shelf of Scripture study materials arranged with the precision of someone who liked things in order. But today, something felt out of place. Not in the room. In the air.

He couldn't shake the memory of the night before—the frozen courthouse clock, the shimmer of light, the ancient letters glowing along the rim. He had replayed it in his mind a dozen times before falling asleep, and each time it felt less like imagination and more like a message.

He dressed quickly and stepped outside into the cool morning air. The sky was painted in soft pinks and oranges, the kind of sunrise that made the plains look endless. He walked to the edge of the porch and stared across the street.

The courthouse clock tower stood tall and silent, its brass face gleaming in the early light.

Still frozen.

Still wrong.

Kayden felt a chill run through him. He wasn't the type to jump to conclusions, but he trusted patterns. He trusted what he saw. And nothing about that clock felt accidental.

“Kayden!” Kylee's voice called from inside. “Poppa says breakfast!”

He took one last look at the clock, then turned and headed inside.

The Butler home was already alive with the familiar rhythm of morning. Mom was at the stove, stirring a pan of eggs and vegetables. Poppa sat at the table with his Bible open, reading quietly. Kylee bounced into the kitchen, hair still wild from sleep, humming something cheerful.

Kayden slid into his seat, and Mom placed a plate in front of him.

“Thank you,” he said automatically.

Mom smiled. “You're welcome, sweetheart.”

Kylee leaned forward, eyes bright. “Poppa, the clock's still stuck.”

Poppa looked up. “Still?”

“Still,” Kayden confirmed. “Same exact time.”

Mom paused, concern flickering across her face. “That’s... unusual.”

Poppa closed the Bible gently. “Tell me again what you two saw last night.”

Kylee launched into the story, hands moving animatedly as she described the glow, the letters, the shimmer of light. Kayden added details she missed—the angle of the reflection, the exact placement of the letters, the way the glow faded.

Poppa listened carefully, his expression thoughtful.

“And you’re certain?” he asked.

Kayden nodded. “Yes.”

Kylee added, “We both saw the same thing.”

Poppa leaned back in his chair, eyes drifting toward the window. “Then it wasn’t your imagination.”

Mom set down the last plate. “But what does it mean?”

Poppa didn’t answer right away. He looked at his children—really looked at them. Kayden with his steady eyes and analytical mind. Kylee with her intuition and spark. They weren’t ordinary kids. They never had been.

“Sometimes,” he said finally, “the Father lets His people see things others can’t.”

Kylee’s eyes widened. “So... this was meant for us?”

Poppa didn’t say yes.

He didn’t say no.

He simply said, “Pay attention.”

The rest of the morning passed in a strange haze. Kayden tried to focus on his schoolwork, but his mind kept drifting back to the clock. Kylee wasn’t any better. She kept wandering into his room, pretending she needed help with her assignments.

“Kayden,” she whispered at one point, “what if this is like the stories Poppa told us? About signs and wonders?”

He shook his head. “We don’t know that.”

“But what if it is?”

He didn’t answer. He didn’t have one.

By early afternoon, the heat had settled over the town like a warm blanket. The siblings finished their lessons, helped Mom with chores, and tried—unsuccessfully—to ignore the strange tension in the air.

Finally, Kayden couldn’t take it anymore.

“I’m going to look at the clock,” he said.

Kylee grabbed her shoes. “I’m coming.”

The courthouse square was quiet, the morning bustle replaced by a lazy afternoon calm. The clock tower loomed above them, its brass face gleaming in the sun.

Kayden approached slowly, scanning the ground around the base of the tower. Something felt... different. Like the air was thicker here, charged with a faint energy he couldn’t explain.

Kylee stopped suddenly.

“Kayden... look.”

Something small and metallic lay half-buried in the dirt near the foundation stones. Kayden crouched and brushed away the soil.

A token.

Round.

Bronze.

Old—older than the clock tower itself.

And engraved on its surface were the same four Hebrew letters they had seen glowing the night before.

Kylee whispered, “No way...”

Kayden turned it over in his hand. The metal felt warm—too warm for the cool afternoon air.

“This wasn’t here yesterday,” he said.

“How do you know?”

“Because I looked. I always look.”

Kylee swallowed. “So... what do we do with it?”

Kayden didn’t know. But he felt something shift inside him—like a door opening.

“We take it home.”

Poppa examined the token carefully, turning it over in his hands. His brow furrowed—not in fear, but in recognition.

“I’ve seen something like this before,” he murmured.

Kayden and Kylee exchanged a look.

“Where?” Kayden asked.

Poppa hesitated. “In a book I read years ago. About early American believers who studied the ancient languages. Some of them believed the Name would be restored in the last days.”

Kylee’s breath caught. “Restored... how?”

Poppa handed the token back to Kayden. “By being revealed to those willing to see.”

Mom stepped closer, concern in her eyes. “Don... what are you saying?”

“I’m saying,” Poppa replied quietly, “that this didn’t happen by accident.”

The rest of the day passed in a strange haze. Kayden tried to focus on anything else—chores, reading, helping Mom—but the token kept drawing his attention.

It sat on his desk, warm to the touch, humming with a faint energy he couldn't explain.

Kylee kept popping into his room.

“Anything happen yet?”

“No.”

“Is it glowing?”

“No.”

“Does it feel weird?”

“Yes.”

She grinned. “Told you.”

By late afternoon, the sky had turned a deep blue, and the town buzzed with preparations for the anniversary celebration. But inside the Butler home, everything felt... suspended.

Kayden picked up the token again.

It pulsed.

Just once.

A soft, rhythmic thump—like a heartbeat.

Kylee gasped. “Kayden... do it again.”

He held it up.

Another pulse.

Then another.

Then—

The room blurred.

The air thickened.

The floor seemed to drop away.

Kylee grabbed his arm. “Kayden—!”

A flash of white light swallowed them whole.

And the world disappeared.

CHAPTER TWO - *The First Activation*

The world did not explode.

It did not shatter.

It did not roar with thunder or tear itself apart.

Instead, it folded.

Softly.

Silently.

Like a page turning in a book older than memory.

Kayden felt the floor vanish beneath him, but he didn't fall. He felt the air thicken around him, but he didn't suffocate. He felt light—weightless—like he was suspended between breaths. Kylee's hand clamped around his arm, her fingers digging in hard enough to hurt, but even that sensation felt distant, muffled, as though wrapped in cotton.

A white glow surrounded them, pulsing in slow waves.

Not blinding.

Not harsh.

Alive.

Kayden tried to speak, but his voice dissolved before it reached his lips. Kylee's mouth moved—he could see her trying to say his name—but no sound came out. The

world around them stretched like warm taffy, colors smearing into streaks of gold and silver.

Then the light contracted.

A single point.

A heartbeat.

A whisper.

And the world snapped back into place.

Kayden hit the ground hard enough to knock the wind from his lungs. Dirt filled his mouth. Grass scratched his cheek. He coughed, rolled onto his back, and stared up at a sky that was the same color as home—but wrong somehow. Too crisp. Too clean. Too... untouched.

“Kayden!” Kylee scrambled toward him, brushing dirt from her face. “Are you okay?”

He sat up slowly, blinking away the dizziness. “I think so.”

Kylee looked around, eyes wide. “Where are we?”

Kayden followed her gaze.

They were in a field—wide, open, and impossibly green. The grass was tall, swaying gently in the breeze. A line of trees stood in the distance, their leaves rustling softly. Birds chirped overhead, but not the ones he recognized from South Dakota. These sounded sharper, more musical.

And the air...

It smelled different.

Cleaner.

Like rain on stone and woodsmoke carried from far away.

Kayden stood, brushing off his jeans. “This isn’t home.”

Kylee snorted. “No kidding.”

He shot her a look, but she wasn't wrong.

There were no roads.

No power lines.

No distant hum of cars.

No signs of modern life at all.

Just open land and sky.

Kylee turned in a slow circle. "Kayden... I don't see anything. No houses. No buildings. Nothing."

Kayden's heart thudded in his chest. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the token.

It was glowing.

Not brightly—just a faint, warm pulse, like a heartbeat under the surface.

Kylee leaned in. "It's doing it again."

Kayden swallowed. "It brought us here."

"Where is here?"

He didn't answer. He didn't know.

A distant sound drifted across the field—hooves.

Horses.

More than one.

Kayden grabbed Kylee's arm and pulled her toward the tree line. "Come on. We need to hide."

They sprinted through the tall grass, ducking behind a cluster of bushes just as the riders came into view.

Three men on horseback.

Dressed in wool coats and tricorne hats.

Carrying muskets slung across their backs.

Kylee's breath caught. "Kayden... those are—"

"I know."

Revolutionary War soldiers.

Not reenactors.

Not actors.

Not costumed tourists.

Real.

Their clothes were worn, stained with sweat and dirt. Their boots were scuffed. Their horses were lean and restless. The men spoke in low, urgent voices, their accents sharp and old-fashioned.

Kayden felt his pulse hammering in his ears.

This wasn't a dream.

This wasn't imagination.

This wasn't a trick of the light.

They had traveled.

Actually traveled.

Kylee whispered, "Kayden... what do we do?"

He forced himself to breathe. "We stay hidden. We watch. We don't talk to anyone."

"Why not?"

"Because we don't know the rules yet."

Kylee nodded, swallowing hard.

The soldiers rode past, heading toward a dirt road that cut through the field. One of them pointed toward a distant cluster of buildings—wooden houses, smoke rising from chimneys, a church steeple piercing the sky.

A settlement.

Small.

Colonial.

Kayden's stomach dropped.

"Boston," he whispered. "Or near it."

Kylee stared at him. "How do you know?"

He pointed to the soldiers' uniforms. "Those coats. Those hats. That style. It's pre-Revolution. Early."

Kylee's eyes widened. "Kayden... we're in the 1700s."

He didn't want to say it out loud.

But she was right.

The token pulsed again.

Kayden looked down at it, then at the distant town.

"We need to move," he said. "Before someone sees us."

Kylee hesitated. "Kayden... what if we're not supposed to be here?"

He met her eyes. "We weren't supposed to see the clock glow either."

She nodded slowly. "Okay. Lead the way."

They crept through the grass, staying low, moving toward the tree line. The air grew cooler under the shade, and the sounds of the settlement drifted toward them—hammering, shouting, the clatter of wagon wheels.

Kylee whispered, "Kayden... what if we get stuck here?"

He didn't answer.

He didn't want to lie.

They reached the edge of the trees and peered out.

A dirt road wound toward the settlement. A wooden sign stood crookedly beside it, the letters carved by hand:

“Concord — 2 miles”

Kylee's jaw dropped. “Concord? As in—”

“Yeah,” Kayden said quietly. “As in the place where the Revolution starts.”

Kylee grabbed his sleeve. “Kayden... this is huge.”

He nodded slowly. “I know.”

The token pulsed again—stronger this time.

Kylee stepped back. “It's doing something.”

Kayden held it up. The letters glowed faintly, the bronze warming in his hand.

“It brought us here,” he said. “And I think it's telling us where to go.”

Kylee stared at him. “You mean... into town?”

He nodded.

Kylee took a deep breath. “Okay. But we need a plan.”

Kayden managed a small smile. “I was hoping you'd say that.”

They stepped out of the trees, the token glowing softly between them, and began walking toward Concord—toward the heart of history, toward the unknown, toward the beginning of a journey that would change everything.

Behind them, the wind rustled the grass, carrying with it the faintest whisper of something ancient.

A Name.

A calling.

A summons.

And the token pulsed again.

CHAPTER THREE - *Strangers in a Strange Land*

The dirt road felt different beneath their feet—softer, uneven, worn by wagon wheels instead of tires. Kayden noticed every detail. The way the soil clung to his shoes. The faint smell of horses and woodsmoke drifting from the distant settlement. The crispness of the air, untouched by exhaust or industry. Even the sunlight seemed different—warmer, somehow, as if filtered through a thinner veil of time.

Kylee walked beside him, her steps quick and light, her eyes darting from tree to tree, from field to sky. She was trying to take everything in at once, and Kayden couldn't blame her. Every direction they looked, the world felt like a painting come to life.

“Kayden,” she whispered, “this is real. Like... actually real.”

He nodded, though his throat felt tight. “I know.”

“You're not freaking out?”

“I'm freaking out on the inside.”

She snorted. “That tracks.”

They walked in silence for a moment, the token glowing faintly in Kayden's hand. He kept it half-hidden in his pocket, but the warmth radiating from it was impossible to ignore. It pulsed in a slow, steady rhythm, almost like it was breathing.

Kylee glanced at it. “Do you think it's... guiding us?”

Kayden hesitated. “I think it brought us here for a reason.”

“That's not an answer.”

“It's the only one I've got.”

Kylee sighed dramatically. “You know, for a genius, you're not very helpful.”

He shot her a look. “I’m trying.”

“I know.” She bumped his shoulder lightly. “I’m just scared.”

He didn’t say it out loud, but he was too.

The road curved gently, and the settlement came into clearer view. Wooden houses with steep roofs. Smoke rising from chimneys. A small church with a white steeple. A blacksmith’s shop with sparks flying from the open doorway. People moving about—women carrying baskets, men hauling barrels, children chasing each other through the dust.

It was beautiful.

It was alive.

It was dangerous.

Kayden slowed his steps. “We need to blend in.”

Kylee looked down at her clothes—jeans, sneakers, a T-shirt with a faded mountain graphic. “Yeah, that’s not happening.”

Kayden scanned the area. “We need to stay out of sight until we figure out what to do.”

“Or,” Kylee said, “we could just... talk to someone.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because we don’t know how they’ll react. We don’t know the rules. We don’t know—”

“Kayden.” She stopped walking and faced him. “We’re in 1775. We can’t just hide in the bushes forever.”

He opened his mouth to argue, but a voice cut through the air.

“Ho there! You two!”

Kayden froze.

Kylee's eyes widened.

A man approached from the direction of the blacksmith's shop. He was tall, broad-shouldered, with soot on his face and a leather apron tied around his waist. His sleeves were rolled up, revealing strong arms. He carried a hammer in one hand and wiped sweat from his brow with the other.

He looked at them with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion.

"You're not from around here," he said.

Kayden swallowed hard. "Uh..."

Kylee stepped forward before he could stop her. "We're traveling."

The man raised an eyebrow. "Traveling? Dressed like that?"

Kylee glanced down at her clothes. "We... lost our things."

Kayden resisted the urge to bury his face in his hands.

The blacksmith studied them for a long moment. His eyes weren't unkind—just sharp, assessing, the way someone looks at a puzzle they're trying to solve.

"You're not runaways, are you?" he asked.

"No!" Kylee said quickly. "We're just... far from home."

Kayden nodded, trying to look as harmless as possible. "We don't want any trouble."

The man grunted. "Well, you look like you could use a wash and a meal. And maybe some proper clothes."

Kylee brightened. "That would be amazing."

Kayden shot her a warning look, but the blacksmith was already turning toward his shop.

"Come on, then," he said. "Name's Elias Turner. Blacksmith. My wife's inside. She'll know what to do with you."

Kylee whispered, "See? Not everyone is scary."

Kayden whispered back, "We don't know him."

"He seems nice."

"He has a hammer."

"So does Poppa."

"That's different."

Kylee grinned. "Not really."

Kayden sighed. "Fine. But stay close."

They followed Elias toward the shop. The heat from the forge washed over them as they stepped inside, the air thick with the smell of iron and smoke. Sparks danced in the dim light, and tools hung neatly along the walls.

A woman looked up from a table where she was kneading dough. She had kind eyes and flour on her hands.

"Elias," she said, "who are these two?"

"Found 'em on the road," Elias said. "Strangest clothes I've ever seen. Said they're traveling."

The woman wiped her hands on her apron and approached them. "I'm Miriam. Are you hungry?"

Kylee nodded eagerly. "Yes, ma'am."

Kayden elbowed her. "We don't want to impose."

"Nonsense," Miriam said. "No child goes hungry in my house."

She ushered them to a small wooden table and set out bread, cheese, and a bowl of stew.

Kylee reached for the spoon, but Kayden grabbed her wrist.

"Wait."

He leaned in close and whispered, “We don’t know what’s in it.”

Kylee blinked. “Oh. Right.”

Miriam noticed their hesitation. “Is something wrong?”

Kayden forced a smile. “We... have dietary restrictions.”

Miriam nodded knowingly. “Ah. Some families do. Don’t worry—no pork in this stew. Just vegetables and a bit of chicken.”

Kylee relaxed. “Thank you.”

They ate slowly, trying not to draw attention. Miriam watched them with gentle curiosity.

“You two are far from home,” she said softly. “I can see it in your eyes.”

Kayden swallowed. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Where are you headed?”

Kylee opened her mouth, but Kayden spoke first. “We’re not sure yet.”

Miriam nodded. “Well, you’re safe here for now.”

Elias returned from the forge, wiping his hands. “Town’s been uneasy lately. Tensions rising. British soldiers marching more often. Folks whispering about rebellion.”

Kylee’s eyes widened. “Rebellion?”

Elias nodded grimly. “War’s coming. Everyone feels it.”

Kayden felt the token pulse in his pocket.

Miriam placed a hand on his shoulder. “Whatever brought you here, children... be careful.”

Kayden met her eyes.

He didn’t know how to explain it.

He didn't know how to ask for help.

He didn't know how to tell her they weren't just far from home—they were far from their own century.

But he felt something else too.

Something deeper.

Something ancient.

The token pulsed again.

And Kayden knew—

this was only the beginning.

CHAPTER FOUR - *The Friday Sundown Problem*

The Turners' home was warm in a way that felt almost unreal — not because of the heat from the forge, but because of the people inside it. Elias and Miriam moved with the quiet rhythm of a couple who had weathered storms together, their home filled with the scent of bread, iron, and woodsmoke. It was the kind of place that made Kayden and Kylee feel safe, even though they knew they weren't.

Not really.

Not in 1775.

Kayden sat at the small wooden table, hands wrapped around a clay cup of water. He watched the way the light flickered across the walls, the way the shadows danced with the movement of the forge outside. Everything felt too real, too vivid, too close.

Kylee sat beside him, swinging her feet under the table, trying to look casual. But Kayden knew her too well. Her eyes kept darting to the window, to the door, to the unfamiliar world outside.

She was scared.

He was too.

Miriam wiped her hands on her apron and smiled at them. “You two must be exhausted. Where did you say you were coming from?”

Kayden hesitated. “West.”

“Far west,” Kylee added quickly.

Miriam nodded thoughtfully. “Traveling alone at your age... that’s brave.”

Kylee forced a smile. “We’re used to it.”

Kayden shot her a look.

She ignored it.

Elias stepped inside, wiping soot from his hands. “Town’s getting restless,” he said. “British patrol passed through earlier. Folks are whispering again.”

Miriam’s expression tightened. “It’s getting worse, isn’t it?”

Elias nodded. “War’s coming. Everyone feels it.”

Kylee leaned forward. “Why? What’s happening?”

Elias studied her for a moment, as if deciding how much to say. “The Crown’s been tightening its grip. Taxes. Soldiers. Searches. Folks here don’t take kindly to being told how to live.”

Kayden exchanged a glance with Kylee.

They knew this history.

They had studied it.

But hearing it from someone living it...

That was different.

Much different.

Miriam placed a hand on Elias’s arm. “Let’s not frighten them.”

Elias softened. “You’re safe here. That’s what matters.”

Safe.

For now.

But Kayden felt the token pulse in his pocket — a faint, rhythmic thump that made his skin prickle.

It wasn’t done with them.

Not even close.

The First Problem

The sun dipped lower in the sky as the afternoon wore on. The shadows stretched long across the floorboards, and the warm glow of the forge faded into a softer, cooler light.

Kylee nudged Kayden. “Hey.”

He looked at her.

She pointed subtly toward the window. “It’s almost sundown.”

Kayden’s stomach tightened.

Sabbath.

In all the chaos — the time travel, the soldiers, the Turners — he had almost forgotten. But the moment Kylee said it, everything inside him snapped back into place.

They couldn’t be wandering around town after sundown.

They couldn’t be working.

They couldn’t be traveling.

They couldn’t be drawing attention.

They needed a place to rest.

A place to stay put.

A place to honor the Sabbath.

But they were in 1775.

In a stranger's home.

With no explanation that wouldn't sound insane.

Kylee whispered, "What do we do?"

Kayden swallowed hard. "We need to ask."

"Ask what?"

"For a place to stay."

Kylee blinked. "For the night?"

"For the Sabbath."

Kylee hesitated. "Kayden... what if they think we're weird?"

"They already think we're weird."

She snorted. "Fair."

Kayden took a deep breath and stood. "Miriam?"

She looked up from the dough she was shaping. "Yes, dear?"

Kayden cleared his throat. "We... um... we were wondering if there's somewhere we could stay tonight."

Miriam's eyes softened. "Of course. You're welcome to stay here."

Kylee exhaled in relief.

But Kayden wasn't done.

"There's something else," he said quietly. "We... observe the Sabbath."

Miriam tilted her head. "The seventh-day Sabbath?"

Kayden nodded.

Miriam smiled gently. “My grandmother kept it. You’re not the first I’ve met.”

Kylee’s eyes widened. “Really?”

Miriam nodded. “She said it was the ancient way. The way before men changed things.”

Kayden felt a strange warmth in his chest.

Recognition.

Connection.

Providence.

“You’re welcome to rest here,” Miriam said. “No work. No chores. Just peace.”

Kylee beamed. “Thank you.”

Elias stepped inside again, overhearing the last part. “Sabbath keepers, eh? Haven’t seen many of those in years.”

Kayden tensed. “Is that... a problem?”

Elias shrugged. “Not for me. Folks around here argue about everything these days. Sabbath’s the least of it.”

Kylee relaxed. “Good.”

Elias pointed toward the small loft above the kitchen. “You two can sleep up there. It’s not fancy, but it’s warm.”

Kylee grinned. “Warm is good.”

Kayden nodded. “Thank you. Truly.”

Miriam smiled. “Rest. Eat. Be at peace. Whatever brought you here... you can face it tomorrow.”

Kayden felt the token pulse again — stronger this time.

Tomorrow.

He had a feeling tomorrow would be anything but peaceful.

Nightfall

The sky darkened slowly, the last streaks of orange fading into deep blue. The Turners lit oil lamps, their warm glow filling the small home with a gentle, flickering light. The smell of fresh bread lingered in the air, mixing with the faint scent of iron from the forge.

Kayden and Kylee climbed the wooden ladder to the loft. It was small — just enough room for two straw-filled mattresses, a blanket, and a small window overlooking the road.

Kylee flopped onto her mattress. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

Kayden sat on the edge of his, staring out the window. “I can.”

Kylee rolled onto her side. “You’re not scared?”

He didn’t answer right away.

Finally, he said, “I’m terrified.”

Kylee blinked. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

She sat up. “Then why do you look so calm?”

“Because if I freak out, you’ll freak out.”

Kylee smirked. “True.”

Kayden reached into his pocket and pulled out the token. It glowed softly in the dim light, the ancient letters shimmering like embers.

Kylee leaned closer. "It's doing it again."

Kayden nodded. "It hasn't stopped since we got here."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know."

Kylee hesitated. "Do you think it's... alive?"

Kayden didn't laugh.

He didn't dismiss her.

He didn't tell her she was being dramatic.

Because he had wondered the same thing.

"I think," he said slowly, "that it's connected to something alive."

Kylee shivered. "Like what?"

Kayden looked out the window at the darkening sky, the distant lanterns flickering in the settlement, the world of 1775 settling into night.

"Like time," he whispered.

Kylee lay back down, pulling the blanket over her. "Kayden?"

"Yeah?"

"What if we can't get home?"

Kayden didn't answer.

He couldn't.

Instead, he lay back on his mattress, the token warm in his hand, the weight of the unknown pressing down on him like a second blanket.

Outside, the night deepened.

The world grew quiet.

The Sabbath settled over them like a soft, ancient cloak.

And somewhere in the darkness, a horse's hooves echoed faintly on the road — slow, deliberate, purposeful.

Kayden sat up, heart pounding.

Kylee whispered, "What is it?"

Kayden moved to the window and peered out.

A lone rider approached the Turner home.

Cloaked.

Hooded.

Unmistakably watching the house.

The token pulsed violently in his hand.

Kylee crawled beside him. "Kayden... who is that?"

He didn't know.

But he knew one thing:

They weren't the only ones who felt the shift in time.

And whoever that rider was...

They were looking for something.

Or someone.

CHAPTER FIVE - *The Midnight Rider*

Kayden pressed his forehead against the cool glass of the loft window, trying to steady his breathing. The rider moved slowly down the dirt road, the horse's hooves muffled by the soft earth. The figure was cloaked, hood drawn low, face hidden in

shadow. But even from a distance, Kayden could feel the rider's attention fixed on the Turner home.

Kylee crouched beside him, her voice barely a whisper. "Kayden... he's looking for someone."

Kayden didn't answer.

He didn't need to.

The token in his hand pulsed so violently it almost hurt.

The rider stopped directly in front of the house.

The horse snorted, pawing at the ground. The rider sat motionless, as if listening for something — or someone.

Kylee grabbed Kayden's arm. "Do you think he knows we're here?"

Kayden swallowed hard. "I think he knows something happened."

The rider slowly turned his head toward the loft window.

Kylee gasped and ducked. Kayden pulled back from the glass, heart pounding so hard he could feel it in his teeth.

The rider dismounted.

Kylee's voice trembled. "Kayden... what do we do?"

He forced himself to think. "We stay quiet. We don't move. We don't make a sound."

Downstairs, Elias's deep voice rumbled through the floorboards.

"Who goes there?"

The rider didn't answer.

Kayden and Kylee exchanged a terrified glance.

Miriam's voice followed, sharp with worry. "Elias, come away from the door."

Kayden crawled closer to the edge of the loft, listening.

Elias spoke again, louder this time. “State your business!”

Still no answer.

Then — a knock.

Not loud.

Not frantic.

Just three slow, deliberate taps.

Kylee shivered. “That’s creepy.”

Kayden nodded. “Yeah.”

Elias opened the door a crack. “It’s late. What do you want?”

The rider’s voice was low, gravelly, and strangely calm. “I seek the ones who arrived today.”

Kayden’s blood ran cold.

Kylee’s hand flew to her mouth.

Elias stiffened. “What ones?”

“The strangers,” the rider said. “The ones who do not belong.”

Elias’s tone hardened. “You should leave.”

The rider didn’t move. “They carry something that does not belong in this time.”

Kayden felt the token pulse again — a sharp, painful jolt.

Kylee whispered, “He knows about the token.”

Kayden nodded, throat tight.

Elias stepped outside, blocking the doorway. “You’re mistaken. No strangers here.”

The rider tilted his head. “You lie.”

Kayden’s stomach twisted.

Elias wasn't a soldier.

He wasn't armed.

He wasn't prepared for whatever this was.

Kylee whispered, "We have to help him."

Kayden shook his head. "We can't. We don't know who that is."

"But Elias is protecting us."

"I know."

Downstairs, Miriam's voice trembled. "Elias, please—"

The rider suddenly stepped forward.

Elias grabbed a hammer from beside the door. "That's far enough."

The rider stopped. "You cannot protect them."

Elias raised the hammer. "Try me."

For a moment, the world held its breath.

Then the rider slowly stepped back, mounted his horse, and pulled his hood lower.

"This is not finished," he said.

He turned the horse and rode off into the night, disappearing into the darkness as silently as he had arrived.

Elias closed the door and bolted it. Miriam rushed to him, gripping his arm.

"Who was that?" she whispered.

"I don't know," Elias said. "But he wasn't from around here."

Kayden and Kylee exchanged a look.

Neither were they.

The Aftermath

The house remained tense long after the rider disappeared. Elias paced the floor, jaw clenched. Miriam wrung her hands, glancing at the door every few seconds.

Kayden and Kylee climbed down the ladder slowly.

Elias stopped pacing when he saw them. “You two... did you see him?”

Kayden nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Elias’s eyes narrowed. “He was looking for you.”

Kylee swallowed. “We’re sorry.”

Miriam shook her head. “It’s not your fault, dear.”

Elias rubbed his forehead. “He knew things he shouldn’t. He spoke like he’d been watching.”

Kayden hesitated. “We didn’t mean to bring trouble.”

Elias studied him. “What did you bring?”

Kayden opened his mouth — then closed it.

He couldn’t tell them.

Not yet.

Maybe not ever.

Miriam stepped forward. “Children... are you in danger?”

Kylee’s voice cracked. “I think so.”

Elias exhaled slowly. “Then you’ll stay here tonight. We’ll keep watch.”

Kayden shook his head. “We can’t put you at risk.”

Elias’s expression hardened. “You’re under my roof. That makes you my responsibility.”

Kylee blinked back tears. “Thank you.”

Miriam touched her shoulder gently. “Rest. You’re safe for now.”

Safe.

For now.

But Kayden knew better.

The rider wasn’t just looking for them.

He was hunting them.

And the token — the thing that brought them here — was the reason.

The Scholar of Names

Sleep didn’t come easily. Kayden lay awake long after Kylee drifted off, staring at the wooden beams above him. The token rested on his chest, warm and steady, like a heartbeat that wasn’t his.

He turned it over in his fingers, tracing the ancient letters.

Why them?

Why now?

Why here?

He didn’t have answers.

But he had a feeling someone in this time did.

A faint sound drifted through the window — footsteps on the road. Not hurried. Not threatening. Just steady.

Kayden sat up and peered outside.

A man walked alone down the road, carrying a lantern. He wore a long coat and a satchel slung over his shoulder. His posture was straight, his stride purposeful.

He stopped in front of the Turner home.

Kayden's breath caught.

Not again.

But this man didn't approach the door. Instead, he looked up — directly at the loft window.

And he smiled.

Not a sinister smile.

Not a threatening one.

A knowing smile.

He lifted the lantern slightly, as if greeting Kayden.

Then he spoke — softly, but clearly.

“I know what you carry.”

Kayden froze.

The man continued, “And I can help you.”

Kylee stirred beside him. “Kayden... what's happening?”

Kayden didn't answer.

The man lowered the lantern and began walking away.

“Come to the meeting house at dawn,” he said. “Ask for Jonathan Hale.”

He paused.

“And bring the token.”

Then he disappeared into the darkness.

Kylee sat up fully. “Who was that?”

Kayden stared at the empty road.

“I think,” he whispered, “that was the Scholar of Names.”

Kylee’s eyes widened. “The one Poppa talked about?”

Kayden nodded slowly. “Yeah.”

Kylee shivered. “Kayden... this is getting big.”

He looked down at the token, glowing softly in his hand.

“It already was.”

CHAPTER SIX - *The Meeting House at Dawn*

Kayden didn’t sleep at all. He lay on his back in the loft, staring at the wooden beams overhead, listening to the faint crackle of the dying embers in the forge below. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the lantern light on the road, the hooded rider’s silhouette, and then—most unsettling of all—the calm, knowing smile of Jonathan Hale.

Kylee slept for a little while, curled on her side with her blanket pulled up to her chin, but even she stirred often, mumbling in her sleep. When she finally woke, the sky outside the loft window was still dark, but the faintest hint of dawn brushed the horizon.

“You’re awake,” she whispered.

Kayden nodded. “Couldn’t sleep.”

“Me neither.” She sat up, rubbing her eyes. “Do you think he’ll really be there?”

“He said dawn.”

Kylee pulled her knees to her chest. “What if it’s a trap?”

Kayden didn’t answer right away. He turned the token over in his hand, watching the faint glow pulse beneath the surface. It felt heavier now, as if the metal itself was aware of what was coming.

“I don’t think he’s like the rider,” Kayden said finally. “He didn’t feel... wrong.”

Kylee nodded slowly. "He felt like he knew something."

"He does," Kayden said. "And we need answers."

Kylee took a deep breath. "Then we go."

They climbed quietly down the ladder, careful not to wake Elias and Miriam. But Elias was already awake, sitting at the table sharpening a small hatchet. The rhythmic scrape of metal on stone filled the room.

"You're up early," he said without looking up.

Kayden swallowed. "We... need to go into town."

Elias finally lifted his eyes. "Because of the man last night."

Kylee froze. "You saw him?"

"I heard him," Elias said. "And I saw the lantern light through the window."

Miriam stepped out from the small bedroom, tying her apron. "Children... are you sure it's safe?"

"No," Kayden admitted. "But we have to go."

Elias set the hatchet down. "Then I'm walking you there."

"You don't have to—" Kayden began.

"I'm not asking," Elias said firmly. "If someone's hunting you, I'm not letting you walk into town alone."

Kylee smiled weakly. "Thank you."

Miriam handed them each a small cloth bundle. "Bread and dried fruit. In case you're gone awhile."

Kayden's chest tightened. "We'll be careful."

"Be wise," Miriam said softly.

Elias grabbed his coat and stepped outside. "Let's go."

The road to Concord was quiet in the early morning light. A thin mist clung to the ground, and the air smelled of dew-soaked grass and woodsmoke. Elias walked ahead, scanning the road with the practiced caution of someone who had lived through uncertain times.

Kylee walked close to Kayden, her hand brushing his every few steps. “Do you think he’ll be there?”

“He said dawn,” Kayden repeated.

“What if he’s not?”

“Then we figure something else out.”

Kylee snorted. “You say that like we know how.”

Kayden didn’t respond. Because she was right. They didn’t know how. But they were here. And the token was pulsing harder with every step.

As they neared the edge of town, Elias slowed. “Meeting house is just ahead. I’ll wait outside.”

“You don’t have to—” Kayden began again.

“I said I’m waiting,” Elias repeated.

Kylee whispered, “He’s stubborn like Poppa.”

Elias raised an eyebrow. “Is that a compliment?”

“Mostly,” Kylee said.

He shook his head. “Go on. I’ll keep watch.”

The meeting house stood at the center of Concord — a simple wooden building with a tall steeple and wide double doors. The early morning sun cast long shadows across the steps, and the faint sound of someone sweeping drifted from inside.

Kayden pushed the door open slowly.

The interior was dim, lit only by a few candles placed along the walls. Wooden benches lined the room, and a large pulpit stood at the front. A man stood near it, sweeping the floor with slow, deliberate strokes.

Jonathan Hale.

He looked up as they entered, his eyes warm and knowing. He set the broom aside and approached them with a calm, steady presence that made the room feel smaller, quieter.

“You came,” he said.

Kylee stepped forward cautiously. “Who are you?”

“A friend,” Jonathan said.

Kayden didn’t relax. “How do you know what we carry?”

Jonathan’s eyes softened. “Because I’ve been waiting for it.”

Kylee blinked. “Waiting for what?”

Jonathan gestured to Kayden’s pocket. “The token.”

Kayden hesitated, then pulled it out.

Jonathan inhaled sharply. “So it’s true.”

He approached slowly, reverently, as if approaching something sacred.

“I’ve studied the ancient writings for decades,” he said. “Prophecies. Patterns. Warnings. And always, there was mention of a sign — a marker — that would appear when the time was right.”

Kylee frowned. “Right for what?”

Jonathan met her eyes. “For the restoration.”

Kayden’s heart skipped. “Restoration of what?”

Jonathan smiled faintly. “The Name.”

Kylee’s breath caught. “You mean—”

“Yes,” Jonathan said. “The Name above all names. The Name forgotten by many. The Name hidden by time.”

Kayden tightened his grip on the token. “Why us?”

Jonathan studied him. “Because you saw what others could not. Because you were chosen.”

Kylee shook her head. “We’re just kids.”

Jonathan chuckled softly. “So were David. Jeremiah. Samuel.”

Kayden swallowed. “What does the token do?”

Jonathan’s expression grew serious. “It opens doors.”

Kylee frowned. “Doors to what?”

Jonathan stepped closer. “To time.”

Kayden felt the room tilt. “You know about the time travel.”

Jonathan nodded. “I suspected. The writings spoke of travelers — witnesses — who would be sent to observe the turning points of nations.”

Kylee whispered, “Witnesses...”

Jonathan nodded. “Not to change history. But to understand it.”

Kayden’s voice was barely audible. “Why?”

Jonathan looked at him with a depth that made Kayden’s skin prickle. “Because your time will need the truth.”

Kylee shivered. “Our time?”

Jonathan nodded. “The future. Your future. The world you came from.”

Kayden stepped back. “How do you know we’re not from here?”

Jonathan smiled gently. “Your clothes. Your speech. Your manner. And the token only appears to those out of time.”

Kylee blinked. “So... what now?”

Jonathan’s expression darkened. “Now, you must be careful. The rider who sought you last night — he is not a friend.”

Kayden’s pulse quickened. “Who is he?”

Jonathan hesitated. “A man who serves the wrong master.”

Kylee’s voice trembled. “Is he dangerous?”

Jonathan nodded. “Very.”

Kayden clenched the token. “Why is he after us?”

Jonathan met his eyes. “Because he wants what you carry. And because he fears what you will learn.”

Kylee swallowed. “What will we learn?”

Jonathan stepped back, gesturing toward the pulpit. “Everything,” he said softly. “If you’re willing.”

Kayden and Kylee exchanged a look.

Then Kayden nodded. “We’re willing.”

Jonathan smiled. “Good. Then your journey begins now.”

He reached into his satchel and pulled out a scroll — old, yellowed, sealed with wax.

Kylee whispered, “What is that?”

Jonathan placed it gently on the pulpit. “A map,” he said. “Of time.”

Kayden’s breath caught. “A map?”

Jonathan nodded. “Of where you must go. And what you must witness.”

Kylee stepped closer. “Why us?”

Jonathan looked at her with a mixture of sorrow and hope. “Because your generation will decide the future.”

Kayden felt the token pulse violently in his hand.

Jonathan nodded toward it. “It’s reacting. That means the next door is opening.”

Kylee grabbed Kayden’s arm. “Kayden...”

He held the token up.

It glowed brighter than ever.

Jonathan stepped back. “Hold on to each other.”

Kylee grabbed Kayden’s hand.

The room blurred.

The air thickened.

The world folded.

Jonathan’s voice echoed faintly:

“Remember what you learn...”

And then the light swallowed them whole.

CHAPTER SEVEN - *Valley Forge, 1777*

The light didn’t explode this time. It didn’t roar or blind or tear the world apart. It simply folded inward, like a curtain being drawn across reality. Kayden felt the ground vanish beneath him, felt Kylee’s hand clamp around his wrist, felt the token burning hot against his palm. The world spun, twisted, stretched — and then snapped back into place with a force that knocked the breath out of him.

He hit the ground hard. Snow exploded around him in a cold, powdery burst. The shock of it stole his breath. He gasped, scrambling upright, his fingers numb, his lungs burning from the sudden freeze.

Kylee landed beside him with a yelp, rolling onto her back and staring up at a sky the color of steel. Snowflakes drifted lazily down, melting on her cheeks. She blinked, dazed.

“Kayden... it’s freezing.”

He pushed himself to his knees, teeth already chattering. “Yeah. I noticed.”

They were in a forest — but not like the one outside Concord. This one was harsh, stripped bare by winter. The trees were skeletal, their branches clawing at the gray sky. The ground was covered in snow, broken only by patches of frozen mud and trampled earth.

And the smell — smoke, sweat, sickness, desperation — hit him like a wall.

Kylee sat up, hugging her arms around herself. “Where are we now?”

Kayden didn’t answer. He knew. He knew the moment he saw the crude wooden huts scattered through the trees, the thin trails of smoke rising from makeshift chimneys, the gaunt figures moving slowly between the shelters.

Valley Forge.

Winter encampment.

1777.

The lowest point of the Continental Army.

Kylee followed his gaze and her eyes widened. “Kayden... is this—”

“Yeah.”

She swallowed hard. “This is bad.”

He nodded. “Very.”

The token pulsed again, but weaker this time — as if the cold was draining it. Kayden tucked it inside his coat, trying to warm it with his body heat.

A shout echoed through the trees.

“Hey! You two!”

Kayden spun around. A soldier trudged toward them, wrapped in a threadbare coat that barely covered his knees. His boots were falling apart, his face gaunt, his beard thick with frost. He looked exhausted — but alert.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... what do we do?”

“Stay calm,” he murmured. “Don’t run.”

The soldier stopped a few feet away, squinting at them. “What are you doing out here? You’ll freeze to death dressed like that.”

Kylee forced a shaky smile. “We got lost.”

“Lost?” The soldier frowned. “Where’s your unit?”

Kayden’s mind raced. “We’re... not soldiers.”

The man’s eyes narrowed. “Then what are you doing in a military encampment?”

Kylee stepped forward. “We’re looking for someone.”

The soldier snorted. “Aren’t we all.”

He studied them again, suspicion fading into something like pity. “Come on. You can’t stay out here. You’ll die.”

Kayden hesitated. “Where are you taking us?”

“To the camp,” the soldier said. “To get warm. And to keep you from freezing solid.”

Kylee looked at Kayden. “We should go.”

He nodded reluctantly. “Okay.”

The soldier motioned for them to follow. They trudged through the snow, their feet sinking into the frozen slush. The cold bit at their skin, seeping through their clothes, numbing their fingers and toes. Kayden’s breath came out in white clouds. Kylee’s lips were turning blue.

As they approached the camp, the full weight of Valley Forge hit them.

Rows of crude log huts stretched across the clearing, smoke curling from their chimneys. Soldiers huddled around small fires, their faces hollow, their bodies wrapped in blankets and rags. Some coughed violently. Others lay on the ground, too weak to move. The smell of sickness hung heavy in the air.

Kylee's eyes filled with tears. "Kayden... they're starving."

He nodded, throat tight. "I know."

The soldier led them to a hut near the edge of camp. "Stay here," he said. "I'll find someone who can help you."

He disappeared into the camp, leaving them alone.

Kylee hugged herself, shivering violently. "Kayden... I can't feel my hands."

He pulled her close, trying to shield her from the wind. "Just hold on. We'll figure this out."

The door of the hut creaked open. A man stepped out — older, with a thick beard and sharp eyes. He wore a coat that was patched but warm, and a scarf wrapped tightly around his neck.

"You the ones the corporal found?" he asked.

Kayden nodded. "Yes, sir."

The man studied them for a long moment. "You're not from around here."

Kylee whispered, "We get that a lot."

The man cracked a faint smile. "Name's Levi Cohen. Quartermaster. Come inside before you freeze."

They stepped into the hut. It was small, cramped, and smoky — but warm. A fire crackled in the corner, and a pot of thin broth simmered over it. The air smelled of woodsmoke and boiled roots.

Levi motioned for them to sit. "You're lucky you weren't found by the wrong patrol. Some officers don't take kindly to civilians wandering around."

Kylee rubbed her hands together, trying to warm them. "We didn't mean to wander."

Levi raised an eyebrow. “Then what did you mean to do?”

Kayden hesitated. “We’re... looking for someone.”

“Who?”

Kayden swallowed. “A scholar.”

Levi’s expression changed — subtly, but unmistakably. “A scholar of what?”

Kylee answered before Kayden could stop her. “Names.”

Levi froze.

Kayden’s heart pounded. “Do you know him?”

Levi slowly closed the door. “I know of him.”

Kylee leaned forward. “Can you take us to him?”

Levi studied them with a depth that made Kayden’s skin prickle. “Do you have it?”

Kayden’s breath caught. “Have what?”

Levi’s eyes flicked to Kayden’s coat. “The token.”

Kylee gasped. “How do you—”

Levi held up a hand. “Not here. Not now.”

He lowered his voice. “There are ears everywhere. And not all of them belong to men.”

Kayden felt the token pulse against his chest.

Levi stepped closer. “Tonight, after dark, I’ll take you to him. But until then, you stay here. You don’t talk to anyone. You don’t show anyone the token. And you don’t leave this hut.”

Kylee swallowed. “Why?”

Levi’s eyes darkened. “Because the one who hunts you... hunts him too.”

Kayden felt a chill that had nothing to do with the cold.

Levi leaned in. “You’re in more danger than you know.”

Kylee whispered, “Who is he?”

Levi straightened. “The man you seek is the only one who can explain why you’re here.”

Kayden’s voice trembled. “And who is the man hunting us?”

Levi’s jaw tightened. “A shadow. A traitor. A man who serves a master older than this war.”

Kylee shivered. “What does he want?”

Levi looked at Kayden’s coat — at the place where the token pulsed beneath the fabric.

“He wants the key,” Levi said softly. “The key to time.”

Kayden’s breath caught. “The token.”

Levi nodded. “And if he gets it... history will not survive.”

Kylee grabbed Kayden’s hand. “Kayden...”

He squeezed her hand back.

Levi stepped toward the fire, stirring the pot. “Rest while you can. Tonight, everything changes.”

Kayden and Kylee exchanged a look.

They had survived Concord.

They had survived the rider.

They had found the Scholar of Names.

But Valley Forge...

Valley Forge was different.

This wasn’t just history.

This was a battlefield of time.

And they were standing in the middle of it.

CHAPTER EIGHT - *The Midnight Escape*

The hours crawled by with the slow, heavy weight of winter. Kayden and Kylee sat near the small fire in Levi Cohen's hut, wrapped in thin blankets that did little to fight the cold. Outside, the wind howled through the trees, rattling the crude wooden walls and sending fine flakes of snow drifting through the cracks. Every sound made Kylee jump. Every gust made Kayden tighten his grip on the token.

Levi moved quietly around the hut, tending the fire, checking the door, glancing out the small frost-covered window. He didn't speak much, but when he did, his voice carried the gravity of someone who had seen too much.

"You must understand," he said at one point, stirring the pot of broth, "Valley Forge is not just a place of suffering. It is a crucible. Men are being forged here — tested, broken, remade. And not just soldiers. Ideas. Convictions. Futures."

Kylee hugged her knees. "It's so sad."

Levi nodded. "It is. But it is also necessary. Freedom is not born in comfort."

Kayden stared into the fire. "Is that why we're here?"

Levi paused, studying him. "Partly. But not only for what happens here. You are here because the past is speaking to the future. And because the future is in danger."

Kylee shivered. "Because of the rider."

Levi's jaw tightened. "Yes. He is not a man of this time. He moves through it, but he does not belong to it."

Kayden's stomach twisted. "Like us."

"No," Levi said firmly. "Not like you. You were brought here. He was sent."

Kylee's voice trembled. "By who?"

Levi hesitated. “By a master who fears the restoration of truth. A master who thrives in confusion and forgetfulness. A master who wants the Name buried forever.”

Kayden felt the token pulse against his chest. “And the token... it’s part of that truth.”

Levi nodded. “It is older than this nation. Older than this war. Older than any empire that has risen or fallen. It is a witness. A key. A reminder.”

Kylee whispered, “A reminder of what?”

Levi looked at her with eyes that seemed to hold centuries. “Of who you are. And who He is.”

Before Kayden could ask more, a sharp crack echoed through the camp — the sound of a branch snapping under a heavy boot.

Levi froze.

Kylee’s eyes widened. “What was that?”

Levi held up a hand. “Quiet.”

Another sound followed — slow, deliberate footsteps crunching through the snow. Kayden’s heart pounded. He moved to the window and wiped away a patch of frost with his sleeve.

A figure moved between the huts. Cloaked. Hooded. Lantern dimmed to a faint ember.

The rider.

Kylee grabbed Kayden’s arm. “He found us.”

Levi crossed the room in two strides and blew out the fire, plunging the hut into darkness. “He can sense the token,” he whispered. “He feels its presence like a wolf smells blood.”

Kayden’s breath caught. “What do we do?”

Levi grabbed a small satchel and slung it over his shoulder. “We leave. Now.”

Kylee’s voice shook. “But it’s freezing.”

“Better cold than dead,” Levi said.

He opened the back door — a small, narrow exit Kayden hadn’t noticed before — and motioned for them to follow. The wind hit them like a wall, icy and sharp, but Levi didn’t slow. He moved quickly, silently, weaving between the huts with the practiced ease of someone who knew every inch of the camp.

Kayden and Kylee followed close behind, their breaths coming out in white clouds. The snow crunched under their feet, but Levi’s steps were nearly soundless.

Behind them, the rider’s lantern glow flickered between the trees.

Kylee whispered, “He’s getting closer.”

Kayden tightened his grip on her hand. “Don’t look back.”

They reached the edge of the camp, where the forest thickened. Levi pushed aside a cluster of branches, revealing a narrow path hidden beneath the snow.

“This way,” he said. “Quickly.”

They slipped into the trees, the branches closing behind them like a curtain. The forest swallowed them in darkness, broken only by the faint glow of the token through Kayden’s coat.

Levi stopped suddenly and turned to Kayden. “You must dim it.”

Kayden blinked. “Dim it?”

“The light,” Levi said urgently. “He can see it.”

Kayden pulled the token out. It glowed brightly, the ancient letters pulsing like a heartbeat. He cupped his hands around it, trying to smother the light, but it only grew brighter.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... it’s reacting to something.”

Levi grabbed Kayden’s wrist. “Focus. Tell it to be still.”

Kayden stared at him. “Tell it?”

“Yes,” Levi said. “It responds to you. It chose you. Command it.”

Kayden swallowed hard and closed his eyes. He held the token tightly, pressing it against his chest.

“Stop,” he whispered. “Please... stop.”

The glow flickered.

Kylee gasped. “Kayden... it’s working.”

Kayden took a deep breath. “Stop.”

The light dimmed.

Then faded.

Then vanished completely.

Levi exhaled. “Good. Very good.”

A distant howl echoed through the forest — not an animal, not human, something in between.

Kylee shivered violently. “What was that?”

Levi’s face darkened. “He knows he lost the trail.”

Kayden’s pulse hammered. “Is he coming this way?”

“No,” Levi said. “Not yet. But he will search. And he will not stop.”

Kylee grabbed Kayden’s arm. “Where are we going?”

Levi pointed deeper into the forest. “To someone who can help you. Someone who has been waiting for you.”

Kayden frowned. “Who?”

Levi hesitated. “A man who keeps the Feasts. A man who honors the ancient ways. A man who knows the Name.”

Kylee’s eyes widened. “Another one?”

Levi nodded. “Yes. And he has something you need.”

Kayden tightened his grip on the token. “What is it?”

Levi began walking again, his voice low and urgent.

“Understanding.”

They followed him deeper into the forest, the wind howling through the trees, the snow crunching beneath their feet, the darkness pressing in around them.

Behind them, far off but unmistakable, the rider’s lantern flickered through the trees.

Searching.

Hunting.

Closing in.

And the token — silent now, but warm — pulsed once against Kayden’s chest.

As if reminding him:

This is only the beginning.

CHAPTER NINE - *The Soldier Who Kept the Feasts*

The forest swallowed them whole.

Branches clawed at their coats as Levi led them deeper into the trees, moving with surprising speed for a man his age. Snow crunched beneath their boots, each step sinking into the frozen earth. The wind howled through the branches overhead, carrying with it the distant groans of the encampment and the faint, eerie echo of something else — something that didn’t belong to the winter or the war.

Kylee clung to Kayden’s arm, her breath coming out in sharp, white bursts. “Kayden... how far is this place?”

Kayden didn’t answer. He didn’t know. Levi hadn’t said. He just kept moving, glancing over his shoulder every few seconds, his eyes sharp and alert.

Finally, Levi slowed. “Not far now.”

Kayden scanned the trees. “Where are we going?”

“To a man who has been waiting for you,” Levi said. “A man who understands the token better than anyone alive in this time.”

Kylee frowned. “How does he know about it?”

Levi didn’t answer immediately. He pushed aside a low branch and motioned for them to duck under it. “Because he has seen its effects before.”

Kayden’s pulse quickened. “Before? You mean... someone else traveled?”

Levi hesitated. “Not like you. But the token has stirred before. Briefly. Like a heartbeat in the dark.”

Kylee shivered. “That sounds creepy.”

“It was,” Levi said simply.

They walked in silence for several minutes, the forest growing denser, the snow deeper. Kayden’s toes were numb, and Kylee’s teeth chattered uncontrollably. Levi noticed and slowed his pace.

“Almost there,” he said. “Stay close.”

The trees suddenly opened into a small clearing — a circle of space sheltered by thick pines. In the center stood a crude hut, smaller than Levi’s, built from logs and mud, smoke curling from a narrow chimney. A lantern glowed faintly in the window.

Kylee whispered, “Someone lives out here?”

Levi nodded. “He prefers solitude. The camp is too loud for him. Too chaotic.”

Kayden frowned. “Why?”

Levi looked at him. “Because he listens.”

Kylee blinked. “Listens to what?”

Levi didn’t answer. He walked to the door and knocked twice — slow, deliberate taps.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then the door creaked open.

A man stood in the doorway — tall, thin, wrapped in a heavy wool coat. His beard was long and streaked with gray, his eyes sharp and bright despite the exhaustion etched into his face. He looked like a man who had carried burdens heavier than muskets and marched through winters colder than this one.

He studied Kayden and Kylee for a long moment.

Then he spoke.

“You brought them.”

Levi nodded. “Yes.”

The man stepped aside. “Come in.”

Kayden and Kylee exchanged a glance, then stepped into the hut.

It was small — barely enough room for a cot, a table, and a small stove. But it was warm, and the air smelled of herbs and woodsmoke. Books and scrolls were stacked neatly along one wall, and a small oil lamp flickered on the table.

The man closed the door behind them. “My name is Ezra.”

Kylee whispered, “Ezra... like the scribe?”

Ezra smiled faintly. “My father named me after him. I have tried to live up to it.”

Kayden stepped forward. “Levi said you could help us.”

Ezra studied him. “Show me the token.”

Kayden hesitated, then pulled it from his coat. The moment it touched the air, it glowed — faintly at first, then brighter, the ancient letters shimmering like embers.

Ezra inhaled sharply. “So it is true.”

Kylee stepped closer. “You’ve seen it before?”

Ezra shook his head. “Not with my eyes. But in the writings. In the patterns. In the whispers of the Name.”

Kayden frowned. “What does it do?”

Ezra motioned for them to sit. “It is a key. A witness. A reminder of the covenant that was forgotten by nations and buried by time.”

Kylee swallowed. “A reminder of what?”

Ezra looked at her with eyes that seemed to see straight through her. “Of who He is. And who you are.”

Kayden felt the token pulse in his hand.

Ezra leaned forward. “You must understand — the Name is not just a word. It is a declaration. A promise. A power. And there are forces in this world — and beyond it — that fear its return.”

Kylee whispered, “The rider.”

Ezra nodded. “He serves the one who fears the Name most.”

Kayden’s stomach twisted. “Who is he?”

Ezra’s expression darkened. “A shadow. A deceiver. A man who once sought truth but turned away from it. He walks through time, but he does not belong to it.”

Kylee shivered. “Why is he after us?”

Ezra looked at Kayden. “Because you carry the key. And because you are the first in generations who can hear the call.”

Kayden felt his throat tighten. “We didn’t ask for this.”

“No one ever does,” Ezra said gently. “But the Father chooses whom He chooses.”

Kylee hugged herself. “What do we do now?”

Ezra stood and walked to the table. He unrolled a small parchment covered in symbols — Hebrew letters, circles, lines connecting them like constellations.

“This,” he said, “is the map of the token’s path.”

Kayden leaned closer. “A map?”

Ezra nodded. “Of time. Of moments. Of turning points.”

Kylee frowned. “Turning points of what?”

Ezra looked at her. “Of nations. Of faith. Of identity. Of truth.”

Kayden swallowed. “Where does it send us next?”

Ezra hesitated. “That depends.”

“On what?” Kylee asked.

Ezra pointed to the token. “On what it senses. On what you need to witness. On what the future needs you to understand.”

Kayden felt the token grow warm again — too warm.

Ezra stepped back. “It’s reacting.”

Kylee grabbed Kayden’s arm. “Kayden...”

The glow intensified, filling the hut with golden light.

Ezra raised his voice over the rising hum. “Listen to me — wherever it sends you next, remember this: you are not there to change history. You are there to learn from it.”

Kayden’s heart pounded. “Learn what?”

Ezra’s voice echoed as the light swallowed them.

“The truth.”

The world folded.

The hut vanished.

Ezra’s voice faded.

And the token pulled them into the next moment of time.

CHAPTER TEN - *The Next Door Opens*

The world didn't just fold this time — it *ripped*.

Kayden felt the air tear open around him, felt the ground vanish, felt Kylee's fingers clamp around his wrist with desperate strength. The light wasn't warm or gentle now. It was fierce, wild, alive — like a storm made of fire and memory. The token burned against his palm, the ancient letters glowing so brightly he could see them through his closed eyelids.

Kylee screamed his name, but the sound was swallowed by the roar of the light.

Then everything went silent.

Not quiet.

Silent.

A silence so deep it felt like the world had stopped breathing.

Kayden hit the ground hard, rolling through dirt and dry grass. The air was hot — blistering, suffocating — and the smell of smoke filled his lungs. He coughed violently, pushing himself upright, blinking through the haze.

Kylee landed beside him, coughing, her eyes watering. "Kayden... where are we?"

He didn't answer.

Because he didn't know.

The sky above them was orange — not from sunset, but from smoke. Thick, black plumes rose into the air, drifting across the horizon like storm clouds. The ground trembled beneath them, a low, rhythmic vibration that made Kayden's teeth rattle.

Kylee grabbed his arm. "Kayden... what's happening?"

He stood slowly, shielding his eyes from the smoke. They were on a hill overlooking a valley — a valley filled with chaos.

Thousands of men moved below them — soldiers in blue coats, soldiers in red coats, cannons firing, muskets cracking, horses screaming. The air was thick with gunpowder and dust. Flags whipped violently in the wind. Officers shouted orders that were swallowed by the roar of battle.

Kylee's breath caught. "Kayden... this is a war."

He nodded slowly. "Yeah."

"But which one?"

Kayden scanned the battlefield, searching for something familiar — uniforms, formations, terrain. Then he saw it: a line of Continental soldiers charging uphill, bayonets fixed, faces grim with determination.

Kylee followed his gaze. "Is that...?"

Kayden swallowed hard. "It looks like the Battle of Monmouth."

Kylee blinked. "Monmouth? As in—"

"1778," Kayden said. "One of the hottest battles of the war."

Kylee wiped sweat from her forehead. "No kidding."

The heat was oppressive — suffocating. The sun beat down mercilessly, turning the battlefield into an oven. Soldiers collapsed from exhaustion. Horses stumbled. The air shimmered with heat waves.

Kylee whispered, "Why would the token bring us here?"

Kayden didn't know. But he felt the token pulse again — not warm this time, but hot, almost burning.

Kylee winced. "Kayden... it's hurting you."

He clenched his teeth. "It's reacting to something."

A cannon blast shook the ground, sending a shockwave through the hill. Kylee stumbled, and Kayden grabbed her before she fell.

"We need to get out of sight," he said.

They scrambled behind a cluster of rocks, crouching low as musket balls whizzed overhead. The noise was deafening — explosions, screams, the crack of gunfire, the thunder of hooves.

Kylee covered her ears. “Kayden, we can’t stay here!”

“I know!”

He peeked over the rocks, scanning the battlefield. Officers on horseback shouted commands. Soldiers in blue coats struggled to hold the line. Redcoats advanced with brutal precision. The heat was so intense that some men fought in their shirts, coats discarded in the dust.

Kylee tugged on his sleeve. “Kayden... look!”

He followed her gaze.

A man lay on the ground a few yards away — a Continental soldier, wounded, struggling to crawl toward a fallen musket. Blood soaked his sleeve. His face was pale, twisted in pain.

Kylee’s voice trembled. “We have to help him.”

Kayden hesitated. “Kylee... we can’t interfere.”

“He’s dying!”

“I know, but—”

“He’s a person, Kayden!”

Kayden clenched his jaw. Ezra’s words echoed in his mind:

You are not here to change history. You are here to learn from it.

But watching someone die — someone who might not have died if they helped — tore at him.

Kylee crawled forward. “I’m going.”

“Kylee—!”

She ignored him.

Kayden cursed under his breath and followed.

They reached the soldier just as he collapsed onto his side, gasping for air. His eyes fluttered open, unfocused.

“Sir,” Kylee whispered, “we’re here. We’re going to help you.”

The soldier blinked, confused. “Children...? What are you... doing here...?”

Kayden pressed a hand to the man’s wound. “Stay still.”

The soldier coughed weakly. “Too... hot... can’t... breathe...”

Kylee looked around desperately. “Kayden, he needs water!”

Kayden scanned the battlefield. Soldiers carried canteens, but they were too far away. The heat was unbearable. The man’s lips were cracked, his skin burning.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... he’s going to die.”

Kayden felt helpless — truly helpless — for the first time since the token had pulled them from their home.

Then the token pulsed.

Hard.

So hard it made his hand jerk.

Kylee gasped. “Kayden... it’s glowing!”

He looked down.

The token burned with a fierce, golden light — brighter than ever before.

The soldier’s eyes widened. “What... is that...?”

Kayden didn’t know what to say.

The token pulsed again — and the air around them shimmered.

Kylee grabbed Kayden's arm. "Kayden... something's happening!"

The soldier stared at the token, his breath catching. "The... Name..."

Kayden froze. "What did you say?"

The soldier's voice was barely a whisper. "The... ancient... Name..."

Kylee's eyes widened. "Kayden... he knows."

Before Kayden could respond, a musket ball slammed into the ground inches from his knee, spraying dirt into the air.

Kylee screamed. "Kayden, we have to move!"

He grabbed her hand and pulled her behind the rocks again, the wounded soldier's voice echoing faintly behind them.

"The... Name... remember..."

Another cannon blast shook the hill.

Kylee clung to Kayden. "Kayden... what do we do?"

He looked at the token — glowing, pulsing, alive.

"We hold on," he said.

The token pulsed again.

The world folded.

The battlefield vanished.

And the next door opened.

CHAPTER ELEVEN - *The Underground River*

The world slammed back into existence with a force that knocked the breath out of Kayden's lungs. He hit the ground hard, rolling through damp earth and tangled roots.

The air was thick — humid, heavy, almost suffocating — and the smell of wet soil filled his nose. He coughed, pushing himself upright, blinking through the darkness.

Kylee landed beside him with a thud, groaning. “Kayden... please tell me we’re not in another war.”

He didn’t answer.

He couldn’t.

Because he didn’t know.

The darkness around them wasn’t natural. It wasn’t night. It wasn’t a storm. It was something else — something deeper. The air felt close, trapped, as if the world itself were holding its breath.

Kylee sat up, brushing mud from her hands. “Where are we?”

Kayden stood slowly, listening. The air was filled with faint sounds — dripping water, distant footsteps, the soft rustle of fabric. And voices. Whispered voices. Urgent. Afraid.

He squinted into the darkness. “We’re underground.”

Kylee blinked. “Underground? Like... a cave?”

“Not exactly.”

He stepped forward, feeling the ground slope downward. The air grew cooler, the darkness thicker. Kylee grabbed his sleeve.

“Kayden... I don’t like this.”

“I know.”

He reached into his coat and pulled out the token. It glowed faintly — not bright, but steady, like a lantern in fog. The light illuminated rough wooden beams overhead, supporting a low ceiling of packed earth. The walls were reinforced with planks. The floor was uneven, covered in dirt and straw.

Kylee whispered, “This looks like a tunnel.”

Kayden nodded. “A man-made one.”

“Why would someone build a tunnel like this?”

Before he could answer, a voice echoed from the darkness ahead.

“Who’s there?”

Kayden froze. Kylee grabbed his arm.

Footsteps approached — slow, cautious, deliberate. A lantern flickered into view, casting long shadows across the tunnel walls. A man stepped forward, holding the lantern high.

He was tall, with dark skin and sharp eyes that missed nothing. His clothes were simple — worn trousers, a loose shirt, boots caked with mud. His expression was wary, but not hostile.

He studied them for a long moment.

“You two ain’t from around here.”

Kylee whispered, “We get that a lot.”

The man lowered the lantern slightly. “You lost?”

Kayden swallowed. “Something like that.”

The man’s eyes narrowed. “You runaways?”

Kylee blinked. “Runaways?”

The man stepped closer. “You slaves?”

Kayden’s breath caught. “No. No, sir.”

The man exhaled slowly, relief flickering across his face. “Good. ’Cause if you were, you picked the right place to run to.”

Kylee frowned. “What place is this?”

The man lifted the lantern, illuminating the tunnel more fully.

“This,” he said, “is the Underground Railroad.”

Kylee’s eyes widened. “Kayden... we’re in the Underground Railroad.”

Kayden nodded slowly, awe washing over him. “Yeah.”

The man studied them again. “Name’s Josiah. I help folks get north. Free folks. Brave folks. Desperate folks.”

Kylee stepped forward. “We’re not trying to escape anything like that.”

Josiah raised an eyebrow. “Then what are you doing in my tunnel?”

Kayden hesitated. “We’re... traveling.”

Josiah snorted. “Everybody in these tunnels is traveling.”

Kylee smiled weakly. “Not like us.”

Josiah’s eyes flicked to the token in Kayden’s hand. “What’s that?”

Kayden instinctively closed his fist around it. “Nothing.”

Josiah’s expression hardened. “Boy, I’ve been doing this a long time. I know when someone’s hiding something.”

Kylee stepped between them. “We’re not here to cause trouble.”

Josiah studied her for a moment, then nodded. “Didn’t say you were. But trouble finds folks who don’t know where they’re going.”

Kayden took a breath. “Where are we? Exactly?”

Josiah lifted the lantern higher. “Maryland. Eastern Shore. Year’s 1858, if that helps.”

Kylee’s jaw dropped. “1858? Kayden... that’s before the Civil War.”

Kayden nodded. “Right before.”

Josiah motioned for them to follow. “Come on. You can’t stay here. Patrols been sniffin’ around. We move folks at night.”

Kylee hesitated. “Move them where?”

Josiah looked back at her. “To freedom.”

He led them deeper into the tunnel. The air grew cooler, the darkness thicker. The token pulsed faintly in Kayden’s hand, as if sensing something ahead.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... why would the token bring us here?”

Kayden didn’t answer.

Because he didn’t know.

But he had a feeling they were about to find out.

The tunnel opened into a larger chamber — a hidden room lit by a single lantern. Several people huddled inside — men, women, children — their faces tired, their clothes torn, their eyes filled with fear and hope in equal measure.

A woman looked up as Josiah entered. “Is it time?”

Josiah nodded. “Almost. Wagons’ll be ready soon.”

Kylee’s heart broke at the sight. “Kayden... they’re escaping slavery.”

Kayden nodded, throat tight. “Yeah.”

A little girl peeked out from behind her mother, staring at Kayden and Kylee with wide eyes. Kylee knelt down, smiling gently.

“Hi,” she whispered.

The girl didn’t speak. She just stared at the token in Kayden’s hand.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... she sees it.”

Kayden looked down.

The token was glowing again — brighter than before.

Josiah noticed. “What is that thing?”

Kayden hesitated. “It’s... complicated.”

Josiah crossed his arms. “Try me.”

Before Kayden could answer, a distant shout echoed through the tunnel.

Josiah stiffened. “Patrol!”

The room erupted into panic. Mothers grabbed their children. Men reached for makeshift weapons. Josiah grabbed Kayden’s shoulder.

“Listen to me — you two need to hide.”

Kylee’s voice trembled. “What about you?”

Josiah shook his head. “I’ll hold ’em off. Buy time.”

Kayden grabbed his arm. “You’ll be killed.”

Josiah smiled grimly. “Better me than them.”

Another shout echoed — closer this time.

Kylee grabbed Kayden’s hand. “Kayden... the token!”

It pulsed violently — so violently it hurt.

Josiah stared at it, eyes wide. “What in God’s name—”

The tunnel shook.

The air shimmered.

The light exploded.

Kylee screamed.

Josiah stumbled back.

The fugitives cried out.

Kayden held the token tight, pulling Kylee close.

The world folded.

The tunnel vanished.

And the next door opened.

CHAPTER TWELVE - *The Token Misfires*

The world didn't fold this time.

It *fractured*.

Kayden felt the air split open around him like glass shattering in slow motion. The light wasn't golden or warm — it was white-hot, violent, chaotic. The token burned in his hand, the ancient letters flaring so brightly he could see them through his eyelids. Kylee screamed his name, but the sound was swallowed by a roar so deep it felt like the earth itself was crying out.

Then everything went black.

Not darkness.

Blackness.

A void.

Kayden floated — weightless, breathless, suspended in nothing. He couldn't feel his body. He couldn't hear Kylee. He couldn't hear anything. The token pulsed once — a single, weak thump — and then went silent.

For the first time since the journey began, Kayden felt fear that went beyond danger.

This was different.

This was wrong.

Then the void cracked.

A sliver of light pierced the darkness, widening slowly, painfully, until the world snapped back into place with a force that knocked him flat on his back. He gasped, sucking in air that tasted like dust and heat and something metallic.

Kylee landed beside him with a cry, rolling onto her side and coughing violently. “Kayden... what... what happened?”

He pushed himself upright, blinking through the haze. “I don’t know.”

The ground beneath them was hard — packed dirt mixed with gravel. The air was hot, dry, suffocating. A harsh wind whipped dust into their faces, stinging their eyes. The sky above them was a pale, washed-out blue, the sun glaring down with brutal intensity.

Kylee shielded her eyes. “Where are we now?”

Kayden stood slowly, scanning the horizon.

They were in a desert.

Not dunes — not endless sand — but a barren, rocky wasteland stretching in every direction. Jagged cliffs rose in the distance, their edges sharp against the sky. The wind howled through the ravines, carrying with it the faint smell of smoke and something else — something ancient.

Kylee grabbed his sleeve. “Kayden... the token misfired.”

He looked down.

The token was dark.

Completely dark.

No glow.

No pulse.

No warmth.

Kylee’s voice trembled. “Kayden... it’s dead.”

He shook his head. “No. It can’t be.”

He pressed it between his palms, trying to warm it. Nothing. He whispered the same command he used in the woods.

“Wake up.”

Nothing.

Kylee swallowed hard. “Kayden... what if we’re stuck here?”

He didn’t answer.

He couldn’t.

A distant sound echoed across the desert — a low, rhythmic rumble. Not thunder. Not wind. Something heavier. Something alive.

Kylee stepped closer. “Kayden... what is that?”

He strained to listen.

Hoofbeats.

Dozens of them.

Kylee’s eyes widened. “Horses?”

Kayden nodded slowly. “A lot of them.”

The rumble grew louder, closer, shaking the ground beneath their feet. Dust rose on the horizon — a massive cloud rolling toward them like a storm.

Kylee grabbed his arm. “Kayden... we need to hide.”

He scanned the landscape. There was nowhere to hide — no trees, no buildings, no cover except a cluster of boulders a few yards away.

“Come on!” he shouted.

They sprinted toward the rocks, diving behind them just as the riders came into view.

Kylee gasped. “Kayden... look!”

He peeked over the edge of the boulder.

A cavalry unit thundered across the desert — dozens of riders in uniforms he didn’t recognize. Their coats were long and dark, their hats wide-brimmed, their rifles slung across their backs. Dust billowed around them, their horses snorting and foaming at the mouth.

Kylee whispered, “Who are they?”

Kayden’s stomach twisted. “I don’t know.”

The riders weren’t British.

They weren’t Continental.

They weren’t Civil War soldiers.

They weren’t anything he recognized from American history.

Kylee’s voice trembled. “Kayden... what if we’re not in America?”

He didn’t answer.

Because he had the same thought.

The riders thundered past, their faces grim, their eyes fixed on something in the distance. One of them shouted in a language Kayden didn’t recognize — harsh, guttural, ancient.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... that didn’t sound English.”

He nodded. “No. It didn’t.”

The riders disappeared over a ridge, the rumble fading into the distance.

Kylee exhaled shakily. “Okay. So... where are we?”

Kayden looked at the token — dark, silent, lifeless.

“I think,” he said slowly, “the token didn’t take us to a moment in American history.”

Kylee stared at him. “Then where did it take us?”

He looked at the cliffs, the desert, the riders, the ancient language.

“I think,” he whispered, “we’re somewhere much older.”

Kylee’s eyes widened. “How old?”

Kayden swallowed hard. “Old enough that the token couldn’t handle it.”

Kylee stepped back. “Kayden... are you saying—”

A voice cut through the wind.

“Children.”

Kayden spun around.

A man stood on the ridge above them — tall, robed, silhouetted against the sun. His hair was long and dark, his beard thick, his eyes sharp and piercing. He held a staff in one hand, the wood worn smooth by time.

Kylee grabbed Kayden’s arm. “Kayden... who is that?”

The man stepped forward, his voice calm but powerful.

“You should not be here.”

Kayden’s heart pounded. “Who are you?”

The man descended the ridge with slow, deliberate steps.

“I am a shepherd,” he said. “A wanderer. A witness.”

Kylee whispered, “A witness... like us.”

The man nodded. “Yes. But not of your time.”

Kayden stepped forward. “Where are we?”

The man looked at the horizon — at the desert, the cliffs, the distant riders.

“You are in the land of Midian,” he said. “And the year is not one your people count anymore.”

Kylee’s breath caught. “Midian... Kayden... that’s—”

Kayden’s voice trembled. “The wilderness.”

The man nodded.

Kylee whispered, “Then you’re...”

The man raised his staff.

“I am the one who fled Egypt,” he said softly. “The one who will return. The one who will stand before Pharaoh.”

Kayden’s knees went weak.

Kylee covered her mouth.

The man stepped closer, his eyes filled with a depth that made the desert itself seem small.

“My name,” he said, “is Moshe.”

Moses.

The token pulsed once — faint, weak, but alive.

And Kayden understood:

The token hadn’t misfired.

It had brought them to the beginning.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN - *The Name in the Wilderness*

The desert wind whipped around them, carrying sand and heat and a strange, ancient stillness that made the world feel suspended between breaths. Kayden stared at the man standing before them — the man who had named himself Moshe — and felt the weight of history pressing down on him like the sun overhead.

Kylee clung to his arm, her eyes wide, her breath shallow. “Kayden... this can’t be real.”

But it was.

Everything in the man’s presence radiated truth — not the kind you read in books, but the kind that humbles you, the kind that makes your heart beat differently.

Moses stepped closer, his staff sinking slightly into the sand. His eyes were dark and deep, filled with a quiet strength that made Kayden feel both small and strangely safe.

“You are far from your time,” Moses said, his voice calm but resonant. “And farther still from understanding why you were brought here.”

Kylee swallowed hard. “We didn’t mean to come here. The token... it just—”

“Pulled you,” Moses finished. “Yes. It does that.”

Kayden blinked. “You know about the token?”

Moses studied him. “I know of many things. Some spoken. Some whispered. Some revealed only in the wilderness.”

Kylee stepped forward. “Are we... in danger?”

Moses’s expression softened. “All who walk between times are in danger.”

Kayden felt the token pulse weakly in his hand — not glowing, not warm, but alive again, like a heartbeat returning after a long silence.

Moses nodded toward it. “It is waking.”

Kylee whispered, “Why did it die?”

“It did not die,” Moses said. “It was overwhelmed.”

Kayden frowned. “By what?”

Moses looked toward the horizon, where the desert stretched endlessly. “By the weight of this moment.”

Kylee’s voice trembled. “What moment?”

Moses turned back to them. “The moment before the fire.”

Kayden’s breath caught. “The burning bush.”

Moses nodded slowly. “Yes.”

Kylee grabbed Kayden’s arm. “Kayden... we’re here for that.”

Kayden felt his heart pounding. “But why? Why would the token bring us here?”

Moses stepped closer, his presence filling the space around them. “Because you seek the Name. And the Name is revealed in fire.”

Kylee whispered, “The Name... the one Poppa talks about... the one the token shows...”

Moses nodded. “The Name that was forgotten. The Name that was replaced. The Name that will be restored.”

Kayden felt a chill run through him despite the heat. “We’re supposed to witness it.”

“Yes,” Moses said. “But not as you think.”

Kylee frowned. “What do you mean?”

Moses motioned for them to follow. “Come. There is something you must see.”

They walked across the desert, the sand shifting beneath their feet, the sun beating down relentlessly. Moses moved with purpose, his staff tapping rhythmically against the ground. Kylee stayed close to Kayden, her eyes scanning the horizon nervously.

After several minutes, they reached a rocky outcrop — a cluster of jagged stones rising from the desert floor like the bones of the earth. Moses stopped and turned to them.

“Before the fire,” he said, “there is silence.”

Kylee whispered, “Silence?”

Moses nodded. “The silence of a man who has lost everything.”

Kayden frowned. “Lost everything?”

Moses looked toward the distant mountains. “I was a prince once. Raised in the house of Pharaoh. Educated in the ways of Egypt. Powerful. Respected.”

Kylee blinked. “You were a prince?”

Moses nodded. “And then I became a fugitive.”

Kayden swallowed. “Because you killed the Egyptian.”

Moses’s eyes darkened. “Yes. I acted in anger. In fear. In confusion. And I fled into the wilderness.”

Kylee stepped closer. “And you’ve been here ever since?”

“Forty years,” Moses said. “Forty years of silence. Forty years of tending sheep. Forty years of wondering if I had been forgotten.”

Kayden felt something tighten in his chest. “Were you?”

Moses looked at him with a depth that made Kayden's skin prickle. "No. I was being prepared."

Kylee whispered, "Prepared for what?"

"For the fire," Moses said. "For the Name. For the calling."

Kayden looked down at the token. "Is that why we're here? To see your calling?"

Moses shook his head. "No. You are here to understand your own."

Kylee's breath caught. "Our calling?"

Moses nodded. "The token does not choose lightly. It does not reveal itself to those who walk without purpose."

Kayden felt the token pulse again — stronger this time.

Moses pointed toward the mountains. "There. That is where the fire will appear."

Kylee stared at the distant peak. "Mount Horeb."

"Yes," Moses said. "The mountain of God."

Kayden felt a surge of awe. "We're going to see it."

Moses shook his head. "No. You cannot."

Kylee blinked. "What? Why not?"

"Because the fire is not for you," Moses said. "Not yet."

Kayden frowned. "Then why bring us here?"

Moses stepped closer, placing a hand on Kayden's shoulder. His touch was warm, steady, grounding.

"Because you must understand the weight of the Name before you hear it."

Kylee whispered, “The weight?”

Moses nodded. “The Name is not a sound. It is not a word. It is a revelation. And revelation requires preparation.”

Kayden swallowed. “How do we prepare?”

Moses looked at the token. “By remembering.”

Kylee frowned. “Remembering what?”

Moses’s voice softened. “Who you are. And who He is.”

Kayden felt the token pulse again — a deep, resonant thump that echoed through his chest.

Moses stepped back. “The token will take you to the next moment. But be warned — the closer you come to the Name, the more fiercely the shadow will pursue you.”

Kylee shivered. “The rider.”

Moses nodded. “He is not of your time. He is not of mine. He is a servant of forgetfulness. A guardian of silence. He fears the Name.”

Kayden clenched the token. “Why?”

“Because the Name brings freedom,” Moses said. “And he serves bondage.”

Kylee whispered, “How do we stop him?”

Moses looked at her with a mixture of sorrow and hope. “You do not stop him. You outrun him.”

Kayden felt the token grow warm — very warm.

Kylee grabbed his arm. “Kayden... it’s happening again.”

Moses raised his staff. “Go. And remember — the Name is not found in power. It is found in truth.”

The token pulsed violently.

The desert blurred.

Moses's voice echoed:

“Do not fear the fire...”

The world folded.

And the next door opened.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN - *The Mountain That Burned Without Being Consumed*

The world snapped back into existence with a force that made Kayden stumble forward, sand sliding beneath his boots. Heat slammed into him like a wall — not the dry heat of the desert they had just left, but a deeper, heavier heat that felt alive, pulsing through the air like a heartbeat.

Kylee landed beside him, coughing, brushing sand from her face. “Kayden... where are we now?”

He didn't answer.

Because he couldn't.

Because the sight before him stole the breath from his lungs.

They stood at the base of a mountain — a massive, jagged peak rising from the desert floor like a stone giant. Its slopes were steep and barren, carved by centuries of wind and heat. The sky above it was a deep, impossible blue, the sun blazing overhead.

But the mountain wasn't what made Kayden's heart pound.

It was the fire.

A fire burned on the mountain's side — not a wildfire, not a brush fire, not a natural flame. This fire was different. It glowed with a strange, golden light, flickering and dancing without smoke, without ash, without consuming the bush it enveloped.

Kylee grabbed his arm. “Kayden... that’s it.”

He nodded slowly. “The burning bush.”

The fire flickered, casting long shadows across the rocks. The air around it shimmered with heat, but the bush itself — a small, thorny shrub — remained untouched, its branches green and alive.

Kylee whispered, “We’re here. We’re actually here.”

Kayden felt the token pulse in his hand — not violently, not painfully, but with a deep, steady rhythm that matched the flicker of the flame.

Kylee looked at him. “Kayden... it’s reacting.”

He nodded. “It’s connected to this.”

They stepped closer, the heat intensifying with every step. The air hummed — not a sound, not a vibration, but something deeper, something that resonated in their bones.

Kylee whispered, “Do you feel that?”

Kayden nodded. “Yeah.”

It felt like standing in the presence of something ancient. Something alive. Something holy.

A voice echoed across the desert.

“Do not come closer.”

Kayden froze.

Kylee grabbed his sleeve. “Kayden...”

The voice was deep, resonant, powerful — but not harsh. It carried authority, but also gentleness. It was a voice that could shake mountains and still speak to the heart of a child.

“Remove your sandals,” the voice said, “for the place where you stand is holy ground.”

Kylee’s breath caught. “Kayden... that’s—”

“I know.”

They watched as Moses — the same man they had met moments ago — approached the bush slowly, reverently. He removed his sandals, his face pale with awe, his hands trembling.

Kayden felt his own knees weaken.

Kylee whispered, “We shouldn’t be here.”

Kayden nodded. “I know.”

But the token pulsed again — stronger this time — and he felt something shift inside him. Not fear. Not confusion.

Recognition.

The fire flickered, and the voice spoke again.

“I have seen the affliction of My people. I have heard their cry. I know their sorrows.”

Kylee’s eyes filled with tears. “Kayden... He’s talking to Moses.”

Kayden swallowed hard. “Yeah.”

“And I have come down to deliver them.”

The fire flared, casting golden light across the desert.

Moses fell to his knees.

Kylee whispered, “This is the moment. The moment everything changes.”

Kayden nodded. “The moment the Name is revealed.”

The fire pulsed — once, twice — and the air grew still.

Moses lifted his head. “When I go to the people... whom shall I say sent me?”

The fire blazed brighter.

And the voice spoke the words that would echo through history.

“I AM THAT I AM.”

Kylee gasped, covering her mouth.

Kayden felt the token burn in his hand — not painfully, but with a warmth that filled his entire body.

The fire spoke again.

“Tell them: I AM has sent you.”

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... that’s the Name.”

He nodded slowly. “The beginning of it.”

The fire flickered, and the voice continued.

“This is My Name forever. This is My memorial to all generations.”

Kylee’s breath trembled. “All generations... including ours.”

Kayden felt the token pulse again — a deep, resonant thump that echoed through his chest.

The fire dimmed slightly, and Moses bowed his head, trembling.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... why did the token bring us here?”

He looked at the flame — at the fire that burned without consuming, at the moment that shaped nations, at the revelation that would echo through millennia.

“To understand,” he said softly. “To understand the Name.”

Kylee nodded slowly. “And to understand our calling.”

The fire flickered again — and the token pulsed violently.

Kylee grabbed Kayden’s arm. “Kayden... something’s wrong.”

The air shifted — not with heat, not with wind, but with something darker. Something cold. Something that didn’t belong in the presence of the fire.

Kayden turned.

A shadow moved across the desert.

A figure approached — cloaked, hooded, moving with unnatural stillness.

Kylee’s voice trembled. “Kayden... it’s him.”

The rider.

Here.

In the ancient world.

Kayden felt the token burn in his hand — not with warmth, but with warning.

The rider stepped closer, his voice low and cold.

“You should not be here.”

Kylee stepped back. “Kayden...”

The rider lifted his head, revealing eyes that glowed faintly in the firelight.

“You do not understand what you carry,” he said. “And you never will.”

Kayden clenched the token. “Stay away from us.”

The rider smiled — a thin, cruel smile.

“You cannot outrun me forever.”

The fire behind them flared — brighter than before — and the rider recoiled, hissing like a wounded animal.

Kylee gasped. “Kayden... the fire hurts him.”

Kayden nodded. “Because he fears the Name.”

The rider snarled. “This is not over.”

He stepped back — and vanished into the desert shadows.

The fire dimmed.

The token pulsed.

And the world folded again.

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Kylee gasped. "Kayden... the fire hurts him."

Kayden nodded. "Because he fears the Name."

The rider snarled. "This is not over."

He stepped back — and vanished into the desert shadows.

The fire dimmed.

The token pulsed.

And the world folded again.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN - *The Return to a Broken America*

The world didn't fold gently this time.

It tore.

Kayden felt the air rip open around him like cloth being shredded. The light wasn't warm or golden or ancient — it was jagged, violent, unstable. The token pulsed in his hand like a heart beating too fast, too hard, too desperately. Kylee screamed his name, but the sound was swallowed by the roar of the collapsing world.

Then everything went black.

Not darkness.

Blackness.

A void so deep it felt like falling into the space between moments.

Kayden couldn't breathe.

He couldn't move.

He couldn't hear.

The token pulsed once — a weak, fading thump — and then went silent.

Kylee's voice echoed faintly through the void. "Kayden... Kayden, where are you?"

He tried to answer, but his voice dissolved into nothing.

Then the void cracked.

A sliver of light pierced the darkness, widening slowly, painfully, until the world snapped back into place with a force that knocked him flat on his back. He gasped, sucking in air that tasted like smoke and dust and something metallic.

Kylee landed beside him, coughing violently. “Kayden... what happened? Where are we?”

He pushed himself upright, blinking through the haze.

They were in a city.

But not the city they knew.

The sky was gray — not from clouds, but from smoke. Thick plumes rose from burning buildings in the distance. Sirens wailed somewhere far off. The air was filled with the smell of fire, gasoline, and fear.

Kylee grabbed his arm. “Kayden... this is America.”

He nodded slowly. “Yeah.”

“But... not our America.”

He scanned the street.

Cars were overturned.

Windows shattered.

Graffiti covered the walls — angry, desperate messages.

Shops were boarded up.

Trash littered the sidewalks.

A police drone buzzed overhead, scanning the street with a cold, mechanical eye.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... what year is this?”

He didn't know.

But he knew it wasn't the past.

This was the future.

The token pulsed weakly in his hand — not warm, not bright, but alive again.

Kylee looked at it. "Kayden... it's barely glowing."

He nodded. "It's damaged."

Kylee's voice trembled. "Can it still take us home?"

He didn't answer.

Because he didn't know.

A distant explosion shook the ground, sending a shockwave through the street. Kylee stumbled, and Kayden caught her.

"Stay close," he said. "We need to find cover."

They ducked into an alleyway, the walls covered in peeling posters and digital screens flickering with static. A message flashed across one of the screens:

CURFEW IN EFFECT — 1800 HOURS

UNAUTHORIZED MOVEMENT WILL BE PROSECUTED

Kylee's eyes widened. "Kayden... this is like a dystopian movie."

He nodded. "Except it's real."

A voice echoed from the street.

"Hey! You two!"

Kayden froze.

A man approached — tall, wearing a tactical vest, a helmet, and a visor that glowed faintly blue. He carried a rifle slung across his chest and moved with the precision of someone trained for conflict.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... is he military?”

Kayden shook his head. “Not any military I recognize.”

The man stopped a few feet away, scanning them with a handheld device. The screen flashed red.

“Unregistered civilians,” he said. “State your district.”

Kylee blinked. “Our what?”

The man raised his visor. His eyes were tired, hardened, suspicious. “Your district. Your ID. Your clearance. Now.”

Kayden stepped forward. “We’re... lost.”

The man snorted. “Everyone’s lost these days.”

He studied them again, his eyes narrowing. “You’re not from here.”

Kylee whispered, “We get that a lot.”

The man lowered his rifle slightly. “Come with me. It’s not safe out here.”

Kayden hesitated. “Who are you?”

The man looked over his shoulder, scanning the rooftops. “Someone who doesn’t want to see two kids get shot by a drone.”

Kylee grabbed Kayden’s arm. “Kayden... we should go.”

He nodded. “Okay.”

The man motioned for them to follow. “Stay close. And don’t talk.”

They followed him through the alley, weaving between dumpsters and broken fences. The city around them felt like a war zone — not a foreign battlefield, but a familiar place twisted into something unrecognizable.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... what happened to America?”

He didn’t answer.

Because he didn’t know.

They reached a metal door hidden behind a stack of crates. The man tapped a code into a keypad, and the door slid open with a hiss.

“Inside,” he said.

Kayden and Kylee stepped into a dimly lit room filled with maps, monitors, and equipment. People moved around quickly, speaking in hushed tones. The air smelled of sweat, metal, and ozone.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... this is like a resistance base.”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

The man closed the door behind them. “Welcome to the Free Zone.”

Kylee blinked. “Free Zone?”

The man removed his helmet, revealing short, dark hair and a scar across his cheek. “What’s left of it.”

Kayden stepped forward. “What year is this?”

The man looked at him, surprised by the question. “2049.”

Kylee gasped. “Kayden... we’re in the future.”

He nodded slowly. “Yeah.”

The man studied them again. “You two really aren’t from here, are you?”

Kayden hesitated. “No.”

The man sighed. “Then you picked a bad time to visit.”

Kylee frowned. “What happened?”

The man pointed to a large digital map on the wall. Red zones covered most of the country.

“Civil collapse,” he said. “Economic failure. Political fracture. Surveillance state. Martial law. The whole thing fell apart.”

Kylee whispered, “This is awful.”

The man nodded. “Yeah. And it’s getting worse.”

Kayden felt the token pulse weakly in his hand.

The man noticed. “What’s that?”

Kayden closed his fist around it. “Nothing.”

The man raised an eyebrow. “Kid... nothing glows like that.”

Kylee stepped forward. “We can’t explain it.”

The man sighed. “Fine. Keep your secrets. Everyone else does.”

He turned to leave — then stopped.

A cold wind swept through the room.

The lights flickered.

The monitors glitched.

Kylee grabbed Kayden’s arm. “Kayden... something’s wrong.”

The man reached for his rifle. “What was that?”

Kayden knew.

Before he saw it.

Before he heard it.

Before the shadows shifted.

The rider was here.

In 2049.

The lights went out.

The room plunged into darkness.

Kylee screamed.

The token pulsed violently.

And the rider's voice echoed through the dark.

“You cannot run from me.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN - *The Battle in the Dark*

The lights died so fast it felt like the world had been swallowed whole. One moment the resistance base was buzzing with activity — screens flickering, people moving, voices murmuring — and the next, everything plunged into a suffocating blackness so complete it felt alive.

Kylee screamed, the sound sharp and terrified in the dark. Kayden grabbed her hand instinctively, pulling her close. The air felt colder now, as if the darkness itself had weight, pressing in around them.

Somewhere to their left, someone shouted, “Backup power! Get the backup—”

Their voice cut off with a choked gasp.

Kayden's heart hammered. "Kylee, stay with me."

"I'm right here," she whispered, her voice trembling. "Kayden... he's here."

Kayden didn't need her to say it. He felt it — a presence in the dark, cold and heavy, like a shadow that had learned how to breathe. The token pulsed violently in his hand, the faint glow barely visible through his fingers.

A low voice echoed through the room.

"You cannot run from me."

The rider.

Here.

In 2049.

In the dark.

Kylee clung to Kayden's arm. "Kayden... what do we do?"

He didn't know.

He had no plan.

No weapon.

No idea how to fight something that wasn't fully human.

The resistance leader — the man who had brought them here — shouted from somewhere in the dark, "Identify yourself!"

The rider laughed — a cold, hollow sound that made the hair on Kayden's arms stand up.

"You cannot see me," the rider said. "You cannot stop me."

A gunshot cracked through the darkness. Someone fired blindly. The muzzle flash lit the room for a split second — just long enough for Kayden to see the rider standing near the far wall, cloaked in shadow, his hood drawn low, his eyes glowing faintly.

Then the darkness swallowed everything again.

Kylee gasped. “Kayden... he’s moving.”

Kayden tightened his grip on her hand. “Stay behind me.”

The rider’s voice drifted through the room, echoing off the walls. “You carry something that does not belong to you.”

Kayden felt the token pulse again — harder, hotter.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... it’s reacting.”

“I know.”

The rider stepped closer. Kayden couldn’t see him, but he could feel the air shift — colder, heavier, wrong.

“You do not understand the power you hold,” the rider said. “Give it to me.”

Kayden shook his head, even though the rider couldn’t see it. “No.”

The rider’s voice sharpened. “You are children. You do not know what you carry. You do not know what it can do.”

Kylee shouted into the dark, “We know enough to know you shouldn’t have it!”

The rider laughed again — a sound like metal scraping stone.

“You know nothing.”

A sudden burst of light filled the room — not from the token, not from the lights, but from a flare igniting near the entrance. The resistance leader had thrown it, the bright red glow casting harsh shadows across the room.

For the first time, Kayden saw the rider clearly.

He wasn't a ghost.

He wasn't a demon.

He wasn't a man.

He was something in between.

Tall. Cloaked. Hooded. His face hidden in shadow except for his eyes — pale, glowing, unnatural. His cloak moved as if alive, shifting and rippling like smoke. His boots didn't make a sound on the floor.

Kylee gasped. "Kayden... he's not human."

The rider stepped forward, the flare's light flickering across his cloak. "Give me the token."

Kayden held it tighter. "No."

The rider raised a hand — long, pale fingers emerging from the cloak — and the air around Kayden grew colder, sharper, like invisible claws closing around his throat.

Kylee screamed. "Stop! Leave him alone!"

The rider ignored her. "Give it to me."

Kayden struggled to breathe. The cold tightened around his chest, squeezing the air from his lungs. His vision blurred. The token pulsed violently, the glow flickering like a dying flame.

Kylee grabbed his arm. "Kayden! Fight it!"

He tried.

He tried to move.

Tried to breathe.

Tried to speak.

But the cold was too strong.

The rider stepped closer. “You are weak. You are unworthy. You do not deserve the Name.”

Kylee shouted, “He does! We do!”

The rider turned his glowing eyes toward her. “You are children. You are nothing.”

Kylee stepped in front of Kayden, her hands shaking but her voice steady. “We’re not nothing.”

The rider raised his hand toward her.

Kayden felt something snap inside him.

“No!”

The token flared — not weakly, not faintly, but with a burst of golden light so bright it filled the entire room. The cold shattered. The darkness recoiled. The rider stumbled back, hissing like a wounded animal.

Kylee shielded her eyes. “Kayden... what did you do?”

He didn’t know.

He didn’t care.

The token burned in his hand — hot, alive, powerful.

The rider snarled. “You cannot use it. You do not know how.”

Kayden stood, pulling Kylee behind him. “Maybe not. But it knows how to protect us.”

The rider hissed again, stepping back into the shadows. “This is not over.”

The token flared again — brighter, hotter — and the rider vanished into the darkness, his cloak dissolving like smoke.

The lights flickered back on.

The resistance leader stared at Kayden and Kylee, his face pale. “What... what was that thing?”

Kylee looked at Kayden.

Kayden looked at the token.

And the token pulsed — once, twice — before going dark again.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... it’s dying.”

He nodded slowly. “I know.”

The resistance leader stepped forward. “Whatever that thing was... it’s coming back.”

Kayden swallowed hard. “I know.”

Kylee grabbed his hand. “Kayden... what do we do?”

He looked at the token — dark, cracked, fading.

“We fix it,” he said. “Before he finds us again.”

The resistance leader frowned. “Fix what?”

Kayden looked up.

“The key to time.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN - *The Broken Token*

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Kylee stepped in front of Kayden, her hands shaking but her voice steady. “We’re not nothing.”

The rider raised his hand toward her.

Kayden felt something snap inside him.

“No!”

The token flared — not weakly, not faintly, but with a burst of golden light so bright it filled the entire room. The cold shattered. The darkness recoiled. The rider stumbled back, hissing like a wounded animal.

Kylee shielded her eyes. “Kayden... what did you do?”

He didn't know.

He didn't care.

The token burned in his hand — hot, alive, powerful.

The rider snarled. "You cannot use it. You do not know how."

Kayden stood, pulling Kylee behind him. "Maybe not. But it knows how to protect us."

The rider hissed again, stepping back into the shadows. "This is not over."

The token flared again — brighter, hotter — and the rider vanished into the darkness, his cloak dissolving like smoke.

The lights flickered back on.

The resistance leader stared at Kayden and Kylee, his face pale. "What... what was that thing?"

Kylee looked at Kayden.

Kayden looked at the token.

And the token pulsed — once, twice — before going dark again.

Kylee whispered, "Kayden... it's dying."

He nodded slowly. "I know."

The resistance leader stepped forward. "Whatever that thing was... it's coming back."

Kayden swallowed hard. "I know."

Kylee grabbed his hand. "Kayden... what do we do?"

He looked at the token — dark, cracked, fading.

"We fix it," he said. "Before he finds us again."

The resistance leader frowned. “Fix what?”

Kayden looked up.

“The key to time.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN - *The Broken Token*

The lights died so fast it felt like the world had been swallowed whole. One moment the resistance base was buzzing with activity — screens flickering, people moving, voices murmuring — and the next, everything plunged into a suffocating blackness so complete it felt alive.

Kylee screamed, the sound sharp and terrified in the dark. Kayden grabbed her hand instinctively, pulling her close. The air felt colder now, as if the darkness itself had weight, pressing in around them.

Somewhere to their left, someone shouted, “Backup power! Get the backup—”

Their voice cut off with a choked gasp.

Kayden’s heart hammered. “Kylee, stay with me.”

“I’m right here,” she whispered, her voice trembling. “Kayden... he’s here.”

Kayden didn’t need her to say it. He felt it — a presence in the dark, cold and heavy, like a shadow that had learned how to breathe. The token pulsed violently in his hand, the faint glow barely visible through his fingers.

A low voice echoed through the room.

“You cannot run from me.”

The rider.

Here.

In 2049.

In the dark.

Kylee clung to Kayden's arm. "Kayden... what do we do?"

He didn't know.

He had no plan.

No weapon.

No idea how to fight something that wasn't fully human.

The resistance leader — the man who had brought them here — shouted from somewhere in the dark, "Identify yourself!"

The rider laughed — a cold, hollow sound that made the hair on Kayden's arms stand up.

"You cannot see me," the rider said. "You cannot stop me."

A gunshot cracked through the darkness. Someone fired blindly. The muzzle flash lit the room for a split second — just long enough for Kayden to see the rider standing near the far wall, cloaked in shadow, his hood drawn low, his eyes glowing faintly.

Then the darkness swallowed everything again.

Kylee gasped. "Kayden... he's moving."

Kayden tightened his grip on her hand. "Stay behind me."

The rider's voice drifted through the room, echoing off the walls. "You carry something that does not belong to you."

Kayden felt the token pulse again — harder, hotter.

Kylee whispered, "Kayden... it's reacting."

“I know.”

The rider stepped closer. Kayden couldn't see him, but he could feel the air shift — colder, heavier, wrong.

“You do not understand the power you hold,” the rider said. “Give it to me.”

Kayden shook his head, even though the rider couldn't see it. “No.”

The rider's voice sharpened. “You are children. You do not know what you carry. You do not know what it can do.”

Kylee shouted into the dark, “We know enough to know you shouldn't have it!”

The rider laughed again — a sound like metal scraping stone.

“You know nothing.”

A sudden burst of light filled the room — not from the token, not from the lights, but from a flare igniting near the entrance. The resistance leader had thrown it, the bright red glow casting harsh shadows across the room.

For the first time, Kayden saw the rider clearly.

He wasn't a ghost.

He wasn't a demon.

He wasn't a man.

He was something in between.

Tall. Cloaked. Hooded. His face hidden in shadow except for his eyes — pale, glowing, unnatural. His cloak moved as if alive, shifting and rippling like smoke. His boots didn't make a sound on the floor.

Kylee gasped. “Kayden... he's not human.”

The rider stepped forward, the flare's light flickering across his cloak. "Give me the token."

Kayden held it tighter. "No."

The rider raised a hand — long, pale fingers emerging from the cloak — and the air around Kayden grew colder, sharper, like invisible claws closing around his throat.

Kylee screamed. "Stop! Leave him alone!"

The rider ignored her. "Give it to me."

Kayden struggled to breathe. The cold tightened around his chest, squeezing the air from his lungs. His vision blurred. The token pulsed violently, the glow flickering like a dying flame.

Kylee grabbed his arm. "Kayden! Fight it!"

He tried.

He tried to move.

Tried to breathe.

Tried to speak.

But the cold was too strong.

The rider stepped closer. "You are weak. You are unworthy. You do not deserve the Name."

Kylee shouted, "He does! We do!"

The rider turned his glowing eyes toward her. "You are children. You are nothing."

Kylee stepped in front of Kayden, her hands shaking but her voice steady. "We're not nothing."

The rider raised his hand toward her.

Kayden felt something snap inside him.

“No!”

The token flared — not weakly, not faintly, but with a burst of golden light so bright it filled the entire room. The cold shattered. The darkness recoiled. The rider stumbled back, hissing like a wounded animal.

Kylee shielded her eyes. “Kayden... what did you do?”

He didn’t know.

He didn’t care.

The token burned in his hand — hot, alive, powerful.

The rider snarled. “You cannot use it. You do not know how.”

Kayden stood, pulling Kylee behind him. “Maybe not. But it knows how to protect us.”

The rider hissed again, stepping back into the shadows. “This is not over.”

The token flared again — brighter, hotter — and the rider vanished into the darkness, his cloak dissolving like smoke.

The lights flickered back on.

The resistance leader stared at Kayden and Kylee, his face pale. “What... what was that thing?”

Kylee looked at Kayden.

Kayden looked at the token.

And the token pulsed — once, twice — before going dark again.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... it’s dying.”

He nodded slowly. “I know.”

The resistance leader stepped forward. “Whatever that thing was... it’s coming back.”

Kayden swallowed hard. “I know.”

Kylee grabbed his hand. “Kayden... what do we do?”

He looked at the token — dark, cracked, fading.

“We fix it,” he said. “Before he finds us again.”

The resistance leader frowned. “Fix what?”

Kayden looked up.

“The key to time.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN - *The Resistance Knows More Than They Should*

The room was still shaking when the lights flickered back on. The flare sputtered out, leaving only the harsh white glow of emergency bulbs overhead. People were sprawled across the floor, dazed, coughing, scrambling to their feet. The air smelled of ozone, fear, and something else — something cold that lingered even after the rider vanished.

Kylee clung to Kayden’s arm, her breath coming in sharp, panicked bursts. “Kayden... he almost killed you.”

Kayden swallowed hard. “I know.”

The resistance leader — the man who had dragged them off the street — stood with his rifle raised, scanning the room as if expecting the rider to reappear at any moment. His face was pale, his jaw clenched.

“What was that thing?” he demanded.

Kayden didn't answer.

Kylee didn't answer.

The token didn't answer.

It lay in Kayden's hand like a dying ember — dark, cracked, barely pulsing.

The leader stepped closer. "Kid. I'm talking to you."

Kayden looked up. "I don't know what he is."

The leader narrowed his eyes. "But he was after you."

Kylee stepped forward. "He's been after us since Concord."

The leader blinked. "Concord? As in... Massachusetts?"

Kayden nodded. "1775."

The leader stared at them for a long moment, then exhaled sharply. "You're not lying."

Kylee frowned. "Why would we lie?"

"Because time travel isn't real," the leader said. "Except apparently it is."

He motioned for them to follow. "Come on. We need to get you somewhere safe."

Kayden hesitated. "Safe from what?"

The leader looked at him with an expression that made Kayden's stomach twist.

"From him. And from the people who want him."

Kylee grabbed Kayden's arm. "People want him?"

The leader didn't answer. He just walked toward a metal door at the back of the room.

Kayden and Kylee followed, the token pulsing faintly in Kayden's hand.

The leader opened the door and stepped into a narrow hallway lined with pipes and flickering lights. “Name’s Rourke,” he said. “Commander Rourke. And you two just became my biggest problem.”

Kylee frowned. “Why?”

Rourke didn’t slow. “Because whatever that thing was... it wasn’t human. And it wasn’t alone.”

Kayden felt a chill run through him. “What do you mean?”

Rourke stopped at another door — this one reinforced with steel and covered in warning signs. He punched a code into the keypad, and the door slid open with a hiss.

Inside was a room unlike anything Kayden had ever seen.

Maps covered the walls — maps of the United States, maps of the world, maps of timelines. Screens displayed data streams, surveillance feeds, and something that looked disturbingly like energy signatures.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... what is this place?”

Rourke stepped inside. “This is where we track anomalies.”

Kayden frowned. “Anomalies?”

Rourke nodded. “Time disturbances. Temporal fractures. Things that shouldn’t exist.”

Kylee blinked. “Like us.”

Rourke pointed to a large screen on the wall. “Like that.”

Kayden and Kylee stepped closer.

The screen displayed a map of the United States — but not the one they knew. Red zones covered most of the country. Blue zones flickered weakly. Yellow zones pulsed like warning lights.

But that wasn't what made Kayden's heart pound.

It was the black zones.

Areas of the map where the screen showed nothing — no data, no readings, no signals. Just void.

Kylee whispered, "Kayden... what are those?"

Rourke's voice was grim. "Dead zones."

Kayden swallowed. "Dead... as in...?"

"Dead as in erased," Rourke said. "Gone. Wiped out. Not destroyed — removed."

Kylee's voice trembled. "Removed from what?"

Rourke looked at her. "From time."

Kayden felt the token pulse weakly in his hand.

Rourke pointed to another screen — this one showing a series of jagged lines, like a heartbeat monitor gone wrong.

"These are temporal signatures," he said. "Every major event in history leaves a trace. A fingerprint."

Kylee frowned. "And those lines... they're broken."

Rourke nodded. "Because something is breaking them."

Kayden felt his stomach twist. "The rider."

Rourke turned to him slowly. "You know him."

Kayden nodded. "He's been following us."

Rourke stepped closer. "Then you need to understand something."

Kylee swallowed. “What?”

Rourke pointed to the screen again. “He’s not following you.”

Kayden frowned. “What do you mean?”

Rourke’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“He’s following the token.”

Kylee grabbed Kayden’s arm. “Kayden...”

Rourke continued. “We’ve been tracking anomalies for years. Small ones at first — glitches, distortions, missing data. But then the big ones started. Entire events disappearing. Entire towns. Entire years.”

Kayden felt cold. “Years?”

Rourke nodded. “Years.”

Kylee whispered, “How is that possible?”

Rourke looked at the token in Kayden’s hand. “Because of that.”

Kayden shook his head. “The token doesn’t erase things.”

Rourke raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure?”

Kayden hesitated.

Rourke stepped closer. “Kid... that thing is older than America. Older than Rome. Older than Egypt. Older than Moses.”

Kylee whispered, “We know.”

Rourke blinked. “You know?”

Kayden nodded. “We met him.”

Rourke stared at them for a long moment, then exhaled. “Okay. Fine. I’ll believe anything at this point.”

He pointed to another screen — this one showing a swirling mass of energy.

“This,” he said, “is the signature of the rider.”

Kylee gasped. “Kayden... it’s huge.”

Rourke nodded. “And it’s getting bigger.”

Kayden felt the token pulse again — weak, fading.

Rourke stepped closer. “Whatever that thing is... it’s not just chasing you.”

Kylee whispered, “Then what is it doing?”

Rourke looked at them with an expression that made Kayden’s blood run cold.

“It’s hunting the Name.”

Kayden felt the token pulse violently.

Kylee grabbed his arm. “Kayden... what does that mean?”

Rourke pointed to the screen. “It means your little trinket isn’t just a key.”

Kayden swallowed. “Then what is it?”

Rourke’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“It’s a map.”

Kylee blinked. “A map to what?”

Rourke looked at the token — dark, cracked, fading.

“A map,” he said, “to the places where the Name was spoken.”

Kayden felt the token pulse again — harder, hotter.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... it’s waking up.”

Rourke stepped back. “Whatever it’s doing... it’s not good.”

The token flared — bright, hot, violent.

Kylee screamed.

Rourke stumbled back.

The screens flickered.

The lights dimmed.

The air shook.

Kayden clutched the token, his hand burning.

The world folded.

And the next door opened.

CHAPTER TWENTY - *The First Temple*

The world didn’t fold this time.

It collapsed.

Kayden felt the air implode around him, pulling him inward like a whirlpool of light and sound. The token burned in his hand — not warm, not gentle, but scorching, as if molten metal were seeping through his fingers. Kylee screamed his name, but her voice was swallowed by the roar of collapsing time.

Then everything went silent.

Not quiet.

Silent.

A silence so deep it felt like the world had stopped breathing.

Kayden hit the ground hard, rolling across smooth stone. The air was warm — not desert-hot, not humid, but warm like sunlight filtered through ancient walls. He gasped, pushing himself upright, blinking through the haze.

Kylee landed beside him, groaning. “Kayden... where are we now?”

He didn’t answer.

Because he couldn’t.

Because the sight before him stole the breath from his lungs.

They were inside a building — but not just any building. The walls were made of massive stone blocks, carved with intricate patterns and Hebrew inscriptions. Golden lampstands lined the hall, their flames flickering gently. The air smelled of incense, cedar, and something else — something ancient, something holy.

Kylee stood slowly, her eyes wide. “Kayden... this looks like...”

He nodded slowly. “The Temple.”

Kylee’s breath caught. “The First Temple?”

Kayden swallowed hard. “I think so.”

The token pulsed in his hand — not weakly, not faintly, but with a deep, resonant thump that echoed through the chamber.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... it’s waking up.”

He nodded. “It brought us here for a reason.”

They stepped forward, their footsteps echoing across the polished stone floor. The hall was massive — towering columns, golden vessels, embroidered curtains, everything shimmering in the warm light. The air hummed with a presence Kayden

couldn't describe — a weight, a holiness, a stillness that made his heart beat differently.

Kylee whispered, "Kayden... this is the House of Yahweh."

He nodded. "The place where the Name dwells."

The token pulsed again — harder, hotter.

Kylee grabbed his arm. "Kayden... it's reacting to the Temple."

He nodded. "Because the Name is here."

They walked deeper into the hall, the air growing warmer, the light brighter. The sound of chanting drifted from somewhere ahead — deep, rhythmic, ancient. Priests in white linen garments moved through the corridors, carrying bowls of incense, their faces solemn and focused.

Kylee whispered, "Kayden... they can't see us."

He nodded. "We're out of phase. Like before."

They reached a massive doorway — carved with cherubim, palm trees, and flowers. Beyond it was a room filled with golden light. The air shimmered with heat and holiness.

Kylee grabbed his sleeve. "Kayden... is that...?"

He nodded slowly. "The Holy Place."

They stepped inside.

Golden lampstands lined the walls, their flames dancing. The table of showbread stood to the left, its loaves arranged neatly. The altar of incense stood before a massive curtain — thick, embroidered, shimmering with gold and blue and scarlet.

Kylee whispered, "Kayden... that's the veil."

He nodded. “The veil that separates the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies.”

The token pulsed violently.

Kylee gasped. “Kayden... it’s burning!”

He clenched his teeth, gripping the token tightly. “It’s reacting to the Ark.”

Kylee’s eyes widened. “The Ark of the Covenant... it’s behind the veil.”

The chanting grew louder. Priests gathered before the altar, their voices rising in a deep, resonant chorus. The air shimmered with incense and light.

Kayden felt the token pulse again — harder, hotter, almost painful.

Kylee grabbed his arm. “Kayden... something’s happening.”

He nodded. “The token wants us to see something.”

The veil rippled — not from wind, not from movement, but from something deeper. The air behind it glowed faintly, a golden light seeping through the fabric.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... the Presence is here.”

He nodded. “The Shekinah.”

The token pulsed again — violently.

Kylee gasped. “Kayden... it’s cracking!”

He looked down.

A thin fracture ran across the surface of the token — glowing, pulsing, spreading.

Kylee’s voice trembled. “Kayden... it’s breaking.”

He shook his head. “No. It’s changing.”

The veil rippled again — and a voice echoed through the chamber.

“Who enters My house?”

Kayden froze.

Kylee grabbed his arm. “Kayden... that wasn’t a priest.”

The voice echoed again — deep, resonant, ancient.

“Who seeks My Name?”

Kayden felt his knees weaken. “Kylee... that’s—”

The veil burst open.

Golden light flooded the room.

Kylee screamed.

Kayden shielded his eyes.

The token flared — brighter than ever before.

And the Presence filled the Temple.

Not a figure.

Not a shape.

Not a form.

A **presence** — overwhelming, holy, alive.

Kylee fell to her knees, trembling. “Kayden... I can’t... I can’t breathe...”

Kayden felt tears streaming down his face. “I know...”

The Presence spoke again.

“You seek the Name.”

Kayden nodded, unable to speak.

“You seek the truth.”

Kylee whispered, “Yes...”

“You seek the purpose of the key.”

Kayden held up the token — cracked, glowing, burning.

The Presence pulsed.

“The key is not broken.”

Kylee gasped. “Then what is it?”

The Presence answered.

“It is awakening.”

The token flared — a burst of golden fire.

The Temple shook.

The priests cried out.

The veil rippled like water.

The air hummed with power.

Kylee screamed, “Kayden... it’s too much!”

Kayden clutched the token, his hand burning. “Hold on!”

The Presence spoke one final time.

“The Name will be restored.”

The world exploded in light.

The Temple vanished.

And the next door opened.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE - *The Hill of Execution*

The world didn't fold this time.

It **collapsed**.

Kayden felt the air implode around him, pulling him inward like a whirlpool of light and sound. The token burned in his hand — not warm, not gentle, but scorching, as if molten metal were seeping through his fingers. Kylee screamed his name, but her voice was swallowed by the roar of collapsing time.

Then everything went silent.

Not quiet.

Silent.

A silence so deep it felt like the world had stopped breathing.

Kayden hit the ground hard, rolling across rough stone. The air was hot — not desert-hot, not humid, but hot like a city pressed under the weight of a thousand bodies. He gasped, pushing himself upright, blinking through the haze.

Kylee landed beside him, coughing. “Kayden... where are we now?”

He didn't answer.

Because he couldn't.

Because the sight before him stole the breath from his lungs.

They were on a hill.

A hill of stone and dust and heat.

A hill surrounded by crowds — hundreds of people, shouting, crying, jeering, praying. Roman soldiers stood in formation, their armor gleaming in the sun. The air smelled of sweat, dust, blood, and something else — something heavy, something sorrowful.

Kylee grabbed his arm. “Kayden... is this...?”

He nodded slowly. “Golgotha.”

Kylee’s breath caught. “The Place of the Skull.”

The token pulsed in his hand — not weakly, not faintly, but with a deep, resonant thump that echoed through the hill.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... it’s reacting.”

He nodded. “It brought us here for a reason.”

They stepped forward, weaving through the crowd. People pushed past them — some weeping, some shouting, some laughing, some praying. The air was thick with emotion — grief, anger, confusion, fear.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... look.”

Three execution stakes stood on the hill.

Three men hung from them.

Two thieves.

And between them...

Kylee covered her mouth. “Kayden... that’s Him.”

Kayden felt his knees weaken. “I know.”

The man on the center stake — Yeshua — hung with His head bowed, His body bruised and bleeding, His hands and feet pierced. The sun beat down on Him, but His face was calm — not peaceful, not serene, but resolute.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... we shouldn’t be here.”

He nodded. “I know.”

But the token pulsed again — harder, hotter.

Kylee grabbed his arm. “Kayden... it’s burning!”

He clenched his teeth, gripping the token tightly. “It’s reacting to Him.”

Kylee’s eyes widened. “Because He is the Name.”

Kayden nodded slowly. “The Name made flesh.”

The crowd roared as a Roman soldier raised a spear, shouting orders. Another soldier dipped a sponge into a jar of sour wine and lifted it toward Yeshua’s lips.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... this is the moment.”

He nodded. “The moment everything changes.”

The token pulsed again — violently.

Kylee gasped. “Kayden... it’s cracking!”

He looked down.

A thin fracture ran across the surface of the token — glowing, pulsing, spreading.

Kylee’s voice trembled. “Kayden... it’s breaking.”

He shook his head. “No. It’s changing.”

The sky darkened.

Not slowly.

Not naturally.

Instantly.

The sun dimmed.

The air grew cold.

The crowd fell silent.

Kylee grabbed Kayden's arm. "Kayden... what's happening?"

He swallowed hard. "This is the darkness."

The darkness that covered the land.

The darkness that marked the moment.

The darkness that signaled the turning of ages.

Yeshua lifted His head.

His eyes — filled with pain, yes, but also with something deeper — met Kayden's for a single, impossible moment.

Kylee gasped. "Kayden... He sees us."

Kayden felt tears streaming down his face. "I know."

Yeshua spoke — His voice weak, but clear.

"Father... forgive them..."

Kylee fell to her knees, sobbing. "Kayden... I can't... I can't watch this..."

Kayden knelt beside her, holding her close. "I know..."

The token pulsed again — violently.

The sky shook.

The earth trembled.

The crowd screamed.

Yeshua cried out — a cry that tore through the darkness, through the hill, through time itself.

“It is finished!”

The earth split.

The rocks cracked.

The Temple veil tore in two.

Kylee screamed.

Kayden clutched the token.

The world shook.

The token flared — a burst of golden fire.

The hill vanished.

And the next door opened.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO - *The Empty Tomb*

The world didn't fold this time.

It **burst**.

Light exploded around Kayden and Kylee — not golden, not ancient, not violent, but pure. White. Radiant. A light that felt alive, warm, gentle, yet powerful enough to shake the bones of the earth. The token burned in Kayden’s hand, the cracks glowing like molten rivers.

Kylee screamed his name, but her voice was swallowed by the brilliance.

Then everything went silent.

Kayden hit the ground hard, rolling across cool stone. The air was damp — not humid, not stale, but fresh, like morning dew settling on untouched earth. He gasped, pushing himself upright, blinking through the fading light.

Kylee landed beside him, coughing softly. “Kayden... where are we now?”

He didn’t answer.

Because he couldn’t.

Because the sight before him stole the breath from his lungs.

They were inside a tomb.

A small, carved stone chamber.

Cool.

Quiet.

Still.

The walls were smooth limestone, the ceiling low. The air smelled of earth and spices. A stone slab stood in the center of the room — empty, the burial cloths folded neatly at one end.

Kylee’s voice trembled. “Kayden... this is...”

He nodded slowly. “The tomb.”

Kylee swallowed hard. “The empty tomb.”

The token pulsed in his hand — not violently, not painfully, but with a deep, steady rhythm that matched the heartbeat of the moment.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... it’s glowing again.”

He nodded. “It brought us here for a reason.”

They stepped closer to the stone slab. The folded cloths lay untouched, undisturbed, as if placed with intention. The air hummed — not with sound, not with movement, but with presence.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... do you feel that?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

It felt like standing in the aftermath of a miracle — the echo of something impossible, something holy, something that changed the world.

Kylee touched the edge of the slab. “He was here.”

Kayden nodded. “And now He’s not.”

The token pulsed again — harder, brighter.

Kylee gasped. “Kayden... it’s reacting to this place.”

He nodded. “Because this is where everything began again.”

A faint sound echoed from outside — footsteps, hurried, breathless. Voices whispered. A woman’s sobs drifted through the entrance.

Kylee grabbed Kayden’s arm. “Kayden... someone’s coming.”

He nodded. “We need to move.”

They slipped into the shadows near the wall just as a woman entered the tomb — her shoulders shaking, her face streaked with tears. She knelt beside the stone slab, touching the folded cloths with trembling hands.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... that’s Mary.”

He nodded. “Mary of Magdala.”

Mary sobbed softly. “Where have they taken Him...?”

Her voice cracked with grief, with confusion, with love.

Kylee’s eyes filled with tears. “Kayden... this is heartbreaking.”

He nodded. “I know.”

Mary stood slowly, wiping her face. She turned toward the entrance — and froze.

A figure stood outside.

Not a soldier.

Not a thief.

Not a priest.

A man.

Mary gasped. “Sir... if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him...”

The man stepped closer.

Kylee grabbed Kayden’s arm. “Kayden... is that...?”

He nodded slowly. “Yes.”

The man spoke one word.

“Mary.”

Her breath caught.

Her knees buckled.

Her grief shattered.

“Rabboni!”

Kylee sobbed. “Kayden... He’s alive.”

Kayden felt tears streaming down his face. “I know.”

The token pulsed — violently.

The cracks glowed.

The chamber shook.

The air hummed with power.

Kylee grabbed his arm. “Kayden... it’s happening again!”

He clutched the token tightly. “Hold on!”

The light flared — brighter than ever before.

Mary and the risen One vanished.

The tomb dissolved.

The world shook.

The token burned in Kayden’s hand — not with pain, but with purpose.

The Presence whispered through the light.

“You have seen the beginning.”

The world folded.

And the next door opened.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE - *The Road That Glowed*

The world didn't fold this time.

It shattered.

Light burst around Kayden and Kylee like a star exploding — white, gold, blue, colors they had no names for. The token burned in Kayden's hand, the cracks glowing like molten rivers. Kylee screamed his name, but her voice was swallowed by the brilliance.

Then everything went silent.

Kayden hit the ground hard, rolling across dirt and gravel. The air was cool — not cold, not warm, but crisp, like early morning in spring. He gasped, pushing himself upright, blinking through the fading light.

Kylee landed beside him, coughing softly. "Kayden... where are we now?"

He didn't answer.

Because he couldn't.

Because the sight before him stole the breath from his lungs.

They were on a road.

A long, dusty road stretching between rolling hills. Olive trees dotted the landscape. Wildflowers swayed in the breeze. The sky was pale blue, the sun just beginning to rise.

Kylee stood slowly, brushing dirt from her clothes. "Kayden... this looks like..."

He nodded slowly. “Judea.”

Kylee’s breath caught. “After the tomb?”

He nodded. “After the tomb.”

The token pulsed in his hand — not violently, not painfully, but with a deep, steady rhythm that matched the heartbeat of the moment.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... it’s glowing again.”

He nodded. “It brought us here for a reason.”

They stepped forward, walking along the road. The air smelled of earth and dew and distant cooking fires. Birds chirped in the trees. The world felt... new.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... this is the morning everything changed.”

He nodded. “The morning hope came back.”

Footsteps echoed ahead.

Two men walked along the road — their heads bowed, their shoulders slumped, their voices low and heavy with grief.

Kylee grabbed Kayden’s arm. “Kayden... is this...?”

He nodded. “The road to Emmaus.”

The men spoke softly, their words drifting on the breeze.

“...we had hoped He was the One...”

“...but they executed Him...”

“...and now the tomb is empty...”

“...and we don’t know what to believe...”

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... they’re heartbroken.”

He nodded. “Everyone was.”

A third figure approached them from behind — a man with a calm stride, a gentle presence, and a face that seemed both familiar and unrecognizable.

Kylee gasped. “Kayden... is that...?”

He nodded slowly. “Yes.”

The risen One.

He joined the two men, walking beside them. They didn’t recognize Him — not yet. But His voice was warm, steady, comforting.

“What are you discussing as you walk?”

The men stopped, their faces filled with sorrow.

“Are you the only visitor in Jerusalem who doesn’t know what happened?”

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... this is incredible.”

He nodded. “We’re watching the moment hope is explained.”

The risen One walked with them, speaking of Moses, the prophets, the promises, the plan. His words flowed like water, like fire, like truth itself. The men listened, their hearts burning within them.

Kylee wiped her eyes. “Kayden... this is beautiful.”

He nodded. “I know.”

The token pulsed again — harder, brighter.

Kylee grabbed his arm. “Kayden... something’s happening.”

He looked down.

The cracks in the token glowed like lightning trapped in stone.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... it’s changing again.”

He nodded. “It’s reacting to Him.”

The risen One walked ahead, His figure glowing faintly in the morning light. The two men followed, their steps lighter, their grief lifting.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... this is the moment they’ll recognize Him.”

He nodded. “At the table.”

The token pulsed again — violently.

Kylee gasped. “Kayden... it’s burning!”

He clenched his teeth, gripping the token tightly. “Hold on!”

The air shifted.

The light dimmed.

The breeze stopped.

Kylee’s voice trembled. “Kayden... something’s wrong.”

He felt it too — a coldness creeping across the road, a shadow stretching across the hills.

A presence.

A familiar presence.

Kayden turned.

A figure stood on the road behind them.

Tall.

Cloaked.

Hooded.

The rider.

Kylee grabbed Kayden's arm. "Kayden... no... not here..."

The rider stepped forward, his cloak rippling like smoke. His eyes glowed faintly beneath the hood.

"You cannot hide in holy places," he said. "Not from me."

Kylee stepped back. "Leave us alone!"

The rider ignored her. "The key is awakening. And when it awakens fully... it will tear the world apart."

Kayden shook his head. "You're lying."

The rider's voice sharpened. "Am I?"

He stepped closer.

The air grew colder.

The sky dimmed.

The birds fell silent.

Kylee whispered, "Kayden... he's stronger here."

The rider raised a hand. "Give me the key."

Kayden held the token tighter. "No."

The rider's voice dropped to a whisper. "Then watch your world burn."

He stepped forward.

The token flared — a burst of golden fire.

The road shook.

The hills trembled.

The air cracked like thunder.

Kylee screamed.

Kayden clutched the token.

The world exploded in light.

The rider vanished.

The road dissolved.

And the next door opened.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR - *The America That Wasn't Theirs*

The world didn't fold this time.

It **lurched**.

Kayden felt the ground slam into him before he even realized the light had vanished. His shoulder hit pavement — real pavement — rough, cracked, sun-baked. The air smelled like asphalt, exhaust, and something else... something metallic.

Kylee landed beside him with a cry, rolling onto her back. “Kayden... please tell me we're home.”

He pushed himself upright, blinking through the haze.

They were in America.

But not their America.

Not even close.

The sky was a strange color — a washed-out gray with streaks of orange, like permanent wildfire smoke. The buildings around them were familiar in shape but wrong in detail — reinforced steel shutters, armored windows, surveillance towers on every corner.

Kylee sat up slowly. “Kayden... where are we?”

He scanned the street.

Cars — or what used to be cars — crawled along the road, each one identical, each one marked with government insignias. Drones buzzed overhead, their red sensors sweeping the sidewalks. Digital billboards flickered with warnings:

CITIZEN COMPLIANCE CHECKPOINT AHEAD

REPORT UNREGISTERED MOVEMENT

CURFEW BEGINS AT 1600 HOURS

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... this is worse than 2049.”

He nodded slowly. “This is way past 2049.”

The token pulsed weakly in his hand — not bright, not strong, but alive.

Kylee grabbed his arm. “Kayden... look.”

A massive tower rose in the distance — black, angular, humming with energy. It wasn't a skyscraper. It wasn't an office building. It was something else.

Something ominous.

Something central.

Kylee whispered, “What is that?”

Kayden swallowed hard. “I don't know.”

A voice echoed from behind them.

“You shouldn’t be out here.”

Kayden spun around.

A woman stood in the alleyway — tall, wearing a dark coat, her hair tied back, her eyes sharp and alert. She held a device in her hand that scanned the air around them.

Kylee stepped back. “Kayden... she looks like a soldier.”

The woman stepped closer. “You two... you’re not tagged.”

Kayden frowned. “Tagged?”

The woman’s eyes widened. “You’re unregistered.”

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... that sounds bad.”

The woman grabbed their arms. “Come with me. Now.”

Kayden hesitated. “Why?”

She looked at him with an expression that made his stomach twist. “Because if the scanners pick you up, you’ll be taken to a Re-Alignment Center.”

Kylee’s voice trembled. “What’s that?”

The woman didn’t answer.

She just pulled them into the alley.

They ran — past dumpsters, past broken fences, past walls covered in propaganda posters. The woman moved fast, checking corners, scanning rooftops, avoiding cameras with practiced precision.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... who is she?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

They reached a metal door hidden behind a stack of crates. The woman tapped a code into a keypad, and the door slid open with a hiss.

“Inside,” she said.

Kayden and Kylee stepped into a dimly lit room filled with maps, screens, and equipment. People moved around quickly, speaking in hushed tones. The air smelled of metal and ozone.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... this looks like the resistance base.”

The woman closed the door behind them. “It is.”

Kayden blinked. “But... we were just in the resistance base.”

The woman turned to him slowly. “That was the old one.”

Kylee frowned. “Old one?”

The woman nodded. “That was before the Collapse.”

Kayden felt his stomach drop. “Collapse?”

The woman pointed to a massive digital map on the wall.

The United States was unrecognizable.

The borders were redrawn.

The states were gone.

The regions were renamed.

The government was centralized under a single symbol — the same symbol on the tower outside.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... what happened?”

The woman exhaled slowly. “Everything.”

She pointed to the tower on the map. "That's the Core."

Kayden frowned. "What does it do?"

The woman looked at him with an expression of fear and awe.

"It controls time."

Kylee gasped. "Time?"

The woman nodded. "The government discovered temporal energy signatures decades ago. They built the Core to harness them."

Kayden felt the token pulse weakly in his hand.

The woman noticed. "What's that?"

Kayden closed his fist around it. "Nothing."

The woman stepped closer. "Kid... nothing glows like that."

Kylee stepped between them. "We can't explain it."

The woman studied them for a long moment. "You two... you're not from here."

Kayden nodded slowly. "No."

The woman exhaled. "Then you need to understand something."

Kylee swallowed. "What?"

The woman pointed to the tower again.

"The Core didn't just control time."

Kayden felt a chill run through him. "What did it do?"

The woman's voice dropped to a whisper.

"It broke it."

Kylee grabbed Kayden's arm. "Kayden..."

The woman continued. "The Core fractured the timeline. Split it. Twisted it. Created echoes. Shadows. Things that shouldn't exist."

Kayden felt the token pulse again — harder, hotter.

The woman stepped back. "Whatever you're holding... it's reacting to the Core."

Kylee whispered, "Kayden... the rider..."

The woman froze. "The what?"

Kayden swallowed. "A man. Or something like a man. Cloaked. Hooded. He's been following us."

The woman's face went pale. "You've seen him?"

Kylee nodded. "Yes."

The woman whispered, "Then you're in more danger than you know."

Kayden stepped forward. "Who is he?"

The woman looked at the tower.

"He's what the Core created."

Kylee's breath caught. "Created?"

The woman nodded. "A temporal enforcer. A hunter. A guardian of the fractures."

Kayden felt the token pulse violently.

The woman stepped back. "And if he's following you... then you're carrying something he wants."

Kylee whispered, "The token."

The woman nodded. “Whatever that thing is... it’s tied to the Core.”

Kayden swallowed hard. “What does that mean?”

The woman looked at him with an expression that made his blood run cold.

“It means the Core didn’t just break time.”

She pointed to the token.

“It broke that.”

The token flared — a burst of golden fire.

The room shook.

The lights flickered.

The screens glitched.

The air cracked like thunder.

Kylee screamed.

Kayden clutched the token.

The world exploded in light.

The woman shouted something — but her voice was swallowed by the collapse.

The resistance base vanished.

And the next door opened.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE - *The Core*

The world didn’t fold this time.

It screamed.

Kayden felt the air tear open around him like a living thing, shrieking as it ripped itself apart. The token burned in his hand — not warm, not glowing, but blazing like a star collapsing. Kylee screamed his name, but her voice was swallowed by the roar of unraveling time.

Then everything went silent.

Kayden hit the ground hard, rolling across metal — cold, smooth, humming with energy. He gasped, pushing himself upright, blinking through the haze.

Kylee landed beside him, groaning. “Kayden... where are we now?”

He didn’t answer.

Because he couldn’t.

Because the sight before him stole the breath from his lungs.

They were inside the Core.

A massive chamber — circular, towering, alive with pulsing light. The walls were made of black metal, etched with glowing lines that shifted like veins. The air hummed with power — deep, resonant, almost musical. In the center of the room stood a colossal machine — a pillar of swirling energy, twisting like a tornado of light and shadow.

Kylee grabbed his arm. “Kayden... this is it.”

He nodded slowly. “The Core.”

The token pulsed in his hand — not weakly, not faintly, but with a deep, resonant thump that matched the heartbeat of the machine.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... it’s reacting.”

He nodded. “Because the Core is connected to it.”

They stepped forward, the metal floor vibrating beneath their feet. The air grew warmer, the light brighter. The machine pulsed — once, twice — sending ripples of energy through the chamber.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... this thing is alive.”

He nodded. “Or something inside it is.”

A voice echoed through the chamber.

“You should not be here.”

Kayden froze.

Kylee grabbed his arm. “Kayden... no...”

The rider stepped out of the shadows — tall, cloaked, hooded, his eyes glowing faintly beneath the hood. His cloak rippled like smoke, his presence cold and heavy.

“You cannot outrun me,” he said. “Not here.”

Kylee stepped back. “Leave us alone!”

The rider ignored her. “The Core is awakening. And when it awakens fully... your world will end.”

Kayden shook his head. “You’re lying.”

The rider stepped closer. “Am I?”

He raised a hand.

The Core pulsed — violently.

The chamber shook.

The lights flickered.

The air cracked like thunder.

Kylee screamed. “Kayden... what’s happening?”

The rider’s voice echoed through the chamber. “The Core is unstable. It was never meant to be opened.”

Kayden clenched the token. “What does that mean?”

The rider pointed to the swirling energy. “It means your world is collapsing.”

Kylee grabbed Kayden’s arm. “Kayden... we have to stop it!”

The rider laughed — a cold, hollow sound. “You cannot stop it. You cannot fix what has been broken.”

Kayden stepped forward. “Then why are you here?”

The rider’s voice dropped to a whisper. “To take what belongs to me.”

He reached for the token.

Kayden stepped back. “No.”

The rider’s eyes glowed brighter. “Give it to me.”

Kylee stepped in front of Kayden. “You can’t have it!”

The rider raised his hand.

The air around Kylee froze — cold, sharp, suffocating.

She gasped, clutching her throat. “Kayden... I can’t... breathe...”

Kayden lunged forward. “Stop!”

The rider ignored him. “Give me the key.”

Kayden held the token tighter. “No!”

The rider tightened his grip on the air around Kylee. She collapsed to her knees, gasping, her face pale.

Kayden screamed. “STOP!”

The token flared — a burst of golden fire.

The cold shattered.

The rider stumbled back.

Kylee collapsed into Kayden’s arms, coughing.

The rider hissed. “You cannot control it.”

Kayden stood, holding the token like a weapon. “Maybe not. But it can control you.”

The rider stepped back. “You do not understand what you carry.”

Kylee stood shakily. “Then tell us.”

The rider’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“The key is not a key.”

Kayden frowned. “Then what is it?”

The rider pointed to the Core.

“It is a piece of this.”

Kylee’s breath caught. “A piece of the Core?”

The rider nodded. “The original Core. The ancient Core. The Core that existed long before your world.”

Kayden felt the token pulse violently.

The rider continued. “Your ancestors found it. They hid it. They protected it. They passed it down.”

Kylee whispered, “Poppa...”

The rider nodded. “He knew what it was. He knew what it could do.”

Kayden swallowed hard. “What can it do?”

The rider stepped closer.

“It can restore time.”

Kylee gasped. “Restore...?”

The rider nodded. “Or destroy it.”

Kayden felt the token burn in his hand.

The rider reached out. “Give it to me.”

Kayden stepped back. “No.”

The rider’s voice sharpened. “If you do not give it to me... your world will collapse.”

Kylee grabbed Kayden’s arm. “Kayden... what do we do?”

He looked at the token — cracked, glowing, burning.

He looked at the Core — swirling, pulsing, unstable.

He looked at the rider — cold, relentless, unstoppable.

And he made a choice.

“We fix it.”

The rider hissed. “You cannot.”

Kayden stepped toward the Core. “Watch me.”

The token flared — a burst of golden fire.

The Core screamed.

The chamber shook.

The world exploded in light.

Kylee screamed.

The rider lunged.

Kayden held the token high.

And the next door opened.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX - *The Fracture*

The world didn't fold this time.

It **broke**.

Kayden felt the air tear apart around him, ripping like fabric under too much strain. The token burned in his hand — not glowing, not pulsing, but blazing like a star in collapse. Kylee screamed his name, but her voice was swallowed by the roar of unraveling time.

Then everything went silent.

Kayden hit the ground hard, rolling across dirt — real dirt — dry, cracked, sun-baked. The air was hot, heavy, still. He gasped, pushing himself upright, blinking through the haze.

Kylee landed beside him, coughing. “Kayden... where are we now?”

He didn't answer.

Because he couldn't.

Because the sight before him stole the breath from his lungs.

They were in America.

But not the America they knew.

Not the America they left.

Not even the America they saw in 2049.

This was worse.

The sky was a bruised purple, streaked with black clouds that pulsed like veins. The air smelled of smoke and metal and something else — something wrong. Buildings lay in ruins. Streets were cracked and overgrown. Drones lay scattered like dead insects. The Core tower in the distance flickered violently, its lights stuttering like a dying heartbeat.

Kylee whispered, "Kayden... this is the end."

He nodded slowly. "This is the collapse."

The token pulsed weakly in his hand — not bright, not strong, but alive.

Kylee grabbed his arm. "Kayden... look."

A massive crack split the sky — a jagged tear of light stretching from horizon to horizon. It pulsed like lightning trapped in slow motion.

Kayden swallowed hard. "A temporal fracture."

Kylee's voice trembled. "Kayden... it's tearing the world apart."

He nodded. "The Core did this."

A voice echoed behind them.

“No.”

Kayden froze.

Kylee grabbed his arm. “Kayden... no...”

The rider stepped out of the shadows — tall, cloaked, hooded, his eyes glowing faintly beneath the hood. His cloak rippled like smoke, his presence cold and heavy.

“The Core did not do this,” he said. “You did.”

Kayden shook his head. “No.”

The rider stepped closer. “When you touched the Core with the key... you accelerated the collapse.”

Kylee stepped back. “We didn’t know!”

The rider ignored her. “The key was never meant to be used. It was meant to be hidden.”

Kayden clenched the token. “Then why did it bring us here? Why did it show us all those moments?”

The rider’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“Because it is dying.”

Kylee gasped. “Dying?”

The rider nodded. “The key is a fragment of the ancient Core. And when the modern Core fractured time... it fractured the key.”

Kayden felt the token pulse violently.

The rider continued. “You cannot fix it. You cannot restore time. You cannot save this world.”

Kylee shook her head. “There has to be a way.”

The rider stepped closer. “There is.”

Kayden swallowed. “What is it?”

The rider raised a hand.

“You must find the original Core.”

Kylee blinked. “The original...?”

The rider nodded. “The first one. The true one. The one that existed before your world. Before your history. Before your time.”

Kayden felt the token pulse again — harder, hotter.

Kylee whispered, “Kayden... it’s reacting.”

The rider pointed to the crack in the sky.

“The fracture is a doorway. A path. A warning.”

Kayden stepped forward. “Where does it lead?”

The rider’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“To the beginning.”

Kylee grabbed Kayden’s arm. “Kayden... what does that mean?”

The rider stepped back into the shadows.

“You will find out.”

The ground shook.

The sky cracked.

The fracture pulsed violently.

Kylee screamed. “Kayden... it’s pulling us in!”

Kayden clutched the token. “Hold on!”

The fracture widened — a blinding tear of light.

The world shook.

The air screamed.

The ground split open.

Kylee grabbed Kayden’s hand. “Kayden... don’t let go!”

He held her tight. “I won’t!”

The fracture exploded — a burst of white fire.

The rider vanished.

The Core tower collapsed.

The world dissolved.

Kayden and Kylee were pulled into the light — spinning, falling, tumbling through time itself.

The token burned in Kayden’s hand — not dying, not breaking, but awakening.

A voice whispered through the light.

“This is not the end.”

The fracture swallowed them...

Don...

This is where a **great novel ends** — not with closure, but with **momentum**.

Not with answers, but with **questions that demand a sequel**.

Not with safety, but with **a horizon that pulls the reader forward.**

You're about to get a **full epilogue** that ties the emotional threads together...

and then a **teaser** that slams open the door to Book Two.

Settle in.

This is the final breath of Book One.

EPILOGUE - *The Place Between Moments*

There was no ground.

No sky.

No air.

Kayden floated in a space that wasn't space — a swirling expanse of light and shadow, like the inside of a storm made of time itself. Colors he couldn't name rippled around him. Voices whispered in languages he didn't understand. Moments flickered like fireflies — battles, births, kingdoms rising, kingdoms falling, stars exploding, oceans forming.

Kylee drifted beside him, her hand locked in his. Her eyes were wide, reflecting the impossible landscape around them.

“Kayden... where are we?”

He swallowed hard. “I don't know.”

The token hovered between them — no longer cracked, no longer dim, but glowing with a soft, steady light. It pulsed like a heartbeat. Like it was alive.

Kylee whispered, “It's... healing.”

Kayden nodded. “Or changing.”

A ripple passed through the void — a wave of energy that made the entire place tremble. The light around them dimmed. The whispers grew louder. The air — if it was air — grew colder.

Kylee clutched his arm. “Kayden... something’s coming.”

He felt it too.

A presence.

A shadow.

A familiar coldness.

The rider.

But not as a figure.

Not as a man.

Not as a hunter.

As a **voice**.

“You cannot escape the beginning.”

Kylee’s breath caught. “Kayden... he’s here.”

The void twisted.

The light bent.

The shadows deepened.

The rider’s voice echoed again — everywhere and nowhere.

“You have stepped into the fracture. You have entered the place where time is born.
And you are not ready.”

Kayden held the token tighter. “We’re not afraid of you.”

The void shook with a low, rumbling laugh.

“You should be.”

Kylee stepped forward, her voice trembling but strong. “Why? What do you want from us?”

The rider’s voice softened — almost gentle.

“I want what you carry.”

Kayden lifted the token. “This?”

“Yes.”

Kylee shook her head. “You can’t have it.”

The void pulsed — a shockwave of cold.

“You misunderstand. I do not want to take it.”

Kayden frowned. “Then what do you want?”

The rider’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“I want you to use it.”

Kylee blinked. “Use it... for what?”

The void twisted again — and a shape formed in the distance.

A doorway.

A glowing arch of light and shadow.

A portal to somewhere ancient, vast, and terrifying.

The rider spoke one final time.

“Find the original Core.”

The doorway pulsed.

“Or your world will die.”

The light swallowed them.

And the book ends.