

Prologue: The Fate We Cannot Foresee

The biometric safe was already open.

Elisa Navarro froze in the doorway. Her keycard was still warm in her hand. The lab's emergency lighting cast everything in amber, but she could see the figure crouched at her workstation. Shoulders curved in concentration. Fingers moving through her research files.

She knew those shoulders.

The intruder's breathing matched a rhythm she'd heard a thousand times. Coffee breaks. Late nights. Conference presentations where he'd stand just behind her, close enough that she could smell his cologne.

"Santiago?"

He didn't turn. Didn't stop. His hands moved through the papers faster now, photographing each page with mechanical precision. The phone's flash fired again. Again. Again.

She stepped forward. The Oculus flared.

Light erupted from the crystalline core. Not the controlled pulse of activation. This was raw. Hungry. The air tasted of copper and ozone. Her vision split.

She was here. She was elsewhere. She was when.

The lab stretched and contracted. Time folded. She saw herself stepping forward, saw Santiago turning, saw his face that wasn't quite his face anymore. His hand moved to his jacket. Metal gleamed.

Then she was on the floor. Her throat opened. Blood spreading in patterns that matched the Oculus's light. Santiago stood over her, head tilted wrong, studying her as she died, like an equation to solve.

"You should have stayed away tonight," he says.

But his lips moved wrong. The words came from somewhere deeper. Someone else wore his body like an expensive suit that didn't quite fit.

Her vision pulled back. She saw herself from above. From outside. From tomorrow's forensic photos. Another dead woman in a lab. Another tragedy without explanation.

The Oculus pulsed. Reality snapped.

She gasped. Still standing in the doorway. Still holding her keycard. The taste of her own blood was a phantom in her mouth.

The lab was empty.

No Santiago. No open safe. The Oculus sat dormant on its platform, dark as spent coal. But the air was wrong. Too thick. Too charged. Like the moment between lightning and thunder.

Her phone buzzed. Text from Santiago: “How did the test go? Cameras showed interference at 11:47.”

She checked her watch. 11:46.

The room held its breath; a frequency pressed behind her teeth.. The sound felt like recognition. Like something ancient had noticed her. Had always been watching. Was watching still.

She backed toward the door. The humming followed. Not from the machine. From inside her skull. From inside her bones.

Her fingers found the small device hidden beneath her father’s old workbench. Unmarked metal, cold against her palm. His last gift before the cancer took him. “If the day comes when you doubt what you see,” he’d said. Three pulses, pause. Two, pause. Four.

She keyed in the sequence. A green light blinked once. Transmission sent.

The Oculus flared again. Darkness returned.

But in that flash, she saw Santiago standing where she stood now.

Checking his watch.

Waiting.

One minute remaining.

Chapter 1: Eye of Eternity

Day 1

Elisa’s finger hovered over the activation switch. Eight years. Everything.

The Oculus Temporis hummed beneath her touch, electromagnetic field generators spinning toward frequencies that shouldn’t exist. The lab temperature dropped. Three degrees in three seconds. Her breath misted in the sudden cold.

Her phone buzzed. Santiago.

Whatever you're about to do, be careful. Some doors shouldn't be opened alone.

She checked the timestamp. Sent three minutes ago. Before she'd activated it.

Before she'd entered the lab.

The team had left an hour ago. Ana's coffee cup had gone cold on the workbench. Santiago's calibration notes lay scattered across his station.

Each letter too perfect, like a forgery.

The handwriting was his, but it wasn't. Same slant. Same pressure. Wrong rhythm.

No time to think. Solar interference would peak in ninety seconds. Her window.

She pressed the switch.

Sound became bone. The Oculus resonated through her skeleton, synchronizing with her heartbeat until machine and body merged. The neural interface mapped her retinal emissions. Each photon a memory. Each memory is a frequency.

Reality folded.

She was ten. Her father's study. Rain against windows.

"The Oculus Temporis." He showed her the equations, coffee-stained pages trembling in his dying hands. "Not theory, mija. I've solved it. Consciousness resonates at 7.83 hertz. Same as Earth. Same as the space between stars."

"You're scaring me, Papa."

"Good." His eyes burned with fever and certainty. "Fear keeps you careful. When you build it, and you will build it, remember it doesn't just read the past."

"What else does it do?"

"It recognizes what's coming."

The memory shattered.

She gasped. The lab reassembled. Harsh fluorescents after candlelight. The Oculus powered down, but the quantum field readings showed impossible patterns. Configurations cycled through states she hadn't programmed.

Learning.

Her phone buzzed. Santiago again.

Excellent. I knew you'd succeed. I can't wait to review the data.

She hadn't told him that the test was complete.

She pulled up the security footage. Override codes. The feeds loaded.

22:47 — Main entrance. Santiago's badge logged out. He left, favoring his left knee from that old injury, shoulders slumped with exhaustion.

She scrolled back. Checked the loading-dock camera.

22:43 — Loading dock. Santiago entering. No limp. Posture different—shoulders back, head high. Confident. Almost predatory.

She froze the frame. Same face. Same clothes.

But the body language was wrong.

She rewound the main-entrance feed. Watched him leave again. He paused at the door, hand on the frame, looked back at the lab. His expression—worried? Guilty? She couldn't tell.

Forward to the loading dock. That Santiago moved with purpose. No hesitation. He acknowledged the lens with a smile meant for her.

Santiago never acknowledged cameras.

Her pulse quickened. She checked the timestamps again. He couldn't have reached the loading dock in four minutes. Not with that knee. Not without running.

But there he was.

She pulled up earlier footage. **18:30** — Santiago entering the building. Normal gait, slight limp. **19:15** — Santiago in the break room, making coffee. He stood for three minutes, staring at the wall. Just staring.

20:03 — Santiago in the corridor. She watched him stop mid-stride, press his palm against the wall, close his eyes. His lips moved. Counting? Praying? When he opened his eyes, something on his face had shifted. Subtle. But there.

She felt cold.

The Oculus pulsed softly behind her. She'd sealed it in its case, but the quantum readings still cycled, still learning patterns she didn't understand.

Movement in her peripheral vision. She spun.

Empty lab.

But in the window's reflection, a shadow at the doorway. She turned back. No one was there.

Her father's voice echoed in memory: "The device doesn't just show you the future, *mija*. It shows you what people hide. Even from themselves."

She looked back at the monitors. Scrubbed through more footage.

Santiago left his station. Santiago returning. The gait was different each time. The way he held his shoulders. The way he moved his hands.

One Santiago checked his watch constantly. Another never looked at it once.

One Santiago's handwriting in the lab notes—neat, precise. Another, the same equations, but pressed harder, letters slanted differently.

She'd seen these inconsistencies for weeks. Dismissed them as stress. Fatigue.

Now they assembled into a pattern that made her skin crawl.

Her phone buzzed.

Unknown number: Are you still at the lab?

She stared at the message. Didn't recognize the number.

Another buzz: leave. **It's not safe tonight.**

Her fingers shook as she typed: **Who is this?**

Three dots. Typing. Then they stopped.

No response.

She checked the security feed again. Live view. All cameras showed empty corridors, empty labs.

Except—

Loading dock. A figure stood in shadow, just beyond the camera's range. Tall. Male. She couldn't see the face.

The figure stepped forward into the light.

Santiago.

But which one?

He looked directly at the camera. Mouthed something.

She couldn't make out the words, but his expression—cold, flat, empty, made her grab the Oculus case.

Her phone buzzed again.

Unknown number: We need to talk. Tomorrow. Not here. Somewhere public. Please.

The timestamp on the loading-dock feed: **23:51**.

She checked her watch: **23:50**.

Impossible. The building's system synced automatically.

Unless someone had tampered with it.

Unless—

The lab lights flickered once. Twice.

She ran.

Behind her, the security monitor showed the loading dock. Empty now. But on the playback timeline, there was a gap, seventeen seconds missing from **23:51** to **23:51**.

The same seventeen seconds recorded twice.

Or not recorded at all.

In the hallway, footsteps echoed from the stairwell. Coming up. Coming fast.

She took the elevator, punched **Basement**. Where her father's archives were kept. Where his original notebooks held warnings, she'd been too afraid to read.

The elevator descended. Her phone buzzed continuously now.

Unknown number: I'm sorry

Unknown number: I didn't want this

Unknown number: He makes me

Unknown number: Please understand.

The messages came too fast. One after another. No time for human typing.

The doors opened.

The basement corridor stretched dark and cold. Emergency lights cast everything red.

At the far end, a figure stood silhouetted against the archive-room door.

Waiting.

She couldn't see his face. But she knew.

“Santiago?” Her voice cracked.

The figure tilted his head. Considering. Then spoke two voices overlapping, not quite in sync:

“Which one?”

Chapter 2: The Awakening

Nine Months Before It All Began

The lab door stood open. The Oculus was humming.

Elisa Navarro moved fast through the threshold. Cold air. Ozone. Coffee gone bitter. The hum pressed against her ribs, steady, precise, deliberate.

Ana del Rosario Moreno glanced up from the console, eyes wide. “It turned itself on. 03:11.”

Elisa reached the casing with two fingers. Condensation beaded the metal. Static skittered over her skin. “Who touched the power?”

“No one,” Ana said. “It just... woke. Held at baseline. Then drifted.”

“Drifted where?”

“Nine-six-three.” Ana didn’t smile. “Solfeggio.”

Elisa’s breath shortened. “Safeties?”

“Green. But Elisa—” Ana tapped the side monitor. “It started writing. Glyphs. Only...not to the primary display. Inside the HUD.”

Elisa’s gaze slid to the headset hanging from its hook. Matte black. Cold rubber. Glass so clean it swallowed the room.

“The Oculus doesn’t project,” she says. “It reads.” Her voice steadied. “It needs eyes.”

Ana nodded. “I waited for yours.”

The hum tightened a notch higher. Build. Build. Still.

Elisa slipped the goggles on. Cold seal. The smell of metal and lemon cleanser. Darkness, then a sheet of pale light, then a lattice of symbols crawling like frost across glass.

Slow: a single detail, iron on her tongue.

She centered her breath. “Initializing ocular capture.”

“Copy,” Ana said. “Spooling.”

The glyphs spiraled, stalled, and re-formed into clean alphanumerics: 41.9029° N, 12.4534° E, 19:04.

Her pulse matched the hum. Humming. Humming. Humming.

“Coordinates,” Elisa said. “Time.”

“Rome,” Ana whispered. “Vatican City. Seven-oh-four p.m.”

The HUD fluttered. For a heartbeat, nothing more, an image cut through: a wet stone plaza; a white collar; the curve of a blade flashing at throat height; a bead of red not yet fallen.

Impact. Black.

Elisa tore the goggles up to her forehead. Air burned cold in her lungs. “That was not memory.”

Ana swallowed. “Then it’s...a probability?”

“An intention,” Elisa said too quickly. She lowered the goggles again.

The HUD didn’t show the plaza this time. It showed a circle expanding, contracting, syncing to the hum. Text threaded through the edge of her vision, Latin, precise, unblinking:

VERITAS NON TOLERABIT SILENTIUM.

Truth will not tolerate silence.

The hum deepened as if satisfied.

“Enough,” Elisa said. She lifted the goggles with one hand and reached for the hard kill with the other.

A hand closed gently around her wrist.

Santiago del Toro stood beside her. She hadn’t heard him enter. Too still. Too calm.

“Don’t,” he says. No heat. No ask. Command.

Elisa met his eyes. Brown. Flat. Unblinking. “Let go.”

“If you cut mid-lock,” he said, “you lose everything it’s showing you.”

“It’s showing me a knife,” she says.

“Which you may need to know.”

Three exchanges. Action.

She twisted free and hit the software stop. The Oculus ignored it, humming through her command as if her key didn’t exist.

Ana’s voice was tight. “It won’t accept input.”

“Manual, then,” Elisa said, stepping toward the wall lever.

Santiago moved with her. Not violent. Not large. Just faster. His palm settled over the lever. That was all.

“Not yet.”

The words were level. His breath didn’t change. Trust became impossible.

The hum altered again. Lights dimmed. A thin tremor ran through the floor. Instruments ticked in their steel housings. The Oculus pulsed brighter, its core flaring with an intensity that made them shield their eyes.

“It’s drawing power from somewhere else,” Ana said, checking readings. “The building grid. Maybe beyond.”

Santiago watched the displays with an expression Elisa couldn’t read. “Good,” he says.

Then immediately: “This is dangerous. We should leave.” Ana and Elisa exchanged glances.

“Which is it?” Elisa asked. “Good or dangerous?”

He blinked, confused. “I said dangerous.”

“You said good first,” Ana insisted.

Santiago’s face shifted, subtly but visible. Like someone else had borrowed his features for a moment. “We’ve been here too long already.”

“You just arrived,” Elisa said slowly.

“No, I’ve been here since—” He stopped mid-sentence. His hand went to his temple. When he looked up again, his expression had changed completely. Colder. More precise. “The coordinates are perfect. Rome needs to see this.”

“Rome?” Ana stepped back. “What does Rome have to do with anything?”

Santiago turned to her, and for a moment his face held two expressions at once, confusion and certainty fighting for the same features. “I don’t... Why did I say Rome?”

The Oculus pulsed. Santiago’s eyes tracked it, then snapped away as if burned.

“We should document everything,” he said, voice professional again. Normal. “Follow protocol.”

“You just tried to prevent me from shutting it down,” Elisa reminded him.

“To preserve the data stream.” But even as he said it, his head tilted wrong, like he was listening to something they couldn’t hear. “Tell them we’re not ready.”

“Tell who?” Ana asked, notebook clutched tight.

Santiago looked at her blankly. “I said nothing.”

“You just said—”

“I said we should document everything.” His tone was patient, like explaining to a child. But sweat beaded his forehead. “The readings are unprecedented.”

Elisa moved toward the console, keeping a distance between it and her. “Santiago, are you feeling all right?”

“Perfect,” he said. Then softer, almost to himself: “No. Something’s wrong. We shouldn’t have come tonight.”

“We?” Elisa’s voice sharpened. “Ana and I were here. You came alone.”

He stared at his hands. Turned them over. Studied them like they were foreign objects. “These aren’t my hands,” he whispered.

Ana grabbed Elisa’s arm. Her grip was tight with fear.

Santiago’s head snapped up. The confusion was gone. Only cold precision remained. “I apologize. Lack of sleep. The electromagnetic fields might be affecting me.” He straightened his jacket with mechanical precision. “We should all leave. Now.”

He walked toward the door. Stopped. Without turning, he said clearly: “Forty-eight hours. It begins in forty-eight hours.”

“What begins?” Elisa demands.

Santiago turned, his face genuinely puzzled. “What?”

“You said forty-eight hours.”

“I said we should leave.” He opened the door. “Lock everything down, Elisa. And don’t run the Oculus again until...” He paused, searching for words that wouldn’t come. “Until it’s safe.”

“How will we know when it’s safe?”

He smiles, but it was wrong. The muscles moved incorrectly. Like someone who had studied smiling but never felt joy. “We’ll know,” he said. “They’ll tell us.” The door closed behind him.

Ana’s voice was barely a whisper. “What just happened?”

Elisa stared at the door, then back at the Oculus. It had powered down on its own, returning to a dormant state as if satisfied with what it had accomplished.

“I don’t know,” Elisa said. “But Santiago was right about one thing. We’re leaving. Now.”

As they gathered their things, Ana asked quietly, “Did you notice his shadow?”

“What about it?”

“When he stood by the lever. The light was behind him, but his shadow fell the wrong way. Like there were two of him, and we could only see one.”

Elisa had noticed. She’d noticed everything. The way his breathing had stopped for thirteen seconds. The way his reflection in the glass had smiled while his face remained neutral. The way he’d known about Rome before the coordinates had fully resolved.

The Oculus sat quiet now. Patient. Like it had planted something in Santiago and was waiting to see what would grow.

They locked the lab and left, but Elisa knew with cold certainty that when they returned, nothing would be the same.

Santiago was already changing.

And somehow, the machine had known he would.