



Story Relay

Pass the Baton



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SRIY NATAR SCHOOL

A Preface

Stories are the heartbeats of imagination. They carry us to new worlds, teach us empathy, and give voice to the thoughts we sometimes struggle to express. This book is a celebration of that creative spirit.

Each chapter is the result of shared ideas, thoughtful visions, and the courage to write from the heart. Whether the tales transport you to fantasy realms, introduce you to unforgettable characters, or explore the wonders of everyday life, they reflect the unique voices and imaginations of young storytellers working as a team.

The maiden venture supported the students of 11 schools, including one from Nigeria, to imagine, collaborate, and create an amazing storybook. The second edition saw participation from 18 schools across six countries in this wonderful collaboration. It gives me immense pleasure to share that this year, 20 schools from five different countries have come together in this creative journey. This growing participation reflects the popularity and educational value of this collaborative storytelling initiative.

The learning objectives were brilliantly achieved, as students collaborated across borders—each contributing a chapter that preserved the theme's essence and maintained seamless continuity with the previous one, a truly commendable feat. Throughout the process, essential 21st-century skills flourished. Students engaged in critical thinking, honed their communication, fostered creativity, and built interpersonal skills such as listening, appreciating others' ideas, and transforming individual contributions into a meaningful collective work.

What impresses me deeply is the writing expertise these young minds (just 11 to 13 years old) have demonstrated with such depth of thought and vivid imagination. I am equally thrilled that this year, our students are giving voice to their words by creating an audiobook, adding yet another dimension to this remarkable initiative.

This project beautifully aligns with SAI International's core philosophy and vision, to nurture creativity, collaboration, and global citizenship among children. We believe in empowering students to think beyond boundaries, express themselves fearlessly, and become articulate storytellers and empathetic individuals who can influence the world with their ideas.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all the Round Square schools that participated so enthusiastically, making this project a resounding success and the entire process a smooth and joyous experience. We look forward to continuing this initiative year after year, with the unwavering support of our fellow Round Square school members, as we empower the next generation of storytellers to dream, write, and inspire.

Thanks

Nilakantha Panigrahi

Director Academics & Senior Principal
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Participating Schools

SAI International School, Bhubaneswar, India | Vivek High School, India | First Steps School of Arts & Sciences Senior Campus, Pakistan
Mody School, India | Bangalore International School, India | Rajmata Krishna Kumari Girls' Public School, India
Royal Global School, Guwahati, India | K C Public School, India | Maria's Public School, India | Sunbeam School, Lahartara, India
Miles Bronson Residential School, India | The Millennium School, Dubai, UAE | GEMS Modern Academy, Dubai, UAE
Gems Millennium School, UAE | Felsted Prep School, England | Daly College, India | SAI International Residential School, Cuttack, India
The Cathedral and John Connon School, India | Podar Pearl School, Doha, Qatar | Shiv Nadar School, India



Chapter - 1

Echoes Beyond the Horizon

SAI International School, Bhubaneswar, India

They always said, "The sky is the limit." But no one expected someone to actually reach it—and go beyond.

Everything changed the day when the Aether Gate opened high above Earth's skies. At first, scientists cheered at the glowing hues dancing in the sky. Poets called it the golden orb, and dreamers thought it was a sign of something mystical.

But a few of us knew, it was far greater than that. It was a message. A call from something beyond our world. That's when the Aether Mission was launched. Not to explore space— but to answer that mysterious call. What we found changed everything we believed.

My name is Smith Johnson, and I saw it all. I joined the Aether Mission as an intern, guided by my mentor, Engineer Nancy Juno. But this story isn't about me.

It's involving a deeply guarded truth. The Earth we live on—it isn't real. The vast blue expanse— a mere illusion. The clouds—constructed by machines. We aren't living on a planet anymore. We were enclosed in a space station, suspended in orbit around the remains of what's left of the real Earth.

Nancy Juno stumbled upon the truth by sheer chance in the midst of a routine repair. Her tools showed not the sky—but metal. She shut off a cloud machine, and beheld the endless darkness of space came into view.

Long before our time, Earth perished. The affluent preserved themselves forging a fabricated world to mask the truth. The rest of us lived imprisoned in this beautiful lie, oblivious to what was real.

Now, in the year 2139, we inhabit the Aetherion Spires—towering megacities that pierce the heavens. The higher one's dwelling, the greater their status and influence. Below, the air hangs heavy with smoke; the surface has long been forsaken. And above looms the Skyveil, a barrier guarded by lethal drones. Any attempt to breach it is met with ruthless punishment.

"The sky is the limit," they used to say. But we come to understand—it isn't a limit. It's a prison.

Some of us call ourselves Reclaimers. We believe there's more beyond the Skyveil—hidden lands, lost memories, floating ruins. And Nancy discovered something.

She followed strange clues in space. They led her to Echo Vaults-secret places hidden in time. Long ago, humans had tried time travel, but it almost destroyed everything. So, they locked parts of time inside these vaults.

But now-They are awakening.

Within the vaults, strange things happen. Time twists. Echoes of the past stir. Phantoms walk. Creatures not meant for our era emerge. Some people enter-but never return the same.

Nancy came back—with a warning:

The vaults are converging. The Aether Gate is no beacon.

It's a rupture in time.

And something ancient, powerful, and wrathful is coming through.

Once, looked to the sky in hope.

But the sky is no longer a dream.

It is the threshold of a concealed truth - one never meant to be unveiled so soon.



Chapter - 2

Unveiling the Shadows of the Past

Vivek High School, India

Nancy had only one idea – taking advice from Isaac Nimble wick the Great. She went to the tallest spire and found him waiting, his wrinkled face full of worry and his long white beard flowing down his royal purple robe. Knowing why she was here, Nimble wick warned her of the devastating extinction of humans. He said, "You must journey to the land that was lost. Find the secrets of the past or you shall lose everything you know, and time itself shall be unleashed upon us!"

Nancy knew what she had to do. It was me to return to Earth...

A tiny bit of us had known the whole time, that our dazzling and amazing Earth should never have collapsed into chaos. Nancy's photo, clutched tightly in my trembling hands, depicted a dark, burning and devastated planet.

We couldn't just give up like that. We had to stop the imminent extinction of humanity! Our highly specialized (and secret) Aether Emergency Council immediately decreed the formation of a team to journey to the old Earth, find the cause of, and hopefully reverse this catastrophic event.

Nancy, Marian - a historian, Hugo - a technical engineer, Samuel - an expert in geography and I, started to build spaceships. Within 4 months, we had, after working round the clock, constructed two ships and one escape pod.

This was our masterplan: First, avoid the drones, then crash through the Skyveil and head to Earth. After that, we would cross past clouds of acid rain and an asteroid field, finally landing in the heart of America.

With great efforts, we secretly built and then launched the rockets. Ship One distracted the drones as we escaped in Ship Two, leaving a huge, gaping, black hole in the sky. With all the sensors and radars focused on the first rocket, we shot past the barrier in milliseconds.

The security lasers barely scratched our ship as we dashed by... Soon, we approached the horrifying sight of a dead, burning Earth.

We landed on a thin stretch of black, crumbling rock suspended above boiling, red-hot magma. Rivers of greenish blue plasma trickled as we inhaled the poisonous fumes.

We saw the partially disintegrated bones, huge craters from blasts as an aftermath of the war, and far, far worse things...

Hugo suddenly collapsed! Marian took him to the ship while Nancy, Samuel and I went ahead. We crossed over a cracking, ancient bridge. Before we had any time to think, the ground gave way to a portal, showing a grand castle being razed to the ground with a red sun sinking past the horizon.

Out of the blue, Nancy was sucked into the time twist as her image warped and glitched.

She had disappeared into an Echo Vault!

A single tear ran down my cheek as the truth struck me like a bolt of lightning.

Nancy Juno was gone...



Chapter - 3

The Attempt at Bringing Nancy Back

First Steps School of Arts & Sciences Senior Campus, Pakistan

I remained lost in thought, drowning out all the bubbling lava and broken, cluttered rock surrounding me.

Was she really gone? I could swear she wasn't, but that would only mean that I'd be lying to myself—something Nancy would have never wanted me to do. The glitching air that faded away with Nancy's distorted figure continually sat in the corners of my mind, making my thoughts spin. Why did we ever have to come back to Earth? We easily could have avoided all of this if—

My thoughts are interrupted as I suddenly realize that I had been crying—hysterically. It's only when Marian's hand cups my shoulder that I regain my hearing—actual hearing, not just the ringing that had been making my head pound. I glanced at Marian, who looked miserable. Marian was my only hope, and she looked even more miserable than me. Then suddenly I saw a ray of hope. Two suits with heat-protective layers hanging in a dark corner. I grabbed Marian and wasted no time.

We grabbed the suits and put them on in the blink of an eye. Samuel started looking here and there—being the geological expert, he began to assess his surroundings, taking in every little crater and splash of magma, judging when the next explosion could take place.

Samuel and Marian, wanting to find Nancy, decided to take a risk, and I wasn't one to object. We moved a large boulder atop one of the craters that would shoot magma out and waited for pressure to accumulate and send us flying when the moment was right.

Without batting an eye, I had agreed to finding Nancy—how could I not?

Marian and I took our places above the large, disfigured boulder. Terrified—of course—we heard the whistles of the gas trying to escape as the boulder blocked its path, and then—

We went flying into the air as the rock shot up with us. Darkness covered my eyes. I heard Marian moaning in pain. I wanted to help but could not. That's the last thing I remembered.

Chapter - 4

The Cloaked Whisper

Mody School, India

Violent flashes, blinding lights, smoke fills the air and everything around me is in destruction and death walks the land as if waltzing in a dark symphony. All that was once green and beautiful is now dark and dead; across the lawn lying, in a heap, the cause of all this destruction – The Great Doctor, John.

Once upon a time, under the bright sky in a white building of Atlantis, I overheard my father's grim words as he muttered to a dark shadow and his words loom in my mind after several years; but I feel it's the first time I have heard it..

"The key to bright revival
Belongs to the dark rival,
Vital for the realm's survival.
It must land in the hand of those
who are fated for trials"

Suddenly his head whips towards me as if the pillar is a mirage and he can simply see through it, the room starts to tunnel similar to my vision as he starts moving towards me and whispers a single word "run".

It all turned hazy and I wish I was hallucinating but it was too real for an illusion and too fake for reality. It felt as if it was a memory, a misty and a darker one, like something that should have remained untold.

White blurs throughout my vision and before I realize I am already on my feet running towards a hole I hope that contains my tranquility because around me are red creatures, brimming like a swarm of bloody Inferi, like that from Hades Homeland.

I hit a creature with a stone near my foot that had turned red and pale but now I feel hitting it is a mistake for I couldn't comprehend what happened next. A kaleidoscope of colours shatters around me. My eyes barricade themselves against the light and as I convince myself that the strange domain, an expanse I had only read about in the confined pages of my mother's journal were real; a familiar silhouette emerged, one that haunted the dreams of my father.



Chapter - 5

Visions of Destiny

Bangalore International School, India

As my vision wrapped around me, an unusual sensation came over me. Sudden glimpses of Nancy flashed through my mind. I saw her attempting to navigate her way through a hellish, chaotic biome, with crackling embers of fire immersing the area around her.

Her face faded away. Darkness. Chilling screams started to ring through my head. All of a sudden, the scene changed; she was running away from what seemed to be certain death. She spun around, with her eyes seeming to meet mine.

"Smith, help me, please!" she cried in anguish.

She appeared in my head again. I saw her staring intently at a massive, metal door which shone brightly compared to the darkness around her, luring her towards it.

But suddenly, I saw a mirror-like object, and I could feel myself gasping, as if I would implode. Memories that numbered to more than a billion arose. I saw visions of what Nancy was as a child, a teenager, an adult, and an elderly person - just so many versions of Nancy, crying in despair, pain and misery. Multiple grim futures flashed before her eyes, each one getting worse than the others.

Her pained expression made me want to cry. She seemed horrified at what her future held. My heart yearned to be there to console her.

A fluorescent green light suddenly appeared and pulled her away from the visions, and she found herself in a large, empty cavern. It seemed to fight off the heat and destruction. Nestled amongst the rocks, it emanated a gentle glow, pulsing like a heartbeat, as if it were alive. It seemed to draw her further in and she walked towards it in a hypnotic daze.

The green light illuminated the cave but it kept getting fainter. As she reached out, it faded away, drowned out by the darkness of the cave. The crushing heat surged and then the face of a man I recognized too well emerged.

He crept in the shadows like a phantom. I screamed, trying to warn her, but it was no use; he stretched out his hand and placed a vice-like grip on her shoulder.

She let out a blood-curdling scream.

A deep, cold voice whispered

"Hello Smith"...

Chapter - 6

The Unusual Forgetfulness

Rajmata Krishna Kumari Girls' Public School, India

And then I woke up.

Abruptly, my eyes opened. I eyed my surroundings and saw foliage around. The ground beneath me seemed to be irregular and uneven. It felt like a hallucination. I saw some water at a distance and started moving closer to realise that I was tricked by a mirage. Then I started hearing faint voices yelling "Smith, Smith, Smith....." Out of the blue, my senses jumped back to consciousness, and I heard a girl wailing. She was a tall, bespectacled girl with golden hair, and she was sobbing inconsolably in front of me.

I examined my environment and saw white metallic walls with neon strip lights. The temperature was moderate and relaxing. I heard noises from humongous control panels beeping right next to me. One of the panels showed the destruction of planet Earth, and one displayed location and temperature. The strange girl next to me had just perceived that my eyes had opened, so she embraced me by hugging me tightly.

"Thank the council, you're awake...! Is your head feeling alright?"

"What...who are you?" I didn't know what was going on or where I was, why I was wearing what seemed to be a halfway burned spacesuit, or why this girl looked at me with such worry in her eyes.

"Wha-no. I-it's me, Marian. Come on, Smith, you know me..."

Marian. The name sounded familiar, I supposed.

"I think I know you...Who's Smith?" I asked, wondering if the new name was someone I vaguely knew as well-

"What do you mean 'Who's Smith?' Smith, you're Smith. Smith Johnson."

I was getting more and more confused by the minute-- My name was Smith?

"Smith..." I quietly whispered the name when suddenly a sharp pain flared up in the back of my head, almost like an animal was sinking its claws into my skull. Spots danced around my eyes as another person whom I didn't recognize ran up to me and Marian as I fell over sideways, clutching onto my head as if my life depended on it--which at this point, it probably did.

Then I heard it--that voice.

"Smith...don't fight it. He's only doing this to make you a pawn in his game. The more you resist, the more his control seeps in. I can't afford to lose another person to him-- not after Hugo. I need you to find me. Find me before he finds you."

The voice was unusually familiar, which was confusing. It was like when I first heard my name earlier on-- chillingly familiar. It took me a minute to realise that I was being fed some sort of green sludge. I resisted the concoction that was being poured down my throat, grabbing the hands that were feeding me and trying to push them back.

"Smith, stop it! It's medicine. It'll help with whatever you have going on in your head right now." Marian said, forcing it down my throat once again. This time, I didn't try to resist--it was unusually soothing, no matter how vile it tasted. As my vision cleared, I looked around. We were in the same place I had woken up in, and from the look on Marian's face, it wasn't a place we were familiar with.



Outside, the sky had turned a dark red, and dust swirled around as sounds from creatures I couldn't identify came out from all sides.

Just where are we? And how are we going to get away?



Chapter - 7

Echoes of Time : Quest for the Time Anchor

Royal Global School, Guwahati, India

The crimson sky pulsed above us, casting an eerie glow over the desolate terrain. A low hum vibrated beneath our feet as Marian's grip on my hand tightened, a lifeline in the chaos. I scanned our surroundings—the metallic walls, blinking panels—but my mind reeled with disjointed memories: dust storms, cryptic maps, and Nancy's fading voice.

As I searched for answers, my gaze landed on a familiar face—Marian. But my memories were hazy. "Who are you?" I asked, desperation creeping into my voice. Marian's calm response was laced with concern: "I'm your friend, Marian. We were returning to Earth."

Before I could process her words, Samuel appeared, holding a glowing crystal that illuminated his determined face. "It lit up when I touched it," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. Suddenly, a hologram flickered to life—Nancy's image, weak but resolute. "Smith, I'm trapped in the Vault Nexus. Time is collapsing. You must find the Time Anchor."

A loud thud shook the room, and the door creaked open, revealing a boy in a torn uniform. "I'm from the Resistance," he whispered. "Nancy's alive, but you're being watched." We followed him through eerie corridors until a shadow in the sky forced us to flee into an abandoned library.

Marian grabbed a book—*A New Route To Your Trapped Destiny*—its contents hinting at soul entrapment and an entity impersonating me. The solution? A cryptic chant. With a pale, tearful nod, Marian prompted me to speak the words. The air shimmered, but we remained ourselves.

Later, we encountered a colossal metal door etched with ancient symbols. Marian's translation sent shivers down my spine: "He who enters must keep in mind, The Echo Vault is what you'll find..." Her voice trembled. "This is where he took Nancy. A force beyond time, and Nancy's the key."

As I touched the door, visions assaulted me—chaos, agony—and I collapsed. Marian's steady presence brought me back. Nancy's voice returned, guiding us through the darkness. We packed quickly, our mission clear: to fight a being beyond time, save Nancy, and mend reality's fraying edges. Hope flickered to life—our only way forward.

Chapter - 8

Hope Against All Odds

K C Public School, India

Marian's translation of the ancient symbols etched on the colossal metal door, gave me goose bumps, but at the same time a flicker of hope emerged. Samuel and I were trying to uncover every nook and corner to crack the code of the metal door. Ensuring Nancy's safety and rescuing her at the earliest was the main aim. Suddenly, a strong push brought me back from my web of thoughts; it was Samuel assuring me with a sense of optimism that things might get better. He pointed towards another piece of ancient writing on the top left corner of the gate. Marian translated the text to be some sort of a riddle:

'Something lost when it is most needed

Something for which generations have pleaded.'

It clicked at once; it was almost as if Nancy was whispering right into my ear.

'Hope', we exclaimed in unison.

The huge metal gates swung open with a heavy grinding sound, a blinding light could be seen at the other end. We shielded our eyes in fear and upon opening, we were inside a cave and the door was completely shut.

Marian looking excitedly at the inscriptions of ancient symbols on the walls of the cave said, "This is just the place for me."

"Don't be too excited right now," said Samuel. "There might be a trap waiting for us, and you won't even know."

I was worried because the cave was pitch black and Marian only had one flashlight, and to our bad luck, even that ran out of battery in the first few minutes of use.

Suddenly, a faint bit of light emerged in the corner of the cave and with a huge burst of flame a Golden Bird appeared. We were startled and started to flee towards the gate. But the entity assured that it will not harm us.

"I am Hope", it said "A brave warrior who fought in the battle for the original Earth. I was trapped here centuries ago by the evil force. Follow me; I will lead you to what you need to save your friend."

Seeing us scared and confused, she said, "I am a blessed being, gifted with a boon to read minds." It was some relief for us; hesitatingly we followed her glowing body through the cave. She led us to a chest with an ominous light. As we opened it, a crystal that looked identical to the crystal that Samuel had, was placed on a stand in the centre. He took it out of his pocket and as soon as he brought it closer to the chest, there was a magnetic pull and the crystals became one!

Marian examined the crystal and exclaimed, "It's a clue to the time anchor! This will help us find Nancy!"

I turned to thank 'Hope', but she had vanished.

Suddenly, I felt a whisper in my ear. "Don't worry. Hope is never lost."

It was Nancy's comforting voice.



Chapter - 9

The Truth - The Loop of Time

Maria's Public School, India

We had to save Nancy and complete the Aether Mission. Hope – the golden bird we thought had vanished – suddenly reappeared. The golden bird perched on a jagged stone near the chest, its luminous feathers pulsing faintly in the dim light of the cave. We stood frozen, we pushed the lid open slowly. Inside, wrapped in brittle linen, was a weathered map etched onto the parchment that looked older than memory itself. It bore the outline of shifting lands and seas, stars that no longer aligned with our sky, and an inscription scrawled in an ancient dialect. Marian leaned close, brushing dust away.

"It's a chart of temporal fractures," whispered Marian, her eyes wide with awe. "The map, a guide to the key to the time anchor. And here – this symbol.....it matches the time anchor emblem."

"The Crystal has to be placed in the middle of the anchor door that has a void coffer." Hope tells Samuel.

The map showed faintly in the light of Hope's glowing body. As we stared at it, the lines shimmered and moved like rivers of gold, converging on a single point: a tear in the timeline, hidden deep within the Vales of Echoes. That's where Nancy had been pulled, lost between seconds, tethered to a place where time frayed like worn cloth.

"She's alive", Marian said finally. "The path to the time anchor won't be stable. We have to read the map in motion". She warned.

We exchanged a glance and followed deeper into the cavern. The map and the crystal, Samuel holding it safely, guided us like a compass. The paths twisted and narrowed until we reached a chamber where a giant time dial stood, its hands motionless. In the center, a pedestal glowed faintly, its top carved with the same glyphs now aglow on the Crystal.

Samuel stepped forward and set the Crystal in the matte black cube in the pedestal. We observed the past form of everyone when the crystal was in the pedestal but when it was not, time had no effect on them. A deep vibration stirred in the air, and the dial's hands started to turn backward – slowly at first then with increasing speed. Light burst from the pedestal enveloping us. Visions swirled: people we didn't recognize, events long past, and finally – Nancy. It controls time.

She stood beneath the scarlet sky, where the clouds drifted like echoes of forgotten wars. She was surrounded by flickering time anomalies, calling out silently. Her image was ghostly, fading in and out like a lost signal. She was barefoot, clothes scorched by something unseen. Her eyesno longer human. One eye held the spiraling void; the other, a flickering constellation.

"You came back," I cried. "You are trapped in a fractured moment."

"I never left," she said, voice soft, ancient. "I was shown what waits. Not just our end – but our repetition. This has all happened before. Unless we find out how to break this endless loop of time, this is our past, present and future."

Nancy looked toward the Aetherian spire, rising in the distance like a needle through the fabric of reality. "The spire is not a tower. It's a prism. It bends futures. And someone is choosing which one to let through."

"The vaults marked me." Nancy said. "I carry a fragment of its mind now. It showed me echoes – what we became, what we destroyed. It wasn't aliens. It was us. A cycle, played again and again. Each time we reach the Gate, we fall."

The golden bird circled above us, then darted into the light. The Crystal pulsed once more, and a whisper echoed through the cave.

Marian's voice trembled. "Then we know where to go. But we will have to unmoor ourselves – step outside the flow of time."

The chamber quietened. The Crystal dimmed.

We had the key. Now we had to risk everything to reach Nancy – before the time anchor dissolved and she was lost forever.



Chapter - 10

The Breaking Point

Sunbeam School, Lahartara, India

Time felt strange, like the world had paused. The last thing I remembered was Nancy whispering, "You're going the right way," and then everything went dark. When I opened my eyes, I was lying in the quiet, dry cave. Marian, Hugo, and Samuel were with me—shaken, tired, but alive.

Then we saw something shining near the edge of the chamber. It was a pendant. On its surface was the same symbol as the Crystal—a sign of connection. I reached for it, but before I could grab it, Hope—the golden bird—swooped in, took the pendant, and disappeared. A single tear dropped from where it had been and fell to the ground.

Hugo stepped forward, stunned. "I've seen that pendant before," he said. "When I passed out—I was holding it. It felt like it was mine... from another life."

He held his chest and suddenly his eyes went blank. He had a vision. "I was pulled into a swirling tunnel," he said. "Then I saw words—old, glowing words. I remember them... Taatecrypensheelkateture."

Marian leaned in, excited. "It's in Aetherian," she said. She traced shapes in the dust and translated. "It means: 'This pendant will take you to a place where you and the essentials will meet.'"

Samuel nodded. "Then it's not just an object. It's a doorway—one that brings back what was lost. Maybe even us."

The ground shook slightly. I felt a pull—not just on my body, but my heart. Nancy was calling. So was Hope. The loop—we still hadn't broken it.

Then a whisper floated through the air: "You're close now." It was Nancy. And everything went black again.

In my dream, I was alone under a broken sky—cracks across it like shattered glass. Nancy stepped out of those cracks. Her eyes were strange—one was a dark spiral, the other sparkled like stars.

"You came back," she said softly. "But this isn't just about saving me anymore. It's about saving everyone. The loop is a prison we made ourselves."

Behind her stood the Aetherian Spire—tall and glowing, full of wild energy. "The Spire bends time," Nancy said, "but it also makes choices. Someone, or something, has always chosen for us. Until now."

The vision faded quickly. Marian was shaking me awake. "It's time," she said. "The Spire is calling us."

We moved through the winding cave paths. The Crystal in Samuel's hand glowed and hummed, as if it knew we were getting close. We reached the pedestal again. Samuel placed the Crystal into its center.

The Spire lit up with a roar. Light burst everywhere, breaking into pieces of possible futures. I saw Earth burning, freezing, blooming with life, or covered in darkness. So many paths—waiting for one choice.

Then Nancy appeared—not as a vision, but real. Hope flew around her, its feathers flickering between light and shadow. She placed her hand on the pedestal.

"The Vault's mind is inside me now," she said. "It showed me every time we failed to break the loop. But now... you've brought the key. Not just the Crystal or the pendant—but your courage to let go."

Marian nodded. "We are free now. We choose the future, not the past."

"The loop ends," I said, stepping forward. "Even if it means losing our old selves."

The Spire exploded in light. Time cracked... and then broke apart.

When it was over, everything was quiet. The red sky was gone. Now golden sunlight shone over a peaceful field. The air was still.

Nancy smiled—she was whole again. "We broke the cycle," she whispered. "We chose hope."

The others stood beside me, eyes wide, hearts full.

We had reached the breaking point.

And beyond it... was a beginning.



Chapter - 11

The Garden of New Dawns

Miles Bronson Residential School, India

The silence wasn't empty. It hummed. It pulsed with the gentle thrum of a world sighing in relief, the frantic energy of the breaking time loop replaced by a profound, resonant calm. Golden sunlight, real sunlight, warm and nurturing, spilled over the field where we stood. The air tasted clean, sharp with the scent of dew-kissed grass and something else – the fertile promise of life beginning anew. The oppressive red sky, the swirling dust, the ever-present dread – gone. Replaced by a vast, serene blue canopy scattered with soft, white clouds. Not machines. Real clouds.

Nancy stood beside me, whole. The terrifying spiral and starlight were gone from her eyes, replaced by their familiar warm brown, though they held a depth, a weight of witnessed eons she hadn't possessed before. She breathed deeply, a shudder running through her, as if expelling the last vestiges of the Vault's cold consciousness. A small, tremulous smile touched her lips as she looked at the sun. "We chose," she whispered, the sound carrying in the stillness.

Marian let out a choked sob, not of sorrow, but of overwhelming release. She sank to her knees, fingers digging into the soft, cool earth. "It's... real. It's all real." Samuel knelt beside her, his geologist's hand sifting the soil, a look of pure wonder on his face. "Viable... incredibly fertile..." he murmured, disbelief warring with joy.

Hugo stood apart, staring at his hands, then up at the sky, then down at his chest where the phantom weight of the pendant had been. "It was a doorway," he breathed. "Back... and forward." He looked at Nancy, a question in his eyes.

Nancy nodded. "The pendant was a key, Hugo. Not just to a place, but to a self. A piece of you, fragmented across the loops, held safe until the cycle broke. Hope carried it back to the moment it was needed most – when the Spire fractured."

As if summoned, a flash of gold shimmered in the air. Hope materialized, landing gracefully on a smooth rock nearby. Her light was softer now, less urgent, more serene. She tilted her head, regarding us with ancient, knowing eyes. "The loop is sundered," her voice echoed softly, not in our ears, but directly within our minds. "The prison of repetition is broken. The Spire is no longer a prism bending futures to a single, doomed path. It is... dormant. Waiting."

"Waiting for what?" I asked, stepping closer. The grass felt impossibly soft under my worn boots.

"For choice," Nancy answered, turning to face us fully. Her voice was stronger now. "The Vault... its

mind... it wasn't inherently evil. It was a record. A sentient echo of every failure, every collapse, every time humanity reached the precipice of understanding its fabricated cage and the Gate beyond, only to be dragged back into the loop by fear, control, or the sheer inertia of the lie." She gestured around. "This? This is the potential it guarded. The one timeline where the key was found, the Anchor reached, and the cycle willingly broken. Not by force, but by the courage to let go of the known, however false."

She looked directly at me. "Smith, when you stepped forward... when you said 'even if it means losing our old selves'... that was the final key. Acceptance. Surrender to the possibility of something truly new."

The enormity of it settled over us. We hadn't just saved Nancy or escaped a dying station. We had shattered a fundamental law of our existence. We had rewritten destiny.

"But... what now?" Marian asked, wiping her eyes. "The Aetherion Spires? The people? The Skyveil?"

"The Skyveil is gone," Samuel stated, pointing towards the horizon where the familiar, oppressive barrier should have loomed. There was only clear sky meeting a distant, green-tinged landscape. "Shattered with the loop."

"And the Spires?" Hugo pressed.

Nancy closed her eyes for a moment, reaching out with her newly integrated awareness. "Still standing. Taller than ever, perhaps, now they pierce a true sky. But the illusion... the machinery maintaining the false surface, the cloud generators... it's failing. Fading. The truth is seeping in, like sunlight through cracks." A flicker of worry crossed her face. "There will be chaos. Fear. Disbelief. The beautiful lie is unraveling."

"We have to go back," I said, the words coming out firm, surprising even me. The intern who recorded minutes was gone. The leader Nancy had always seen beneath the surface stepped forward. "We have to tell them. Show them this." I gestured at the vibrant field, the vast sky. "They deserve the truth. And they deserve the choice we fought for."

Hope fluttered her wings. "The path is open. The drones are inert, their programming tied to the loop's enforcement. The way back... is clear." She paused, her gaze lingering on the distant shape of the Spires, now visible as magnificent, glittering structures reaching towards the real sun. "But know this: the force that whispered to Smith, that impersonated him, that sought to control the loop... it is not gone. It was of the loop, a manifestation of its controlling will, the 'dark rival' your father warned of, Smith. It is adrift in the fractured remnants of the collapsed timelines, weakened... but not destroyed. It will hunger for order, for control, for the re-establishment of a cage."

A chill, faint but present, brushed against the warmth of the new day. The echo of "Hello Smith" whispered at the edge of memory.

Nancy placed a hand on my shoulder. Her touch was warm, grounding. "Then we remained vigilant. We build a world strong enough in its freedom that it cannot take root again. We have Hope." She smiled at the golden bird. "And we have each other."

We gathered our meager supplies – battered suits, Samuel's now-dormant crystal, Marian's notes. There was no spaceship waiting. The journey back wouldn't be through the void, but across this new, reborn Earth. We started walking, leaving the peaceful field behind, heading towards the towering Spires that were now beacons in a true world.

The ground felt solid. The air was sweet. Ahead lay uncertainty, fear, the monumental task of revealing a truth that would shatter a millennium of belief. But for the first time in what felt like forever, we walked towards a future, not an echo. We walked towards a dawn we had chosen, together.

Behind us, in the sun-drenched grass where the tear of Hope had fallen, a single, impossibly bright flower unfurled its petals – the first bloom of a new epoch. The Garden of New Dawns had begun. Our journey through the Echoes Beyond the Horizon had ended. The journey of building what came after had just begun.



Chapter - 12

Hope Woven into Reality

The Millennium School, Dubai, UAE

The sun began its graceful descent into the vast, undulating expanse of the indigo sea, scattering molten gold along the shore. Beside it, a velvety meadow stretched wide, embroidered with wild flowers dancing in the breeze. Reeds rustled in hushed conversation, and dragonflies darted above the water, glinting like fragments of fire. Twilight cast its final breath across the landscape, shrouding the world in serene stillness. While I remained entranced by nature's grandeur, Marian nudged Nancy and Hugo to settle down for the evening. The message found its way to me soon after.

Only when we paused did I register the searing ache coursing through my legs – masked all day by the thrill of discovery. As night gently unfurled, Hugo briskly gathered twigs, and with a flick of his suit's inbuilt lighter, sparked a bonfire into life. Meanwhile, Marian and Nancy scoured the woods for anything edible, while I, led by a restless spirit, skipped once more along the shoreline, tracing tadpoles as they wiggled through the shallows. But the scent of food coaxed me back. As I approached the firelight, I overheard a tense exchange. Hugo's voice cracked like dry wood: "He hasn't lifted a finger. We're all curious, but he's the only one who's done absolutely nothing to help." Marian chimed in sharply, "Exactly, Nancy. This isn't enough for all of us – if he brings nothing tomorrow, he gets nothing." The words struck like flint. I stiffened, ready to respond, but Nancy, ever the diplomat, deflected the moment. "He's the youngest," she said lightly, "and the most curious. Let him be."

Later, as I opened my mouth to apologize, a hiss curled through my mind: "Don't apologize. They're ools for lacking your sense of wonder." Nancy's eyes studied me with care. "Everything alright?" she asked. I merely shook my head. That night, fatigue alone coaxed me into sleep. At dawn, the sun rose like a sovereign orb, and Nancy summoned us for a team briefing. We had to begin preparations to return – to inform the Spire of Earth's remarkable revival. She, with her typical precision, had mapped every detail. Just as I received my task card, the voice surged again: "Is she serious? We just arrived! If I were you, I'd shred that task into pieces!" My conscience fought back – I couldn't disrespect the only one who ever stood up for me. But the voice grew louder, unbearable. And before I knew it, I'd ripped the card in two. "We just go there! And now we're working again?" I yelled, then turned and bolted into the forest.

I didn't stop until my legs gave way. I collapsed onto a rock, trembling, breath ragged. What have I done? The questions spiraled until my mind faded into silence. When I opened my eyes, I was lying in the grass. A shadow approached – out stretched hand, calm voice. "What was that breakdown about, dude?" It was Marian. Only she used "dude" like that. I wanted to explain, but the words caught in my throat. She handed me fresh water from the nearby stream and left without pressing further.

That evening, Hugo called out orders. "Go fish. Come back empty, and you don't eat." I obeyed. Nancy, ever resourceful, had fashioned a fishing rod from a twig and woven grass. I settled by the lake, casting my line – only for the voice to return, venomous. "Who does he think he is, barking orders? If I were you, I'd return empty-handed just to spite him." I pressed a seashell to my ear, trying to drown it out – but ended up hurling it into the sea in frustration. Suddenly, a tug. A heavy pull. I'd caught something – a big one. "Drop it. Or follow it into the depths!" the voice snarled. But I couldn't. I wouldn't. I tightened my grip. The fish thrashed wildly. Water lapped over my feet. Just as I began to slip, Marian appeared – fast as lightning – and instead of helping me out, she yanked the rod from my hand and flung it away.

I nodded in gratitude. But true to his word, Hugo denied me dinner. I lay in the dark, hungry and cold. That night, I whispered to the voice: Why are you doing this? The reply chilled me. "I don't want to ruin anything – except the person who brought Earth back. That's you. I want you gone." Startled, I stumbled towards the water. There, under the ghostly moonlight, I collided with Nancy. She examined me, her gaze sharp. "Are you hearing voices?" I hesitated. Then, with a faint nod, I confessed. Without judgment, she handed me small white pills. "Just take them for now," she said gently. Within moments, the tension in my limbs melted. For the first time in days, I slept – truly slept.

By morning, I was helping the others. The plan was simple: build a raft from fine spruce, wait fifteen hours for the tide to peak, and let the moon's pull lift us 3000 feet. Our suits would then activate their electromagnetic grips, locking onto the metal beams of the Spire's vehicle bay. From there, we'd climb and report back. But I had doubts. What if they silenced us? What if they didn't believe a word? Still, we had to try.

As Hugo's watch beeped, we launched the raft. The coast fell away behind us. To our right waves loomed ahead. My chest clenched, but Nancy reassured me: "It's perfect. Trust the plan." The wave seized us. We engaged our suits. Three... two... one. Everything vanished. We soared. The Earth shrank beneath us, light years flashing past. With a thunderous impact, we landed at the Spire's base. Hand over hand, we crawled to the entrance – exhausted, silent, determined. We were home. Yet even the towering Spire, with all its might, paled beside the quiet majesty of Earth.

Still breathless from the journey upward, we hovered in the stillness of the vehicle bay – a space echoing with old metal groans and the faint hum of the magnetic systems powering down. But there was no time to pause. Nancy's voice was the first to break through the silence, sharp with urgency. "This way. The climb starts here." She pointed toward the internal structure of the Spire – a narrow shaft leading upward, adorned with what looked like a metallic spine reaching into the clouds. The air felt thinner, the stakes impossibly higher. We exchanged glances – uncertain, wide-eyed, but no one spoke. Our feet moved forward on instinct, hearts braced for the truth that awaited above.

Hugo's legs climbed up the glistening metal, trembling as they struggled to balance on the slippery surface. His shoes scraped the iron, which had rust on its skin. Treading upwards, Nancy's brunette hair strands galloped as she sharply moved ahead.

"How are you doing this?" Marian whispered, a chuckle wringing out of the crevices in her pearly whites. His cheeks were flushed, and sweat caressed his skin. His eyelids shuttering as he tried to hold on.

"Don't be scared," Nancy said.

Smith's canine needled his lips as he inched upwards, his fingers grasping every bit of proud, glimmering metal he could find.

"We're only a metre ahead," Nancy said. Her pupils were comforting with Hugo's reflection embedded in them. The stars, which were painted in her iris, sank into her domes. The wisdom echoing in each cell of her existence.

"Fear is what wrung us out of truth, the foundation of us all." Each time a shiver trundles down your spine or gulps swim anxiously..

"Remember, we're close!" Hugo and Nancy said, their voices barely mumbling.

Hope fluttered its feathers, which were delicately warped in golden light, and hovered outside of the tower. If we were to fall, we would be cushioned by the grass with sunlight sparkling on the fragile flower petals.

Marian's heart drummed in her chest, her neck bone waddling anxiously. The wind apprehensively blew us by. It soon turned into a meandering gust which tugged at us, trying to topple us over.

"Ahhh!" Nancy screamed, her voice hitching as tears flooded down her freckled face.

"Remember what you told me!" Hugo shouted. The heavy clouds churned in the sky and unleashed their tears, which dived onto earth. Hugo's voice was muffled by the gasps of wind which bit our cheeks in its bitter embrace.

Smith struggled to speak. His eyes widened to reveal his shy, blue pupils and his eyelashes reached for his sharp brows. His throat was strangled by his own chain of suppressed beliefs.

Nancy's fingers shivered, and her skin had tiny slits designing it. She reached for a tall ladder. Shimmering golden dustsmeared it and showered us, loitering in the atmosphere, touching our faces and sinking into Nancy's thick braid. Vines of hair clinging to her.

"It's hope!" Marian said from below Nancy, her arms gripped around metal.

"It is," she said, her head tilted backwards and her emerald eyes shone like diamonds. Her legs folded and she reached a room above us.

Soon we all reached there. I was the last to reach. My knees stumbled onto the marbled floor. They all huffed and puffed, catching their breath- a wisp of a white canvas yet to taste the glory of our colors. The future.

A portal boldly waited in front of us, ethereal hues of violet dancing and whirling.

"This is it," she said. Let our voices venture to all of the poor souls who were imprisoned in vengeance and bitter lies.

Nancy sank into the enchanting brew of colors and delightful hues, hope's dust drizzling on her face as she leapt in.

"Woah!" We heard a feeble echo of Nancy's voice on the other side of the portal. The three tightly grasped each other's sweaty fingers before skittering onwards and jumping in.

"We're here," she said, her lips tugging up with in effable joy on her glistening teeth.

The people were flooded in one area, their eyes were magnified with tears and their chests stifled with pain. The trees' leaves had fallen to the ground, deserted by their vibrancy. The fake sun seemed to flicker in the grey sky. Thunder veined out and pierced the atmosphere. The clouds appeared as thoughts were fading.

"You're free," Nancy shouted. Her words in the form of light before they appeared as bold letters in the leaden sky. The people curiously looked up, hope's glimmering touch sank into each intricate carve on the bricked castles which lay around them. Dust, which stirred, landed on the soil.

"What do you mean we're free?" a little girl with innocent pigtails grazing her shoulders spoke. Nancy's knees gently stooped down before her fingers drove down her pale face. Her hands cupped over her scruffy sleeves, gently guiding her forward. The girl disappeared into the portal, and the people flooded in. They thumped on the floor with hope's image encapsulated in their pupils as they stamped.

The fake trees shivered, their frail branches painted black as darkness consumed the sky.

This time, there was no tower. No daunting feat for them to overcome. Their feet dug into the soil. The sunlight perched atop the crimson flowers, which shyly nudged each other in the wind. An ethereal mist gallivanted and licked the leaves with its dew. They collectively sat down. Families huddled amongst themselves.

The little girl with an intrigued face hopped in front of Nancy. Her skirt gently lifted as her feet landed on the floor.

"You saved us, didn't you?" she asked Nancy, her voice whispering. Nancy's finger curiously pointed up before landing on her mouth.

"Shh," she said. "It's between you and me," she continued. I gently patted the girl's head and ruffled her golden strands. Now they stood there, the breeze breathing through the field, combing the blades of grass with a playful touch.

Finally, our hearts—which have been trapped by our rib cages, our bones which had imprison edit for so long—had finally found a way to shatter the trance of bewilderment.

Chapter - 13

An Abrupt Turn

GEMS Modern Academy, Dubai, UAE

Hushed whispers and gasps of awe filled the air. Hundreds of people stood on the fields of wispy grass, looking up to the pearly white clouds that bobbed, contrasting with the pastel blue sky. Some placed their palms on the grass to feel its soft, yet prickly embrace, while others stared up at the sun, enjoying its warm, yet radiating glow. I felt calm - relieved, but also as though something was missing, like a piece of the puzzle was missing. I jogged over to the team and tapped Nancy's back. "Hey!" I said, "Is it just me or does something feel off?"

"I think we have done everything we needed to do Smith. I think you're just feeling a bit - anxious... or homesick? Why don't you get some rest?" Nancy said, smiling at me with her kind, reassuring face.

"A-alright" I said, "You're right, I'm probably just, shaken up after everything." I watched Nancy nod in understanding and then pull out the crystal Samuel had found. She placed it softly onto her palm and, with her finger, gently traced the ancient symbols on it that had now worn out over time.

"The crystal!" I chirped more enthusiastically than I expected. "Well yes, it is indeed," Nancy chuckled a bit. "You seem quite excited about it."

"Yes- I mean-," I slowed down, already embarrassed by my high-pitched voice, "-it did look pretty interesting, and powerful." The last few words came out stiffer and more rigid than I wanted them to. "I never really got to see it up close. Samuel and Hugo never let me. Do you think you could... maybe, let me have it for a while?"

Nancy squinted and tried reading my face, thinking for a while, "Well... I never really understood why he didn't let you. Maybe he thinks you're too young or clumsy, but I do know that you are very trustworthy, so sure, go ahead." Nancy dropped the crystal into his hands.

The weight of the crystal against my palm felt soothing, as though it kept me grounded. "T thanks!" I managed, stuttering, before walking over to a quieter part of the field.

I looked at the crystal in my palm and noticed its pulse, flinching at the sudden movement within it. "Look at the treasure they tried to hide from you! So majestic and powerful, hidden away from you simply because they think you for a fool and believe you have no sense of intelligence in you! Use the crystal's power, Smith. Prove that you are greater than them and everyone who ever doubted you!" the voice echoed throughout my head.

"No! I can't just do that and break their trust! Nancy trusted me by handing over the crystal!" I snapped back at the voice. This time, I found myself talking aloud instead of in my head. It was like the voice was real and I was having a conversation with someone face to face.

"Come on kid! You know they hate you right, how much worse can you make them feel about you anyway?" That was it! I turned my hands into fists and began walking towards the looming towers that tore into the sky, the Aether ion spires. Nancy had talked about Isaac Nimble wick once or twice, but whenever she did, she called him the wisest man to live. She had got advice on the journey along with her courage and spirit from him. If there was someone who would listen to me and realize that everything did not add up, it would be him.

As I entered the Aether ion towers, I started to get a pulsing headache. As the elevators slowly ascended to the top floor, the headache kept getting worse, spreading over my temples. I rubbed them, the sweat from my head trickling onto my hands. But it didn't help soothe the hammering inside my head. Despite that, I knew I had come here for a reason, so I entered the passage and saw the door to Nimble wick's home. I rang the bell, and the door opened by itself. "Cool!", I thought, "An automatic door! Probably a new mechanism had implemented..."

Standing at the far end of the room was Nimble wick with his back to me. "Um... Excuse me Nimble wick Sir, it's me – Smith. I came here to see you."

"Hello young man, it seems as though you have finally come to meet me", but the voice was not Nimble wicks.

"W-who are you?" I asked, my breath shaky. Nimble wick spun around to reveal a twisted grin plastered onto his face and just then a voice filled my head - the same one that had haunted me for days, "Instead of asking WHO I am, you should be asking WHAT I am!", he cackled fiercely.

"No, NO, not YOU! WHY YOU!?" I screamed, "It just can't be..."

"So, we finally meet Smith. I didn't expect you to still be this strong", Nimble wick said, his unnatural grin slowly haunting me each second.

A sense of dread washed over me as I realized that this was not Nimble wick, but instead a cursed spirit using him as a means of communication. I tried to run, but my body refused to listen to me. "You wouldn't dare to try anything, you m-monster! You know my friends will come to know of the truth and then t-they'll come to save me and take you down!" I stuttered, my face cold and wet with tears. My stomach churned horribly with uneasiness.

"But will they? Do you really think they care about you? I thought you were a smart kid Smith, you should have at least figured it out by now." "No, you're wrong", I said, uncertainty slow creeping into my voice.

Nimble wick, wait no, the thing wearing Nimble wick's skin stepped forward and grasped my hand. I screamed, wanting to run, yet my body refused to cooperate.

The ink-like substance oozed from its fingertips, winding around my arms, then my shoulders, and finally enveloped me. I struggled at first, but slowly, my body gave in to it, and I felt peaceful – almost.. comforting. It was unimaginable, I couldn't come to think that my shoulders were what seemed like... softened.

I relaxed.

Strange thoughts filled my mind – thoughts that weren't mine. And honestly, I liked them. I liked the power. The clarity. The voice was no longer frightening. It was strangely familiar and comforting or matter of fact. I began to surrender. Right then, the door burst open. Nancy. Hugo. The whole team stood there, panting, terrified. Their eyes locked on me – on the inky shadow creeping across my body. "SMITH!" Nancy shouted. "Fight it! We're here! That's not you!"

The voice inside me snarled, "No... no, no, NO! They shouldn't be here yet!" I cried out, not in pain, but in confusion. I didn't know who I was anymore. Nancy touched my shoulder and spoke gently, "Smith, you're stronger than this. You were always meant to carry the crystal – not because you're powerful or because you have to prove that you are... but because you're good."

The light around us flared once more, and the spirit within Nimble wick shrieked in rage as it was ripped from his body. It tried to cling to me, to hide, but it was too late. The crystal in my palm flashed, and then shattered into a thousand shards of light.

Silence.

Nimble wick collapsed, and I collapsed with him.



Chapter - 14

The Final Silence: Where Evil Lurks and the Fragile Flame of the Rival's Crystal is Lit

Gems Millennium School, UAE

Out of nowhere, the crystal in my pocket shattered with a sharp, ringing clang. Shards sparkled like stars before falling silently. Nimblewick collapsed. Marian and Nancy called his name desperately, but his eyes remained closed. The old clock inside him had finally stopped.

The room fell silent. Hope, the golden bird, fluttered gently to Nimblewick's chest. Her faint glow couldn't bring him back. Silence pressed like a heavy fog, thick and suffocating. Nimblewick was gone.

"He was the last," Marian whispered, holding a shard carefully. "The last to hold the old light."

Grief crashed over me—loss and bitter failure. Shadows whispered cruel lies: You failed. You let him die. You're weak.

Darkness closed in, tight and cold around my heart.

Then, through the shadows, Vivian appeared—neither memory nor ghost, but something in between. Her presence shimmered like moonlight on restless water. Her steady eyes met mine with quiet strength and unspoken understanding.

"Smith," she said softly, "you don't have to disappear. The darkness won't go away, but you don't have to drift with it. Will you stand, or keep hiding?"

Her voice broke through. I reached out. Our hands met. The dark cracked, just a little. A faint warmth stirred inside me.

As I regained consciousness, Marian and Nancy moved quietly to lay Nimblewick to rest. Grief filled the air—and beneath it, a warning, like a cold wind brushing through the cracks.

Then from the eastern ridges, a figure appeared. Elian—the boy Marian had saved—was pale, torn, eyes wild with fear and urgent desperation. In his hands: a battered beacon, pulsing like a heartbeat.

"There's something beneath the ridges," he gasped. "A shadow... it called Nimblewick's name." The room grew colder. We all turned to him.

"I saw it," he said. "It's not just darkness. It thinks. It waits. It's hungry. And it's coming."

I wanted to believe Nimblewick's death was the worst. But I knew better. The Rival-Great John- was free.

Hope's feathers burst into fierce light. A promise: You won't face this alone.

Then Hugo collapsed. Marian rushed to him. His face was pale, twisted in pain.

Gently, she pushed back his torn sleeve—and froze.

Etched deep into his skin was a dark mark, cold and pulsing with strange energy. The cruel sigil of the Rival.

Time seemed to stop. Marian's breath caught, thick with shock and pain.

"This mark," she said slowly, "it's the sign of the Rival. You... you've been working with them. You are the reason our plans failed? How could you side with the Dark Forces? Have you no love for our home?"

Hugo's eyes went wide. No words came.

The silence was sharp and suffocating.

Marian's hands clenched, trembling with heartbreak.

A sick feeling twisted inside me. How long had Hugo been hiding this? Was everything we believed a lie?

The only light left was the steady glow of Hope's feathers – fighting to hold back the darkness closing in on us all.



Chapter - 15

The Rival Rising

Felsted Prep School, England

Hope's wings fluttered like the dying light in Hugo's eyes. The mark pulsed steadily to the beat of my heart - or so it felt like. Suddenly, it glowed crimson, brighter than before. Hugo's body started to twitch. Dark tendrils wrapped around his arms and face. It roared, so loud that it blew us all away, even Hope, pushing her into the darkness. She had disappeared from our vision, but we could still feel her glow.

Hugo started thrashing, woken by the pain.

Then he stopped.

I knew that the dark presence—The Rival—had infected him.

His eyes opened slowly, no longer the soft grey of our friend, but a seething, glowing red. His mouth curled into a crooked smile. But it wasn't Hugo's smile. It was something else. Something ancient and merciless.

"You're too late," the voice said, but it wasn't Hugo speaking—it echoed in our minds, layered and warped, like a chorus from a nightmare.

Samuel reached for his plasma blade, but the air around us pulsed. With a flick of Hugo's—no, The Rival's—hand, the blade dissolved into shards of glass, scattering in the wind.

"You cling to hope," the voice sneered. "But Hope is fragile. Watch as I break it."

A sharp cry pierced the darkness.

Hope's glow flickered, then blazed from the shadows. She wasn't gone. Not yet. There was still a chance to save him, something that we had hope in.

The Rival spoke again, "Do you want to know why I want to take control of the Time Vault and the time loops?" Every word was imbued with his darkness. "It's because I want to watch you fail. I can watch you strive to save your fragile, little illusion of an Earth. And I enjoy watching you suffer." He paused. "And the best part? Every time you would come close, I could just reset and watch you fail again and again."

All of a sudden, his eyes filled with rage. He bellowed, "You just had to get in the way of my plans didn't you! You brought the key, the pendant and your willingness to let go!? It doesn't matter anyway." Its voice settled. "I've got you all right where I need you to be. I can dispose of all of you in the blink of an eye."

The Rival lifted Hugo's hand and struck it through his body.

He collapsed, joining Nimblewick in the void.

Then, the room was plunged into darkness and I couldn't see my companions. "Marian? Samuel? NANCY!" I felt a dark presence lunge at me, and I thought it was the end. But suddenly, a light blazed and cut through the shadows.

From the gloom, Hope rose, wings tattered but burning with a golden fire. Her light cut through the choking mist like a blade. With every beat of her wings, the darkness faltered, fighting back the crimson glow of corruption.

The Rival hovered in front of us, taking the form of a dark mist. "Hope? You still hold on? How?" it said. "Hope holds on because we believe in her." I called out. "Because we believe that with her, we will beat you." I drew my plasma blade and concentrated on Hope's golden glow. She started to sing, and with every note, something from behind me began to hum in unison. I chanted the ancient words that I had found in the Time Vault, and my blade started to glow.

Suddenly, the fragments of the Echo Crystal came together and imbued my sword with its power. I opened my eyes, and the plasma was golden, just like Hope's glow. "I will defeat you, and bring back the old Earth!" I cried.

The mist took a human form and materialized a blade just like mine. "Fine then. Bring it on."

He lunged at me, and I lunged at him.



Chapter - 16

The Echo's Edge

Daly College, India

A fierce battle broke out. My sword glowed uncontrollably, a wild surge of power surging through me. A beam of golden light erupted from the blade, crackling like lightning. The Echo Crystal embedded in the hilt shimmered—then cracked. I was stunned. It wasn't supposed to do that.

From the shadows, dark tendrils twisted and formed—the Rival, more powerful than ever, feeding on despair. His voice echoed like thunder:

"You cling to hope like a child to a bedtime story. Let me end your fairytale."

Beside me, Hope stumbled, her wings frayed, barely flickering. But she wasn't gone.

I tried to focus, but the crystal's glow pulsed wildly. Suddenly, a massive creature emerged—twisting limbs and red eyes. A Voidbeast. The Rival had summoned it from the darkness.

Just as I was about to falter, I remembered who I was fighting for—Hugo. Nimblewick. My friends. I clenched my blade and roared, leaping through the air, slicing through the dark mist. "I believe in her!" I cried. "I believe in Hope!"

Hope's fire reignited with my words. Her wings blazed gold, and the mist recoiled. The Echo Crystal responded, glowing so brightly it began to hum. I chanted the words carved into the Time Vault, and a beam of pure light shot from the sword—striking the Voidbeast and sending it howling into nothingness.

But The Rival... he wasn't finished.

He lunged at me with Hugo's stolen strength, eyes blazing. We clashed. Blades collided. Sparks flew. The Rival knocked my weapon away, and darkness closed in.

He whispered, "I enjoy watching you fail."

For a heartbeat, everything stilled. But then I heard it.

A voice. Small. Soft. Familiar.

Hugo.

He was fighting back. From within.

"Now!" he said.

I surged forward, retrieved my blade, and with one final strike, light met shadow—

And everything exploded into silence.

When I opened my eyes, the battlefield was gone. The Rival had vanished. Hope stood beside me, her light dim... but alive.

I looked around.

No sign of Hugo.

Only his pendant, lying in the dust.

Was it over?

Or had it just begun?

Chapter - 17

The Trials Begin...

SAI International Residential School, Cuttack, India

The Dark Rival fell; "it was over... the fight was over... right?", my first thought was that and my second thought was, "this totally looked like a Star Wars fight." As soon as he became one with the darkness around, it started to clear. My head felt lighter, I felt at peace after a good long ten days of pitch – black darkness that had fogged my mind.

My third thought? "Hugo. He was gone, wasn't he?". I wanted to deny the truth, go on another pain-staking mission to get him back but hiding the truth from myself isn't really going to do much for me. Marian was standing a few paces away. Her expression was a weird mix of grief and awe and she said, "You... You did it. You beat the Dark Rival but..." Marian and Nancy said "Hugo" in unison. I myself was confused, to be ecstatic and bewildered at me beating the Rival and possibly saving time itself or to sink down lifelessly and weep like a mad man for Hugo. Even though we had our ups and downs... He was a friend and losing one from my already limited amount of friends ought to hurt, right?

"He's now resting in a tranquil place, away from all the destruction of humans... away from pain. You would've wanted that, right?" said Hope. My brain split into two yet again, I wanted to feel happy that he was indeed away from all pain but I still didn't want to let go of Hugo. "This is no time to grieve... Without the Dark Rival there to pull the strings, the fabric of the universe is breaking apart, we need someone to control time!", said Nancy. All our heads slowly turned to her. There was a silent agreement between us that Nancy was perfect for this job. Nancy probably got the message as she was exceptional at reading expressions. She started to protest but Hope interrupted her.

"Time chose you Nancy, you were the one who received a fragment of reality.", said Hope. "I—You sure I am the one for this job?", she said with visible worry on her face. "Don't worry", said Hope as though perfectly reading her thoughts. "If an eternal being with feathers and one that glows and is literally made of fire and stardust is saying you're perfect for this job then you probably are." Marian gave a little chuckle through her sobs. Sameul was consoling her while crying himself. A small cruel part of me said, "I was one to defeat the Dark Rival and I don't even get the credit?" But it quickly got silenced by the big part of me happy for Nancy.

Nancy being the ruler of time was quite a lot to take in. It was so sudden... "All in favour of Nancy being the eternal empress of the flow of time?", asked Hope. Everyone agreed. Hope began chanting. He was chanting ancient Aethorian which no one understood. He later called it "English". Nancy began to

levitate, yellow flashes of light started pouring out of her eyes and mouth. The room basically became a tornado of books flying around. A few hit me but I didn't mind. Then Hope merged with Nancy. After all of it ended, she was... beautiful.

Like a goddess, which she was now, she looked like Athena, her pearly white gown flowing with the breeze, a hood covering her golden pupils. After everything ended, she said, "Finally... that hurt." Hope's voice came from her mouth and said, "Sorry..." The room was a mess. She raised her hand and golden sparking glitter danced on her fingertips. All the books rose and with a golden aura around them, arranged themselves on the shelves obediently. "Sweet!", she exclaimed. But outside was not sweet. There were tears in the sky with creatures coming out of them. "What the hell is going on?!", I exclaimed. The creatures were all flying towards us. "The trials", said Hope's voice. "We have to defeat those creatures to truly become the ruler of time.", said Hope. "Aww... not again...", I said barely above a mumble.



Chapter - 18

The Battle of Hope

The Cathedral and John Connon School, India

The sky tore apart, revealing a void filled with darkness and flames. We shaded our eyes, trying to catch a clearer glimpse of the creatures as they approached our small group of four. They landed swiftly, swooping down upon us with a resounding thud. These were no ordinary creatures - they were serpents and monsters sent to challenge us, to test whether we were truly ready for the power and responsibility of controlling time.

Nancy stood resplendent in a glowing golden robe, clutching a majestic emerald staff that hummed with power.

"LET'S DO THIS FOR HUGO!" Nancy cried, charging towards the monsters - with all of us right behind her.

I gripped my 'sword' tightly... until I realized I was holding a stick. My confidence crumbled. I scrambled to retrieve the real weapon I had dropped during the final clash with the dark rival. With a deep breath, I charged ahead!

We fought individually at first, only to slowly realize that this was a losing battle - unless we united. So, we embraced our strengths and began fighting as a team, helping one another face our deepest fears. After what felt like an eternity, we triumphed over many of the serpents, though we were already fatigued and our morale was dwindling.

Suddenly, thunder roared across the sky. With an ear-splitting screech, a monstrous entity - greater and more powerful than all the rest - descended.

I said, "We have a choice - stand down and crumble, or fight like our lives depend on it."

"Alright," Marian agreed. "Let's earn our happy ending!"



Chapter - 19

Shatterglass Truths

Podar Pearl School, Doha, Qatar

I've seen many skies, but this one bled differently.

The heavens cracked open with a sound like dying thunder, lightning-like fractures zigzagging across the sky. It looked like the world was trying to tear away its own skin. And from that rift, it emerged.

The creature commander.

A monstrous thing, half-shadow and half-flesh. Its shape refused to stay still. Bone plates shifted, limbs twisted, organs pulsed in sync with every ripple in time. It didn't look alive. It looked inevitable.

Marian stood beside me, calm on the outside. But her eyes betrayed her. Samuel adjusted the amplifiers strapped to his wrist, cracking a joke about how he'd never fought a time-warping kaiju on a Sunday. His hands were shaking.

Then we saw her.

Nancy hovered above the chaos, her body still as the storm roared beneath. The phoenix wings behind her - Hope's legacy - moved with a cold light. The warmth they once held had vanished. In its place was something sharpened. Controlled. Dangerous.

"She's not with us," Samuel said, barely a whisper.

Marian nodded. "She hasn't been... not since the Vault."

I stepped forward. My hand wrapped around the hilt of Solstice, the blade born from Hope's last breath. The moment I touched it, it lit up. A rush of fire climbed up my arm. This wasn't just a weapon. It was a promise.

Nancy looked down at me. "You came armed," she said. Her voice echoed like overlapping recordings. "Good. That means you're ready for the truth."

"You're not Nancy," I said.

"I am. And something more." Her tone stayed steady. "The Vault didn't return me. It rewrote me. I saw all of time. What it was. What it could become. What it must become."

Behind her, the commander drove a claw into the earth. Cracks spread under our feet. The world seemed to flicker, like it was struggling to stay real.

"You let it in," I said. "The Vault didn't rescue you. It infected you."

Nancy's eyes narrowed. "It showed me mercy. Hugo died for chaos. I saw what happens when time is left unchecked - nothing survives. If we want Earth to live, time has to stop."

"That's not peace," Marian said. "That's a cage."

Nancy exhaled slowly. Gold dust spiraled from her fingertips, shimmering with strange energy. "There's beauty in order. But you never saw it."

I raised Solstice. "Then show me."

The moment I charged, Solstice flared to life. I moved fast, closing the distance between us. The commander lunged, its limb crashing down. I sliced through it. Flames caught and spread across its body. It screamed, twisting the sky with sound.

Nancy looked away.

"You feel that," I said. "Because somewhere inside, you still remember what Hope was."

Samuel's disruptor fired beside me. Marian activated time anchors to steady the crumbling ground. I kept my eyes on Nancy.

"You could've told us," I said. "We would've helped you carry the burden."

Nancy's voice was soft now. "You would've tried to save me."

"We still can," I told her. "But not like this."

The commander reared again, limbs reforming. Nancy lifted a hand—and the world stopped.

Ash froze midair. Wind held its shape like it had forgotten how to move. Even the roar of the beast hovered between one second and the next.

Nancy stood at the center of it all. "I gave you a choice," she said. "Lay down your weapon. You can still live in the memory of a perfect world."

I walked toward her. She didn't try to stop me.

"I can't let you do this," I said. "Even if it means losing you again."

She looked at me. Something flickered in her expression. Maybe it was regret. Maybe something else.

"You were always the fire," she said quietly. "I was just trying to catch up."

I didn't answer. I just raised Solstice and stepped into the frozen air.

The blade cut through silence. Time shattered like glass.

And the light returned.

Nancy cried out - not in pain, but something deeper. Her wings faltered. For the briefest moment, I saw her. The real Nancy.

Then the battle began again.

Chapter - 20

Embers of Tomorrow

Shiv Nadar School, India

There's a sound that comes after the end of all things.

Not silence. Not grief.

But a soft, persistent hum, like the Earth remembering how to breathe.

The battlefield was dust. Ash hung suspended in the sky, catching the newborn sunlight like fragments of broken halos. The commander was gone. Melted into time itself, erased by the blade's final arc. Solstice lay cracked at my feet, its fire dimming. It had kept its promise. Now it rested.

Nancy hovered above the wreckage, but her wings were torn. Feathers of light shed like autumn leaves. She looked smaller now. Human. Her eyes were no longer gold. Just the soft brown I remembered from before the Vault.

"I don't remember who I am anymore," she whispered.

I stepped forward, careful with every movement, as if too much force might break her. "Then let's start with what you still feel."

She blinked slowly. "Guilt. Hope. And... you."

Marian came beside us, Samuel not far behind. He looked exhausted. Burnt-out circuits sparked faintly from the amplifiers on his arms. Marian's time anchors were flickering, unstable. Reality was stitching itself back together, but wrong in places. Time was healing, but not evenly.

"We don't have long," Marian said. "This rift... it's closing."

Nancy looked up at the tear in the sky, now narrowing like an eye finally shutting. "When it shuts completely, I go with it. The Vault marked me."

"You don't have to," Samuel said. "We've held time open before."

Nancy shook her head. "Not like this. I'm part of the loop now. An echo tethered to too many possible futures. If I stay... the war begins again." I didn't know what to say. Every possible word felt like dust in my throat.

But then she smiled. And it wasn't the distant, celestial smile of someone who'd seen eternity. It was the Nancy we lost, the one who danced barefoot during storms and sang off-key on purpose just to make us laugh.

"I'm not afraid," she said. "I saw a thousand ends. This one is the only one where light survives." She touched Solstice's cracked hilt. A faint pulse of warmth spread through the air.

"This is your world now," she said, her voice steady. "Guard it. Shape it. Break its rules if you must, but never stop loving it."

The rift flared. A wind howled, tugging at her wings.

I reached for her hand.

And for a moment, we held on.

Then the light swallowed her.

The sky stitched itself shut. And Nancy was gone.

Days passed. Or maybe it was weeks. Time was still strange, like it didn't fully trust us yet.

Marian stayed to rebuild the time anchors. Samuel disappeared for a while, then returned with a map of anomalies he'd found, new scars left by the battle. "Work to do," he said, smirking, though his eyes were tired.

And me?

I stood on the cliff where it all began, watching the sun rise through skies that no longer bled.

Solstice was reforged. Not as a weapon. But as a monument. A symbol of what we'd lost. And what we'd dared to save.

Nancy may have stepped into time. But her story hadn't ended. It had become part of ours.

And somewhere, out there in a world of embers and echoes

I knew she was watching.

Not as a god.

Not as a ghost.

But as a friend.

Always.



Chapter - 21

The Twilight Bloom Before Silence

SAI International School, Bhubaneswar, India

Many dawns have risen since the rift was mended.

Now the Earth inhales a new rhythm quieter and wiser. Now the grass blankets the scars of the old battlefields. The stars up above shine with no bend. Yet the remembrance of what was lingers not out of fear, but out of respect.

Samuel strides alone across the Northern Expanse, notebook in his hand. The distortions have faded, but he follows the faintest rhythms, charting the whispers of time as a gardener cultivates tender roots. He no longer tries to repair time but to learn its language.

Under the mountain, Marian's lab whispers. She addresses the anchors as if they were children learning to stand again. Day by day, the world is a little more secure. Dawn by dawn, a little less borrowed. At her wrist, Nancy's compass lies the needle still, but never false.

And Smith. Smith has become Solstice. Not the sword, but the concept. The forge is no longer a battlefield, its fire reworked for healing. Folks arrive not for fighting, but for requiem for tales told in whispers and embers.

In the center of the sanctuary is a single bloom a flower unlike any other. No one put it there. It appeared the day the rift was mended. Petals like twilight. Scent like dawn. They named it Nancy's Bloom.

It never wilts. It never propagates. It just stays.

Then, one morning, as wind stirs the leaves and time pauses. The bloom closes. Not in grief. Not in loss. But in silence.

A silence with peace. A silence that affirms;

The tale endures. Even when there's no one left to speak it. Yet peace has depths which even time can't always keep.

Down very deep in the earth – below Anchor Point Zero, entombed in a vault of rusty metal and abandoned code - something stirs.

A vibration. A flicker. A breath.

Systems long dead flicker to life. Red lights flash softly, one after another, like a heartbeat relearning its beat.

"Static. Then—the sound of her voice, weak, fractured, reverberating through the black. "If you're hearing this. I failed."

Raw data flows across a fractured screen. Coordinates. Energy surges. Temporal shards. And far within the grave of the rift, something throbs again. Once. Then again.

The bloom above remains closed. The Earth is still.

But beneath the silence, something listens. Something remembers. Because time?

Time has never been still.

And somewhere...It begins again.











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