

As usual, I went to college the next morning. When I entered the campus I saw Anthony standing near the entrance, which wasn't surprising because he had a strange habit of arriving earlier than everyone else.

I actually liked that about him — although his bright clothes irritated my eyes more than usual that day.

"Wsg Justin," he said while walking beside me. "How much money did you make?"

I told him everything — how the extraction had failed, how the Chrono Hub couldn't take my years, and how they had compensated me anyway.

While we were talking, William noticed us from across the corridor and walked over while adjusting his glasses.

"Yo Will," Anthony said immediately. "This guy got free money yesterday."

William looked at me with curiosity.

"Is that true, Justin?"

"Yeah," I replied.

Before we could continue the conversation, the professor entered the classroom and everyone quickly settled into their seats.

It was our physics class — and yes, it was the same professor who also taught us history. Even after months I still found that combination strange.

That day the lecture was about fields and wave interactions. I remember the class very clearly because what followed the next day would become impossible to forget.

Toward the end of the lecture he wrote three equations on the board and assigned them as homework.

The questions involved calculating interference patterns between overlapping electromagnetic fields and determining how different wave frequencies interact when they collide inside a confined space.

At the time it seemed difficult, but not impossible.

The next day, however, something unexpected happened.

No one had completed the homework-Not even me.

The previous day had been strange for me — my mind kept racing with thoughts I couldn't control, and after struggling for hours I had simply given up and gone to sleep.

When the professor realized that no one had done the assignment, his reaction shocked all of us.

“Are you serious?” he said while staring at the class in disbelief. “Was it really that difficult?”

For a moment it looked like he might explode with anger, but he forced himself to calm down before continuing.

“I'll give you the entire weekend,” he said firmly. “If I don't see those equations solved by Monday, then don't bother complaining about your grades.”

Without waiting for any response he grabbed his tablet and walked out of the classroom, clearly frustrated.

It was the first time I had ever seen him that angry.....Usually no one wanted to upset him, and I had always assumed I was the only one struggling with the assignment.

But when I finally opened my tablet and looked at the questions again, I immediately understood why nobody had solved them.

The equations weren't ordinary homework.

They described something far more complex — something that would soon become the first real clue to understanding what had gone wrong with me.

An entire weekend — I was sure that would be enough to solve three equations.

At least that was what I believed when I first opened the homework on my tablet. The moment I began working, however, the confidence faded quickly. When the first equation refused to make sense, I decided to skip it for the moment and moved on to the second and third.

Surprisingly... those were much easier.

Within a short time I had worked through both of them without much trouble, which only made the first one more irritating.

“Ugh... why won't you work?” I muttered while staring at the screen.

My mind still felt strange — restless and unusually active — yet I forced myself to stay calm and keep focusing on the problem. Every time I thought I had reached the right path, the calculations collapsed somewhere in the middle.

“Hm... maybe this variable is wrong,” I whispered while adjusting the equation again.

Just then a voice echoed from outside my house.

“Come out, nerd!”

Anthony.

Even though our houses were built underground, his voice somehow managed to travel all the way down.

I leaned back in my chair and sighed.

Heh... that guy never knew how to stay quiet.

For a moment I thought about going outside, but the equation on the screen dragged my attention back.

No distractions.

Not this time.

So I ignored him and continued working.

Hours passed. Attempts piled up. Numbers changed.....Still the equation refused to cooperate.

“Damn... this thing makes no sense,” I murmured while rubbing my eyes.

By the time Saturday ended I still hadn't solved it, but something inside me refused to stop trying.

On Sunday afternoon I started again, rewriting the equation from the beginning and slowly working through each step.

Then suddenly something clicked.

“Huh... wait.”

One small change — a tiny shift in one of the variables — and the entire structure of the equation suddenly began to make sense. I stared at the screen while the final numbers aligned perfectly.

For a moment I simply sat there, making sure I hadn't made a mistake somewhere.

Then I leaned back slowly in my chair.

Finally.

After hours of trying, the answer was sitting right in front of me, A tired smile crossed my face as the tension in my shoulders slowly faded.

That had been harder than I expected....By Sunday night exhaustion had completely taken over. I closed my tablet, stretched for a moment, and dropped onto my bed.

Within minutes I was asleep.

Completely unaware of how strange the next day was about to become.

The next day everyone submitted their homework.

No one wanted to lose grades — for God's sake.

When the class ended, I went home feeling satisfied. As usual, once the students had left the campus, the massive outer walls of the college slowly retracted into the ground.

After learning about the tragedy of 2072, I understood why this mechanism existed.

Nothing built above the surface could be trusted anymore.

After reaching home I rested for a while, and later in the evening I went out to play hockey with my friends along with a few other students from college.

It turned out to be a surprisingly fun day.

My team had scored twenty-nine points while William's team barely managed eighteen, which of course led to Anthony laughing so loudly that people across the field could probably hear him.

But that part of the day was completely normal.

What made that day unforgettable was something else entirely.

At around three in the morning, there was a knock on our door.

Actually... my father heard it first.

I only came out of my room after he checked the entrance screen and allowed the visitor to come down through the lift.

When the lift doors opened, I froze.

It was my professor.

What was he doing here at three in the morning?

He was completely soaked from the rain, his hair dripping water onto the floor as he stood there breathing heavily, as if he had run all the way to our house.

In his hand he held a tablet.

"Mr. Brown..." my professor said between breaths.

My father glanced at me briefly before stepping aside and gesturing for him to come inside.

The professor entered the house and quickly used the wall dryer to remove the water from his clothes before sitting down on the couch.

The atmosphere suddenly felt heavy, my father and I sat across from him while he silently picked up the cup of tea that had been placed in front of him.

For several minutes none of us spoke – We simply watched him as he drank the tea slowly, his expression still tense.

Five full minutes passed – Then he finally placed the cup down on the table and looked directly at me..

“Justin... There’s something you must know...”

He sat there for nearly an hour more — most of the time filled with silence. My father and I remained seated across from him while the professor slowly finished his tea, occasionally glancing toward me as if trying to understand something that still made no sense to him.

Finally he stood up from the couch.

“Hank...” my dad said the moment my professor got up to finally leave the house.

The professor paused near the lift and turned around.

My father continued — his voice firm.

“Don’t tell about this to anyone.”

For a brief moment the professor looked toward me... then nodded slowly.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Brown — I won’t.”

He stepped inside the lift. The doors slid shut... and the platform carried him toward the surface level.

The next day I went to college.

I couldn't sleep the entire night — the events of yesterday kept replaying in my mind again and again.

It was unbelievable what had just happened.

It was physics class again...

Anthony and William — as usual — were busy in their banter and nonsense.

I went to sit next to them, but whatever they were talking about barely reached my ears — my mind was still affixed on last night.

“You know, Anthony...” William said while adjusting his glasses and smirking slightly. “You should ask Sarah for her clothes — perhaps they will look better on you.”

Anthony jumped up instantly, grabbed William's glasses, and ran across the lecture hall.

“Take them if you can, fatso!” Anthony shouted while running.

William chased him through the rows of seats, the two of them laughing like idiots until the classroom door suddenly opened.

They stopped immediately, because the professor had arrived.

He walked to the front of the class and began the lecture... not even looking at me.

It felt like nothing had happened.

I wasn't sure whether I should feel relieved about that — or disappointed.

My father clearly didn't want anyone to know what had happened... yet I had done something extraordinary.

Still — I chose to remain silent.

And looking back now... that was probably the best decision I ever made.

Because what my professor told me later that day...

Would soon change my entire life.

The lecture that day was about mass and fields.

Mr. Hanks — my professor — began explaining something that sounded simple at first but quickly turned strange the deeper he went into it.

He said that mass might not really be a “thing” the way we imagine it. Instead, mass could simply be a disturbance in a field — a ripple inside something invisible that fills the entire universe.

For example, he talked about the Higgs field.

The way he explained it made me imagine the universe as an endless ocean of fields, and particles as nothing more than tiny ripples moving through that ocean. When a particle interacts strongly with the Higgs field, it slows down — and that resistance is what we interpret as mass.

In other words... mass might simply be how strongly something pushes against the field around it.

It sounded less like physics and more like philosophy.

He concluded the lecture by saying,

“The idea of today’s lecture is simple — fields are more fundamental than particles. Particles might just be the visible behavior of something deeper.”

He paused for a moment before continuing.

“I’ll give you time to digest this. Tomorrow we will continue from here.”

With that he began packing his things and switched off the digital board.

Most students rushed out immediately, eager to escape another long lecture, but I stayed seated until the classroom slowly emptied.

“Justin, we’re planning to go for a drink right now — it’ll take fifteen minutes,” William said while looking at me, Anthony standing beside him.

“No... you guys go,” I replied quietly. “I still have some doubts.”

They shrugged and left.

I waited until they disappeared down the hallway before walking toward the professor.

“Sir... I want to talk about yesterday.”

Mr. Hanks froze for a moment.

He slowly stopped packing his bag and looked around the classroom — first toward the door, then toward the empty seats behind me.

Then he leaned closer and said quietly,

“Not here.”

He glanced around one more time, picked up a few of his things, and gestured toward the door.

“Follow me.”

He walked out of the room without another word.

What I didn't know... was that Anthony and William had been watching the entire thing.

They were standing just far enough away to avoid being noticed.

My professor led me through darker corridors of the college — parts of the building I had never seen before. The further we walked, the quieter everything became.

To be honest...

I was starting to feel a little nervous.

Behind us — at a distance — Anthony and William followed quietly.

“I didn’t know Justin was not straight...” Anthony murmured to William while trying not to laugh.

“Oh shut up, Anth — this is serious,” William whispered back.

Meanwhile Mr. Hanks and I reached an old storage room at the end of the corridor.

He pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The room smelled like old equipment and dust.

Once I entered, he shut the door behind us.

Outside the room, Anthony and William quietly leaned closer to the door, trying to hear what we were saying.

Inside, Mr. Hanks didn’t speak immediately.

He stood there for a moment — staring at the floor — as if trying to decide how to say whatever was on his mind.

Finally he dragged a chair across the floor and gestured for me to sit.

Still without saying a word.

Why is he so confused? I wondered.

At that moment I had absolutely no idea what was actually happening in the world around me... or what it had to do with me.

Mr. Hanks finally looked up.

“Justin...” he began slowly.

“You are the most mature student I have ever had — and I hope you can listen to what I’m about to say with the same maturity.”

His voice was calm, but the weight behind his words was impossible to ignore.

Something was coming.

And whatever it was...

It didn’t feel pleasant.

“Looks like they’re discussing something very important...” Anthony whispered while bending slightly to peek through the keyhole of the storage room door.

“What do you see?” William asked while pinching the bridge of his nose impatiently.

“I see... a storage room. Very dusty. And uh...” Anthony scratched the back of his head.
“I actually have myopia, so can you—”

Before he could finish, William pushed him aside and leaned toward the keyhole himself.

“Move.”

Inside the room, I had never seen Professor Hanks look this serious before.

“Justin...” he began slowly, his voice carrying a weight that immediately made my chest feel tight.

“What you did yesterday was not just a fluke.”

He stepped back while rubbing his forehead, and from the way his eyes wandered across the room it was obvious that he was struggling to find the right words.

I remained silent while watching him carefully.

After a moment he came closer again and lowered his voice.

“Listen carefully... do you know how Chrono Exchange works? Did your father ever try to explain anything to you?”

“No,” I replied quietly while shaking my head.

Curiosity flickered across my face, though somewhere beneath it a faint sense of fear had already begun creeping in.

The professor studied my expression for a few seconds before speaking again.

“Is your mind starting to behave... a little differently?” he asked slowly.

The moment he said that, I knew exactly where this conversation was heading.

“Yes,” I admitted.

I explained how strange everything had felt since the day I suddenly collapsed — how my thoughts had started racing faster than usual, how certain ideas felt clearer than they ever had before, and how it constantly felt as if something inside my mind had quietly changed.

But I never mentioned receiving forty extra years.

For some reason I simply kept that part to myself.

It didn't feel important enough to bring up... and besides, those years were worth millions of dollars. The last thing I wanted was unnecessary attention or trouble surrounding them.

Tch... it's probably nothing important anyway.

So the information remained locked inside my head.

The professor listened without interrupting, his expression growing more serious with every word I spoke.

When I finally finished explaining everything, he slowly nodded.

“Now I’m certain what has happened to you...” he said quietly while taking a slow breath.

My chest tightened as he looked directly into my eyes.

“Justin... your chip has broken.”

Outside the storage room, Anthony and William heard every word, Anthony slowly turned toward William while lowering his voice.

“William... did you hear that?” he whispered.

William adjusted his glasses while glancing back at the door.

“Yeah,” he said calmly. “And it sounds like there’s a lot more going on in there than we thought.”

“Chip?” I asked slowly, the word sounding strange even as it left my mouth. I knew it wasn’t something I understood yet, and perhaps because of that my mind immediately tried to deny it.

“Oh—you mean my mobile chip? Nah, it’s fine, I’ve used it—”

“No.”

My professor interrupted me before I could finish.

“Justin... just listen. Give me ten minutes and you’ll understand everything,” he said while pulling a chair closer and sitting down in front of me, his hands clasped together as if he was preparing to explain something extremely delicate.

Then he began explaining.

He had asked for ten minutes—but the explanation stretched well beyond thirty. This wasn’t something a person could casually say in a few sentences.

He spoke continuously while I sat there absorbing every word. Questions formed in my mind one after another, yet I chose to remain silent because my thoughts were still struggling to process the information.

NeuroLink.

That was the name of the chip inside our heads.

Yes—at birth, chips were secretly implanted into every human brain. In fact, the entire Chrono Exchange system depended on those chips.

“Without the chip,” my professor explained while pacing slowly across the room, “you would live naturally—sometimes even up to a hundred years if you were extremely healthy.”

He paused briefly, allowing the statement to sink in.

When I finally questioned him about how and why something like this could exist, he didn't answer immediately. Instead, he raised his hand and pointed toward the small birthmark on the side of my head.

"It isn't random, Justin. That's where your chip was implanted."

He folded his arms as he continued.

"The government inserts them at different locations in every child to avoid suspicion. Only a handful of high-level officials even know the full details."

My head felt heavy as the words settled inside my mind.

"What does that have to do with me?" I asked slowly, leaning forward in my chair while trying to keep my voice steady. "And what does it have to do with my equation... or my mind suddenly racing all the time?"

The professor looked straight at me.

"Everything."

The word echoed in my head far louder than anything else he had said that night.

How was I supposed to take this in?

A chip inside my brain — Chrono Exchange controlling human lifespan — and the government hiding all of it... the thoughts collided inside my head faster than I could process them, and for a moment it felt as if the room itself had grown heavier around me.

It was simply too much — far too much — for a nineteen-year-old mind to absorb in a single conversation.

Yet even with my mind spinning in confusion, I stayed silent and waited.

Because I knew he wasn't finished explaining yet.

After another thirty minutes of talking... many things slowly began to make sense.

My professor knew I loved history, and he also knew that if he explained things through historical examples I would understand them better than through complicated science.

So he gave me an example from the polio outbreaks of the 1950s.

For adults, the cure already existed — a treatment capable of eliminating the disease completely. But when it came to children, the system worked differently.

Instead of giving them the full cure, governments distributed a weakened preventive dose that only protected them for a short period of time... sometimes barely a month.

Children were asked to take those drops again and again.

The disease could have been eradicated entirely — but it wasn't.

Because repeating the treatment meant continuous profit.

My professor paced slowly across the dusty storage room while explaining this, occasionally glancing at me to make sure I was following.

“Now imagine something similar happening on a much larger scale,” he continued, folding his arms.

“The chips implanted inside our heads work in a very similar way.”

I stayed silent while trying to absorb the comparison.

“A child is born with roughly one hundred years of natural lifespan,” he explained while raising his hand slightly as if outlining the numbers in the air. “But the system quietly extracts around sixty to seventy of those years and stores them within the Chrono Exchange network.”

My chest tightened slightly.

“Those years are then sold — often through hidden or illegal markets.”

I leaned back slowly in my chair.

“Each human life becomes a source of enormous value... sometimes worth nearly fifteen million dollars.”

For a moment the room fell silent...Now everything was starting to make sense.

The Chrono system... the economy built around lifespan... the reason people barely lived beyond twenty or thirty years anymore.

But one question still remained.

What was wrong with me?

“Justin...” my professor said while stopping in front of me and resting his hand against the edge of the table.

“The chip comes with several side effects. One of them is limiting the brain’s analytical capacity. I don’t know the exact neurological mechanics behind it, but people with functional chips consistently show reduced problem-solving ability compared to what the human brain is naturally capable of.”

He paused briefly before continuing.

“The moment you solved that equation... that was when the idea first crossed my mind. Because a normal person simply wouldn’t have been able to solve it.”

He raised three fingers in front of me.

“Three things helped you reach that solution.”

He lowered the first finger.

“First — psychology. You never assumed the equation was impossible. To you it was simply a homework problem, and history has shown many examples where problems remained unsolved only because people believed they couldn’t be solved.”

The second finger lowered.

“Second — persistence. You kept working on it for days. The scientist who declared that equation unsolvable apparently worked on it for only one day, and his confidence in that conclusion stopped him from trying again.”

Then he lowered the final finger.

“And third... the most important factor.”

His voice grew quieter.

“Your chip has malfunctioned.”

He hesitated slightly before finishing the thought.

“Or... perhaps you were born with a defective one. Either way — I’m certain something about your chip isn’t functioning normally.”

“Oof...” I muttered quietly while pressing a hand against my forehead.

Outside the room, Anthony and William had heard every word...When my professor noticed the faint shifting sound near the door, he turned his head slightly and spoke toward it.

“You might as well come in.”

The door opened slowly.

Anthony stepped inside first, scratching the back of his head awkwardly.

“Hey... Justin... we were just passing by.. Hehehe” he said with an uneasy laugh.

William followed him inside while adjusting his glasses.

“I hate to admit but we heard most of it,” he admitted calmly.

The professor sighed softly and gestured toward the chairs.

“Well, since you’ve already heard this much... you might as well sit down.”

They moved closer and took their seats...Even after everything that had just been revealed, one final question still remained in my mind.

I stepped forward slightly and looked at my professor.

“Sir... if this is such a dangerous secret, then why tell us about it?” I asked slowly. “Why tell me?”

I swallowed before continuing.

“Now you know... I know... and even my friends know. If everything you’re saying is true, then all of us could be in serious trouble.”

The room fell completely silent.

I waited for his answer — because I needed to understand why my professor would choose to reveal something so dangerous to someone my age, knowing fully well that a secret like this could cost us our lives.

“Because I once had a friend...” the professor said slowly while resting his hands on his waist as Anthony, William, and I watched him speak.

He paused for a moment and swallowed hard before continuing. Sweat had begun forming along his forehead, and the way his voice trembled made it obvious that whatever he was about to say wasn't easy for him.

"They died... because I didn't warn them," he admitted quietly. "I should have told them the truth — but I stayed silent."

His eyes dropped toward the floor.

"It was my fault."

For a moment the room was completely silent except for the faint hum of the ventilation system.

The professor took another deep breath before speaking again.

"And I don't want to repeat that same mistake with you, Justin," he continued. "Now that you know the truth... just stay safe. Be careful — and keep this information to yourself."

He turned toward Anthony and William.

"Mr. Ginart... Mr. Matthews... you two must remain silent as well. If the wrong people hear about this, your families could end up in serious danger. Do you understand?"

Anthony immediately straightened his posture and raised his hand in a mock salute.

"Yes sir!"

William and I both looked at him with completely serious expressions.

Anthony lowered his hand awkwardly.

“What? I was just complying,” he said defensively.

William leaned closer and whispered sharply into his ear.

“Oh shut up, idiot. Can you be serious for at least one moment?”

The professor sighed faintly before stepping toward the door.

“Alright... you should all go home now. I’ll see you in tomorrow’s class.”

With that, he left the storage room.

Anthony waited until the professor disappeared down the corridor before turning toward me.

“Damn, Justin,” he said while shaking his head. “Looks like you’re smarter than William now.”

William didn’t respond.

Instead he simply walked out of the room, clearly lost in thought.

Anthony and I exchanged a quick glance before following him into the hallway.

After a few seconds of silence I spoke.

“I need a break,” I said quietly. “I’m going to grab a coffee in the campus café.”

Anthony’s face suddenly lit up.

“Oh... then you might love a ride,” he said while rubbing his hands together excitedly.

I immediately shook my head.

“No. Not today — not today, Anthony. Today has been... a lot.”

I exhaled slowly.

“Let’s just walk.”

So the three of us started walking toward the café — none of us speaking much, each lost in our own thoughts.

None of us realized it yet...

But our story had only just begun.

We sat quietly at the café table for a while.

For the first few minutes none of us said anything. Even the usual background noise of the campus café felt strangely distant as the three of us waited for our drinks.

For the first time since I had known him, Anthony didn't order his usual Caramel Nebula Latte.

All three of us simply ordered coffee.

Just coffee.

The order arrived a few minutes later, delivered by one of the service robots that worked inside the café. The machine carefully placed the cups on our table before rolling away toward the next customer.

No one even bothered to thank it.

I knew it was just a robot... but still.

The silence had started feeling uncomfortable, so I tried to break it.

"Hey, Will," I said while lifting my cup slightly. "Prepared for the exams?"

He didn't respond... William kept staring down at the table for a moment before giving a small nod, as if acknowledging my question without actually answering it.

I glanced toward Anthony.

He looked calmer than William, though I couldn't tell if he genuinely wasn't affected or if he simply didn't want to show it. Still, the fact that he had ordered plain coffee instead of his usual ridiculous drink told me something was bothering him too.

If anyone could lighten the mood, though... it was Anthony.

Suddenly he stood up from his chair and before William could react, Anthony grabbed his coffee cup.

“Hey!” William shouted.

“If you’re not drinking it, fatso, then this one belongs to me,” Anthony said proudly while holding the cup away from him.

“Give it back!” William snapped.

“Not in this life, buddy – hehehe” Anthony replied with a mischievous grin.

William stood up as if he was about to chase him — then suddenly sat back down.

“Go ahead,” he said calmly. “I just won’t pay for it.”

“Hehehe.”

Anthony narrowed his eyes.

“Don’t copy my laugh, you nerd.”

William leaned back in his chair.

“Hehehe.”

Anthony jumped toward him instantly, and the next thing I knew the two of them had started wrestling right there in the middle of the café.

It didn't even look like a real fight from my side — more like two oversized children trying to prove who was more annoying.

People around us started laughing.

Anthony grabbed William from behind while William struggled to escape his grip, both of them slipping and bumping into chairs while the entire café watched the chaos unfold.

I couldn't help laughing.

After a few minutes the “fight” finally ended, and both of them collapsed back into their seats — breathing heavily, sweating, and still laughing.

For the first time since the conversation with Professor Hanks, the tension between us had finally loosened.

I took a sip of my coffee and looked at them. Seeing them like that, laughing and wrestling as if nothing had happened, I realized the calm was only temporary and that all of us needed a break from everything weighing on our minds—then suddenly an idea clicked.

“Guys... we should go on a trip,” I said slowly. “It might help us clear our heads.”

Both of them looked up immediately...The idea seemed to excite them.

We ended up talking for another hour, throwing around random ideas and locations while the earlier heaviness slowly faded away.

That's the strange thing about friendship.

One hour earlier we had been sitting in shock, trying to process a secret that could change everything about our lives — and now we were laughing, joking, and planning a trip as if nothing had happened.

With friends, even the darkest moments can briefly disappear.

But the place we eventually chose to visit...

Was something we would later regret more than anything else.

Norway.

That was the country we chose — the travel wasn't too expensive, the place was famous for its scenic views and quiet luxury hotels, and most importantly it wasn't overcrowded like most popular tourist spots. It felt like the perfect balance for a short escape.

"Fine then — I'll ask my parents tonight and we'll discuss everything tomorrow after college, alright?" William said while pushing his chair back and adjusting his glasses before standing up.

"Just make sure your mom doesn't start crying the moment you leave the house," Anthony added while laughing.

I laughed too.

“Oh shut up, you two — I’ll be the first one to get permission,” William said confidently as he grabbed his bag and walked out of the café.

Soon after that we all headed back to our respective homes.

My father didn’t even think twice before saying no.

He had always stopped me from going out anywhere — I had never even been on a school trip before, and every time I asked him why, he simply refused without giving a proper reason.

This time though... things were different. I wanted to tell him everything Professor Hanks had told me — about the chip, about the system — but I held myself back, because telling him would only create more chaos.

I hesitated.

Another reason for that hesitation was our relationship.

I had always listened to everything my father said, but deep down I hated him. I blamed him for what had happened to my mother — something inside me had never forgiven him for that day.

Still, pushing those thoughts aside, I tried asking him again — and this time I stopped eating as well.

I knew I needed this trip badly, and I wasn’t even asking him for money — although money had never been a problem anyway. I already had my own from the Chrono Hub visit earlier.

The next day at college we met again.

Anthony and William had both received permission from their parents — even William, which honestly surprised me. His mother was probably the most sensitive person I had ever seen.

Once, when we were twelve, the three of us had taken William to a small restaurant nearby — we had been gone for barely thirty minutes when his mom, Mrs. Elena Ginart, had already called the police saying her son was missing.

Oof.

That had been one of the most chaotic days of my life — I still couldn't imagine what William had gone through that day.

Anyway, when I told my friends I still needed a few more days to convince my father, they immediately started laughing.

“Come on, Justin — you're apparently smarter than anyone on Earth now and you still can't convince your own father?” Anthony joked while William chuckled beside him.

I ignored them.

Three days passed but Still no permission. Finally, I decided to take a very dangerous step.

What I did next...

Shocked my father in ways no one could have imagined.

I finally decided that I didn't need permission anymore.

Late that night, around three in the morning, I called Anthony and William and told them everything — how I had tried every possible way to convince my father, how every conversation had ended the same way, and how I had reached the point where only one option remained.

Just go.

For once, both of them were completely silent.

“Oohhkayy... Are you sure though?” William asked on the call.

I knew exactly why they were worried. Sneaking out of the country without permission wasn't exactly a harmless decision.

“Don't bother yourselves,” I replied calmly. “I won't tell my dad that you both knew about this — so you're safe.”

After a moment the call ended, and the three of us agreed to leave the following week — on the very first day of our summer vacation.

The days between that decision and the actual trip turned out to be strangely important for me.

During that time I focused on learning how to control my thoughts.

Professor Hanks continued teaching as if nothing unusual had ever happened, and although he never treated me differently in class, I now found myself filled with far more questions than before.

Sometimes I even wondered if my father already knew something about everything that had happened — about the chip, about the system.

But I never asked.

For reasons I had already made very clear to myself.

Over the next three or four days I slowly learned how to channel my thoughts and control the strange rush of ideas that had been overwhelming me since the incident.

In that process I discovered something else.

Even though my chip had broken, my lifespan was still being regulated.

Before the malfunction the chip had already set a total limit of sixty-eight years for my life — including the extra forty years I had mysteriously received. And even after the chip stopped functioning properly, that limit still remained in place.

By the time the day of our trip finally arrived, I felt ready.

I had learned to handle the chaos inside my mind — the nausea, the uncontrollable waves of thought, the sudden bursts of emotion that seemed to appear without warning.

Everything felt stable again.

And with that strange sense of calm, I prepared myself to leave for Norway...

Completely unaware that this journey was about to become the real turning point of my story—the moment that would eventually explain how I ended up where I am now.

[Year 2261]

“Sir...”

A familiar voice pulled me out of my thoughts while someone gently shook my shoulder. I had been sitting near the railing of the staircase overlooking the laboratory floor, lost in memories while my assistants worked below on the Chrono machine.

For a moment my mind struggled to return to the present.

They had warned me the machine would take time to stabilize, and while waiting I had drifted back into the past again—replaying the long chain of choices that had eventually brought me here.

“What is it?” I asked while straightening myself. “I was in the middle of something.”

Before anyone answered, a sharp blast echoed through the laboratory and the sound snapped my attention toward the chamber.

The moment I turned around, my body froze.

One of my assistants stood several meters away with a gun in her hand.

“Ella...?” I said slowly, disbelief rising in my voice.

For a second I hoped I was misunderstanding the situation, yet the cold expression on her face made it painfully clear that I wasn't.

"Raise your arms, Justin," she said calmly while keeping the weapon trained on me. "It won't be good for you otherwise."

A thousand thoughts rushed through my mind at once.

Why?

How?

Yet none of those questions reached my lips, because the seriousness in her eyes told me this was not the moment for arguments.

Slowly, I raised my hands.

The instant I did, she rushed forward without hesitation and struck me hard across the head with the flat end of the gun.

The world collapsed into darkness.

...

When my eyes finally opened again, everything felt heavy and distant.

The first thing I noticed was the dull metal interior surrounding me, along with the low vibration of an engine moving somewhere beneath my feet.

A police van.

My hands were restrained and my head throbbed where she had struck me, yet the realization of what had happened arrived faster than the pain.

So this was how it ended.

I didn't shout.

Instead I leaned my head back against the cold metal wall and slowly closed my eyes.

I'm sorry, Dad.

And once again... my thoughts drifted back to the past... To the choices that had led me here.

[year 2242.]

Where was I...?

Right.

The day we left for Norway.

It was already afternoon when the three of us rushed toward the nearby travel hub, though "rushed" was a generous word because Anthony had, as usual, managed to delay us long enough to almost miss the schedule.

Anthony was never on time. In fact, he was one of those people you had to tell to arrive an hour early—and somehow he would still show up late.

We finally reached the hub at around two o'clock, breathless but relieved since our tickets had already been booked.

William's phone buzzed again.

And again.

And again.

His mother had already called him four times.

Anthony and I immediately burst out laughing.

"Come on, guys," William said while checking the screen and sighing. "I just have a caring mom."

"Oh yeah, she cares about you a lot," Anthony replied while throwing an arm around my shoulder. "The night you get married she'll probably sit in the room too—just to make sure the romance is going properly and her son isn't facing any problems."

William rolled his eyes.

"At least I'm getting married someday, Anthony," he shot back. "Not like you... you'll probably end up marrying a guy with the kind of clothes you wear."

Anthony froze for half a second before slowly raising his water bottle like a weapon.

“Oh... you’re dead now.”

William instantly turned and ran.

Anthony chased him across the polished floor while people around us laughed, and I stood there trying to breathe through the laughter building in my chest.

The travel hub itself was buzzing with activity. Families dragged luggage toward departure gates while large digital boards flickered with teleportation schedules, and somewhere nearby two passengers had begun arguing loudly near the security line.

“Not fair!” one of them snapped.

“Your fault!” the other shot back.

Their argument echoed briefly through the hall before security staff stepped in to calm them down.

A moment later the announcement speakers crackled to life.

“Teleportation security checks for the Norway route are now open.”

Still laughing, we walked toward the scanners and passed through the security gates before entering the departure hall.

This was the section from where we would be teleported to Norway.

Teleportation wasn't exactly cheap, but it was completely worth the money because it saved days of travel time. In less than an hour we would be standing on the other side of the continent.

"William, you know how this works, right?" I asked while glancing toward the long row of teleportation pods lining the hall. "You must've read about it somewhere."

William pushed his glasses slightly higher.

"Yeah... kind of," he replied thoughtfully. "It disassembles your atoms and reassembles them somewhere else."

He paused before turning toward Anthony.

"In Anthony's language... you die and then respawn."

Anthony's eyes widened immediately.

"I've never used one before," he said while knocking lightly on the glass chamber. "Wooh... I'm excited, idiots."

The three of us stepped inside.

The teleportation pod looked like a transparent chamber that slowly adjusted its size until it fit snugly around us, and once the door sealed shut the entire structure rotated smoothly into a horizontal position while a faint mist of gas began filling the space around our bodies.

A soft humming sound built around us.

The lights flickered.

For a moment it felt like every cell inside my body had been pulled apart into fragments of light.

And then—

The world snapped back into shape.

We were standing in Norway.

And someone was already waiting for us there.

“Hey—” the man shouted something in Norwegian.

The three of us looked at each other in confusion.

A man was waving his arms wildly at us from across the teleportation hall while shouting in what was most probably Norwegian, though the strange part wasn't the language—it was the expression on his face.

He looked far too excited... and far too relieved.

Cold air drifted through the massive glass hall the moment the teleportation chamber behind us opened, carrying with it the sharp, clean scent of rain and pine from outside.

Large digital boards flickered overhead with Norwegian text and arrival codes, while travelers moved past us with luggage carts and quiet conversations echoing across the polished floor.

Then he suddenly started running toward us.

Halfway through he nearly tripped over his own feet, stumbled forward awkwardly, and somehow managed to keep running.

“I think... I think we should prepare for—” Anthony muttered nervously while slowly stepping behind me.

William grabbed his sleeve immediately.

“Just stay still,” he whispered sharply.

The man finally reached us, bending forward slightly as he tried to catch his breath.

“I am... uh... Erik,” he said between breaths while pointing at himself. “Your travel guide. I’ve been waiting—waiting for you...”

He paused, placing both hands on his knees while breathing heavily before finally forcing the rest of the sentence out.

“—for a very long time.”

Something about the way he said that made my stomach tighten slightly.

He was only a few years older than us and dressed in clothes that looked suspiciously similar to Anthony’s fashion choices.

William leaned closer to me and whispered quietly,

“I think we just found Anthony’s brother.”

I had to bite my lip to stop myself from laughing.

Still trying to stay serious, I stepped forward and asked the obvious question.

“How long did it take?”

The guide looked up at us with an expression that now seemed far more anxious than relieved, his eyes briefly darting toward the teleportation chamber behind us as if expecting something else to appear.

“You were supposed to arrive...”

He paused.

“...two days ago.”

“What are you saying?” I asked Erik, who finally stopped pacing and looked at us with nervous eyes.

“Yes... you heard—heard me right,” Erik said while running a hand through his wet hair, still breathing unevenly.

Anthony stepped forward and waved his hand impatiently in front of Erik’s face.

“Catch your breath first, damn it,” he said, frustration clearly visible in his voice.

Erik inhaled deeply a few times before nodding.

“Okay... I’m fine now,” he said, straightening himself slightly. “You were supposed to arrive on the 4th of June, 2242... but instead you came on the 6th.”

He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly.

“My supervisors have been troubling me since yesterday... thank God I finally found you.”

I exchanged a glance with William before asking the question that was bothering me.

“Uhm... Erik, we’ve used teleportation travel for the first time. Does this happen often?”

Erik shook his head immediately.

“No... I mean, I don’t know exactly. I’ve guided more than a hundred travelers before, but something like this has never happened with me.”

He paused before continuing.

“Anyways, I already spoke with the hotel staff. They agreed to start charging you from today only, so the lost days won’t affect your booking... and I will be staying very close to your hotel.”

“You can stay with us,” I said, interrupting him slightly. “We already lost two days of the trip, so we’ll need more time to explore Norway properly.”

Erik's face lit up instantly.

"I—I thank you so much, sir," he said quickly while nodding repeatedly. "This way please."

"I'm Justin," I said while gesturing toward my friends. "That's Anthony, and he's William. We're from the United States."

"Pleased to meet you, sir... this way please," Erik replied politely.

He guided us toward a mag-train station just outside the teleportation hub. The train looked similar to a bullet train, except it floated a few centimeters above the road thanks to powerful magnetic fields beneath it.

Within minutes we were moving through the city.

The ride was smooth and almost silent, and the glass windows showed a breathtaking view of Norway's streets, mountains, and distant coastline as the city lights reflected off the wet roads.

Soon we arrived at our hotel.

It was decent... not luxurious, but not bad either. The rooms were comfortable enough for the few days we planned to stay.

We booked a room next to ours for Erik, and for some reason he seemed far too grateful for the gesture, even though most hotels already gave heavy discounts for guides and usually had separate accommodation for them.

Still, Erik seemed like a genuinely nice guy.

Relaxed, friendly... though sometimes strangely nervous.

I wondered how someone with that much anxiety handled a job that involved guiding strangers all the time.

“I should call my parents and tell them about this,” Anthony said while pulling out his phone.

But before he could dial, William grabbed his wrist immediately.

“Don’t do it, Anth,” William said quickly. “If my mom finds out about the delay, you know exactly how she’ll react.”

Anthony paused.

“Yeah... you’re right,” he sighed. “But what do I tell her then?”

“Just tell your mom we extended the trip by two days,” William replied calmly. “You should do the same, Justin.”

I nodded...It sounded like the easiest solution.

I sent my father a message telling him that I had reached Norway safely with Anthony and William, and that we would return in four days.

Everything seemed normal.

But the next day...

We encountered something even my constantly racing mind could never have imagined.

Knock.

Knock.

“Are you ready, venner (friends)?” Erik shouted from outside the room.

“Coming, coming...” I replied while glancing back at Anthony, who was still hopping around the room while struggling to pull his pants up.

William leaned against the wall with folded arms, watching the chaos unfold.

“Who told you to bring air-conditioned clothes with you?” he said while looking at Anthony, who was wrestling with the tight pants like they had personally offended him.

“Just—just give me a minute... almost done,” Anthony muttered while finally forcing the zipper up.

I walked over and opened the door for Erik, who was standing outside looking unusually enthusiastic for someone who had been waiting for us.

“How do I look?” Erik asked proudly while adjusting his hat and lifting his camera slightly so we could see it. His new shirt and pants looked oddly familiar, once again resembling Anthony’s questionable fashion sense.

“Excellent,” I said, trying not to laugh. “But our friend Anthony here has the best dressing sense in the world, so beating him is nearly impossible.”

Erik nodded seriously, as if I had just complimented him on something very important.

A few minutes later we boarded a mag-train and began moving through the city, the vehicle floating silently a few centimeters above the road while the mountains of Norway slowly appeared beyond the glass windows.

Anthony leaned forward in his seat and looked toward Erik.

“So... tell us about Norway,” he said curiously while resting his elbow on the seat.

Erik straightened slightly and rubbed his hands together as if preparing for a lecture.

“Yeah, yeah... sorry... just give me a moment to think where to begin,” he said while staring out the window briefly.

He looked nervous, but the moment he started speaking it was as if someone had switched on a machine.

“So Norway...” he began.

At first it was interesting. He explained the major tourist locations, the reason travelers loved visiting the country, and how Norway had been one of the least affected regions during the catastrophe of 2072.

“The earthquake tilted some of the land here,” Erik continued enthusiastically, “but unlike many other regions of the world, Norway did not completely merge into the new continental structure.”

“That’s interesting,” Anthony said, nodding.

“There’s more,” Erik replied immediately.

“Oh.”

And there definitely was more.

Erik continued talking for almost twenty straight minutes, jumping from one historical event to another while our brains slowly stopped processing the information.

William and I exchanged looks.

At some point we silently prayed for the man to stop speaking, but Erik seemed physically incapable of ending a sentence.

Ahem-ahem

Finally William and I looked at Anthony, our eyes conveying the obvious message.

“You had to ask him...?”

“Now it’s your job to stop this.”

Anthony understood the assignment, he suddenly leaned toward the window and pointed dramatically outside.

“Oh look there! A waterfall!”

For a brief moment we felt relief as Erik finally paused.

But then—

“Oh, this waterfall!” Erik said instantly while leaning forward with excitement. “Do you know the history behind this one?”

William slowly closed his eyes.

“This is part of the Vøringsfossen region,” Erik continued enthusiastically. “Centuries ago travelers believed the sound of the falling water echoed across the valley like thunder, and during the early tourist era of the 19th century it became one of the most visited natural wonders in the country...”

Anthony stared blankly out the window.

At that moment we realized exactly what we were dealing with for the rest of the trip.

But none of us could have imagined that later...

We would actually beg for Erik to start speaking again.

Erik continued talking the entire ride, but eventually we reached our destination.

We had planned a three-day trip: two days camping in the mountains and the third day exploring the city.

Now we stood at the bottom entrance of the Norwegian fjords, facing the famous cliffs that tourists from all over the world came to see.

Cold wind swept across the valley while the cliffs rose dramatically above us, their grey walls disappearing into clouds drifting slowly across the peaks.

“Let me tell you about these cliffs before we move on,” Erik said while turning toward us enthusiastically.

“No—” William replied immediately.

He paused and forced a small laugh.

“I mean... you’ve already told us about this... hehehe,” William said while rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly.

“Oh, did I?” Erik asked, thinking for a moment. “Fine then, I will tell you more when we get up there.”

Those words felt like a gift from heaven.

We collected the necessary equipment for the climb: a shovel, a small gas stove, an axe, tents, and a compact robotic assistant that came free with the hiking kit.

Before we began the climb, Erik raised a finger and stopped us.

“There are many routes to reach the top,” he explained. “The shortest one begins on the extreme right, while the longest route is on the extreme left.”

“Is that the only difference?” Anthony asked casually.

William immediately pinched him from behind and whispered in his ear.

“You dumbass. Now he’ll start explaining the entire history of the mountains right here.”

“Oh no...”

“There are actually many differences,” Erik began enthusiastically. “You see, in the eighteenth century when—”

“Erik,” I interrupted quickly, raising my hand before the lecture could begin.

“We’ll take the shortest and safest route. Let’s just start walking.”

“As you say, sir!” Erik replied happily as he began walking toward the right-side trail.

“No!” Anthony suddenly shouted from behind us.

“We’re taking the longest route.”

All of us stopped.

We slowly turned and stared at Anthony, waiting for him to explain himself.

“Come on, guys,” he said while spreading his arms. “We paid so much for this trip and you want it to end sooner?”

Erik scratched the back of his head.

“Sir... I have never personally taken that route,” he admitted carefully. “It is completely safe, but it is a rough climb and there is no assistance on the way. Only at the top will you find facilities.”

William and I exchanged a look.

“Guys, we shouldn’t take the risk,” William said while adjusting his glasses.

“It’s not a risk, William,” Anthony replied immediately. “It’s literally a route made for tourists.”

“But Erik just said he hasn’t been there before.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Anthony said confidently. “You’ll do fine, right Erik?”

Erik straightened slightly and nodded.

“Ja, ja, venner... we can explore that route.”

William and I both felt a small sense of unease, but at the same time the idea of a little adventure excited us.

After all, it was an official route.

Even when we searched it quickly online, the information said it was completely safe and filled with beautiful natural scenery, with no danger from wild animals—except a few harmless squirrels and monkeys.

Still...

Something felt strangely quiet about the trail.

Not a single person walked that path while we stood there.

Yet despite that feeling, we chose the longer route.

And just as we had quietly feared...

The climb turned out to be far tougher than any of us had imagined.

As we began the journey, the first hour passed quickly. Since we were still close to the base of the mountain, the real adventure had not begun yet.

At first William talked a lot, pointing at random things and explaining small details about the terrain, but after a while he suddenly went quiet—and I knew exactly why.

We let Erik walk ahead of us, happily talking about the trek and explaining things no one had asked about. He kept blabbering anyway, completely unaware that none of us were actually listening.

“You’re still thinking about the chip, aren’t you?” I whispered into William’s ear.

“No... it’s nothing. I’m good,” William replied, though the tone of his voice clearly suggested otherwise.

“Maybe the professor was lying,” I said quietly, even though deep down I knew he wasn’t. I just needed to pull William out of whatever thoughts were weighing on him.

“I don’t know, man... I just need some time,” William said while staring ahead at the trail.

I looked toward Anthony.

I didn’t say a word, and neither did he.

But we both knew exactly what to do.

“Hey—what are you doing? Hey, stop!” William shouted as we suddenly grabbed him.

I held his legs while Anthony lifted his arms, and before he could react properly he was already in the air.

“Time for a fucking ride! Woohh !” Anthony yelled with excitement.

“Guys, it’s dangerous—drop me now! What the fu—”

But we weren’t exactly the type to listen.

Laughing like idiots, we ran uphill while carrying William between us as he continued shouting and threatening to throw us off the mountain.

Even Erik joined in, grabbing William from one side to help us lift him higher.

We ran for nearly a hundred meters—which is a lot when you’re running uphill on a mountain.

Finally we stopped.

Sigh.

All of us bent forward slightly, breathing heavily while sweat covered our faces and arms.

The moment William touched the ground again, he pulled out his water bottle and immediately started chasing Anthony.

“Get back here!” he shouted.

“Wait for us!” I yelled while Erik and I ran after them.

“You guys can’t be serious,” William shouted while running. “You even got Erik involved in this?”

“Hehehe,” Anthony laughed while looking back at him.

Soon all four of us were laughing again.

After around ten minutes, however, the real adventure finally began.

The terrain slowly changed. The open path narrowed into dense forests and thinner trails, though they were still wide enough to keep us from falling down the slopes.

We moved carefully now, stepping over roots and rocks, dodging thorny bushes, and helping each other cross the occasional gaps between uneven stones. At one point we even encountered a small stream flowing gently across the trail.

It was beautiful.

In a world like ours, scenes like these had become rare. Most countries had replaced natural landscapes with artificial forests and controlled environments.

Only a few regions—perhaps thirty or forty countries in the world, including Norway—still preserved natural places like this.

Eventually the trail split.

Three different paths appeared in front of us.

Erik looked confused at first, scratching his head as he tried to remember the correct route.

William, on the other hand, didn't hesitate for a second. He pulled out his phone and quickly opened the browser to search for directions.

The internet suggested taking the left route.

But Erik insisted otherwise.

He recommended the right path, saying he believed that was the correct one.

Naturally, we ignored him.

I mean... who would trust a man instead of the internet?

But there was one small mistake William had made.

A piece of information had slipped past his eyes.... And it was something we would only realize much later.

We continued walking along the route, choosing the left path even though Erik had looked uncertain about it. Anthony and William trusted the browser directions more than Erik's memory, and after a short argument we followed what the internet suggested.

The forest thickened quickly as we moved deeper into the trail.

At first everything still felt normal. We even encountered a massive waterfall halfway through the route, its roaring water cutting across the mountainside, and Anthony immediately insisted we stop to take pictures.

Naturally he pulled out the HoloFrame camera, the kind that instantly connected to our homes in the United States and displayed the photos directly inside the glass frames installed there.

Buzz. Buzz.

"Not again," William muttered.

Anthony and I burst out laughing as William pulled his phone out once more. During the trek this was already the fifth call from his mother, and by now the joke had become routine.

Finally William sighed, pressed the power button, and switched the phone off.

“There,” he said while sliding it back into his pocket, “peace.”

We resumed the climb.

The first three hours passed quickly, but the terrain slowly began changing—the trail narrowed, the trees grew thicker, and the ground beneath our feet became uneven with loose rocks and roots twisting across the path.

Seven hours later we were still climbing.

Erik suddenly stopped walking.

“Something’s wrong,” he said quietly.

Even the longest route shouldn’t take this long, he explained. From this elevation the cliffs should already be visible, yet the forest around us looked endless.

For a moment we assumed he was mistaken, so we continued walking.

Another hour passed.

Still nothing.

The trail we had been following slowly faded beneath fallen leaves and loose soil until it was barely visible anymore.

That was when William pulled out his phone again and tried opening the map.

“No signal,” he muttered.

Anthony frowned and looked at him.

“Try the map.”

“It’s not loading.”

Erik slowly turned in a circle, scanning the forest in every direction.

“I don’t recognize this part of the route,” he admitted.

Silence settled over the group. The air had grown colder, and beneath the heavy canopy of trees the sky had begun darkening much earlier than expected.

Then the ground suddenly shifted.

Anthony stepped forward and his foot slipped on loose gravel hidden beneath a thick layer of leaves.

“Whoa—!”

Before any of us could react, he slid sideways down the slope.

“Anthony!” I shouted.

He tumbled several meters down the rocky incline before crashing into a small tree that finally stopped his fall.

William and I rushed down toward him while Erik followed carefully behind us.

Anthony groaned, pushed himself upright, and waved his hand dismissively.

“I’m good... I’m good,” he said quickly, though his arm was scraped badly and his shirt had torn open along the shoulder.

But when we looked back up the slope—

The path was gone.

The steep slide had forced us into a different section of the forest, and the trail we had been following had completely disappeared behind us.

Erik climbed halfway back up the slope and began brushing leaves aside desperately.

“There should be a marker here,” he said while searching the ground. “Every tourist trail has markers.”

There were none.

Only dense forest.

William studied the terrain quietly for several seconds before slowly shaking his head.

“Guys...” he said.

“We’re not just off the trail.”

He paused while staring deeper into the trees.

“We’re completely lost.”

The wind moved gently through the branches above us, and somewhere deep inside the forest—far away from any visible trail—

Something echoed through the valley.

By the time we finally stopped searching, evening had already settled over the forest.

No matter how many directions we tried, we couldn’t find the trail again—partly because the light had faded so quickly beneath the thick canopy of trees.

Luckily we had brought portable light sources with us, small lanterns that clipped onto our belts and illuminated the ground just enough for us to move safely.

The region was mostly cleared of wild animals, but venomous insects were a different story.

Those couldn’t be removed completely, and since this route wasn’t commonly used by tourists, none of us could be entirely sure what lived deeper in the forest.

After one final attempt to search for the trail, we accepted the obvious.

We were not getting out of there tonight.

Eventually we found a relatively flat clearing beside a narrow river that cut quietly through the trees, and we decided to set up camp there.

“We have no option but to start again tomorrow morning,” Erik said calmly.

Strangely, he didn’t look worried at all. If anything, he seemed almost relaxed about the situation, never once making us feel like we had caused the problem—even though the decision had clearly been ours.

It was a small thing, but in that moment I realized Erik was someone worth remembering.

We set up the tents and asked the small robotic assistant to handle the rest of the equipment. The camping kits we carried were 4D tents—compact from the outside but much larger inside, a technology so common that almost every serious traveler carried one.

Soon a fire crackled in the center of our campsite.

The cold mountain air surrounded us as we sat around the flames, letting the warmth reach our hands and faces.

And, of course, the first person to speak was our guide.

Well... technically I started it.

“You don’t look very old,” I said while watching Erik enjoy the warmth of the fire. “Don’t you study somewhere?”

Erik nodded slowly.

“I do, sir. I study at the University of Bergen,” he replied. “I’m on a scholarship there, but I still have to work to pay for my hostel and other expenses. The scholarship only covers the tuition.”

William adjusted his glasses slightly while Anthony leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

Anthony spoke next.

“So you work while studying? Your parents don’t help you with that?”

Erik shook his head.

“I don’t have any parents,” he said quietly. “They died during the Norwegian attacks of 2232.”

The words fell into the silence between us.

Anthony shifted slightly, clearly surprised.

“And... the rest of your family?” he asked. “Uncles, grandparents... anyone?”

Erik stared into the fire for a moment before answering.

“I do have relatives,” he said slowly, “but they don’t really want me. They say they can’t take care of me along with their own families.”

Anthony frowned immediately.

“They just left you like that?” he said, disbelief obvious in his voice. “Even your grandparents?”

I looked at Erik as well.

“At least they could have let you stay with them,” I added.

Erik shook his head again, though this time his expression softened slightly.

“No... it’s more complicated than that,” he said.

“My parents were from different religions. My father was Christian, but my mother was Muslim. Their families were strongly against the marriage, so they had to marry without their parents’ consent.”

He paused briefly before continuing.

“And because of that... both families blamed them for everything. After they died, that blame kind of... shifted to me.”

The fire crackled quietly.

Anthony stopped smiling.

William looked down at the ground, pushing a small stick into the dirt.

For once none of us had anything funny to say.

Even the forest around us felt quieter.

I stared at Erik for a long moment, trying to process what he had just told us.

Because somehow... the cheerful, endlessly talkative guide sitting beside our campfire carried a past darker than almost anyone I had ever known—or even read about.

I kept a hand on his shoulder and comforted him.

“If you ever need any help... don’t hesitate to contact me,” I said as I gave him my number.

But all of a sudden, on the opposite bank of the river, I saw some light sources moving in the forest.

“Look at that!” I shouted, pointing my finger toward the source.

“That must be the route we didn’t take—hurry up before we lose the trail.”

And that was our way out of the forest.

We knew we didn’t have enough time to pack everything and then follow the trail so I ran alone — I asked them to wait and keep the campfire ignited so I know where they are.

I ran to the opposite bank as fast as I could and took Anthony with me.

The torches were moving quicker than we thought so we hurried.

I would've asked William to come but the pace with which he runs... it would've taken us a decade to reach there.

Finally we saw a group of travellers.

“Hva gjør dere her? Er dere gått dere vill?” one of them said while pointing his torch at us.

Another man added, “Denne stien går til klippen. Følg oss hvis dere skal dit.”

They had trouble understanding our language so I pulled out a translator and they confirmed they were on a route to the cliff.

Finally — we had found our way.

We asked them to wait and quickly came back with our stuff and within an hour we were at the cliff.

It was decorated... two or three stalls offered water and some snacks and the viewing point — it was crowded but we got our chance to enjoy the view.

We took a rope down the hill and reached our hotel two hours after the incident.

“I thought we weren't coming back here today... I was damn sure we weren't but thank God,” William said the moment we arrived in the hotel room.

Anthony jumped on the bed and prepared to sleep.

“Come on William, don’t give credit to God for nothing... he doesn’t exist anyway,” I said — I didn’t believe in God.

“I saved us... if I hadn’t seen the torches then we would’ve been a bear’s dinner by now.”

Both of them were too tired to reply.

The three of us prepared to sleep, yet the thought of Erik and the troubles he had to face stayed in my mind.

At 3 a.m. in the night I saw William sitting alone on the balcony. When I approached him he looked shocked.

“Hey — hey... I was just... looking at the city.”

“Okay,” I said. “Aren’t you feeling sleepy right now?”

“Yeah yeah I’ll just come in sometime.” William said, rubbing a hand against his hairs.

I knew something was wrong... I should’ve stopped him... but I didn’t -Something was still bothering him and I said nothing.

I should have.

Because what he did after that... I could never have imagined a guy like William even thinking about it.

The moment I turned around, I heard running footsteps behind me — fast, desperate footsteps — and then suddenly they stopped.

Thud.

My heart dropped as I rushed toward the balcony, fear rising inside my chest before I even understood what had happened.

William was lying on the balcony floor.

“William!?” I shouted as I dropped beside him and grabbed his shoulders, shaking him while trying to bring him back to consciousness.

For a moment nothing happened — and then I saw it.

Blood.

It was slowly spreading from the back of his head.

“Anthony! Anthony!! Wake up!” I screamed at the top of my lungs, my voice breaking as panic took over.

Anthony burst out of the bedroom in confusion — and the moment he saw William on the floor his face went pale. Without wasting a second he grabbed the bedsheet from the bed and pressed it against William’s head while I kept calling his name again and again.

My screams had already attracted attention — people began knocking on our hotel door while the three of us struggled to lift him.

Anthony suddenly ran outside in nothing but his shorts and slammed the emergency stop button near the road, forcing a passing mag-train to halt immediately.

At that moment Erik rushed into the room.

“What happened, sir?” he asked, his voice shaking while his eyes froze at the sight of blood.

“Help me lift him!” I shouted.

The three of us carried William into the elevator and rushed down to the ground floor where the train was waiting.

We placed him inside — and the train immediately sped toward the nearest hospital.

William’s eyes opened for a brief second... then closed again.

“William! Stay with me — you’ll be fine, trust me... William!” I kept shouting while holding his shoulders, trying desperately to keep him conscious.

Anthony stood near the door of the train, staring at him helplessly while fear slowly replaced the usual confidence on his face.

None of us had expected the trip to go this wrong.

Why did we even come here in the first place?

This place is full of mishaps, I thought while watching the blood soak deeper into the cloth pressed against William’s head.

If anything happens to him...

I will never forgive myself.

After all — I was the one who pushed for this trip.

“Can’t you run the train faster, damn it!?” I shouted toward the control panel.

“William... please keep your eyes open... please...”

Within minutes we reached the hospital.

Doctors rushed him into the emergency room while Anthony, Erik, and I were left sitting outside in the hallway — silent, exhausted, and terrified.

And only one question remained in all our minds.

Why did he do it?

Thanks to the advanced medical technology of the hospital, William’s injury stabilized within an hour, though the doctor warned us that he would need proper rest before leaving the building.

We were given permission to visit him briefly, but taking him back to the hotel immediately was out of the question.

When we approached his room, Erik hesitated outside the door while looking at us uncertainly, clearly unsure whether he was supposed to enter such a personal moment with us.

Anthony noticed his hesitation and simply waved his hand toward the door while saying quietly that he should come inside with us since he had already seen more than enough chaos tonight anyway.

The moment we stepped into the room...we saw William lying on the hospital bed under a thin white sheet, his head wrapped with a medical bandage while the soft humming of monitoring equipment filled the otherwise quiet room.

His eyes were open, but the moment he saw the three of us standing there his expression broke instantly, tears forming faster than he could hide them.

He sniffed once and quickly turned his face toward the other side of the bed.

Anthony stepped closer first and placed a hand on his shoulder, while I moved beside the bed and spoke softly.

“William... are you good?”

“Yeah,” he replied almost immediately, though his voice sounded hollow. “I didn’t see the wall.”

Anthony and I exchanged a glance without saying anything, because both of us understood instantly that he was lying.

“Your chip wouldn’t break like this,” I said quietly while resting my hand on the metal rail beside the bed.

William slowly turned back toward us and pushed himself up against the headrest, though his eyes still refused to meet ours. For several seconds he stared down at his hands, rubbing them together nervously while the silence in the room grew heavier.

Anthony looked toward me, I looked toward Erik, and Erik simply looked confused because he clearly had no idea what conversation we were actually having.

“You’re right,” William finally said while wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

None of us spoke after that.

We knew he wasn’t finished yet.

Due to unknown reasons, Chrono servers across the world had begun to fail — one after another — and within minutes the entire system started collapsing.

The moment we reached the hotel, I called my dad and explained everything.

He was furious at first — not because of the situation, but because I hadn’t taken permission before leaving. I had told him we were going for an exhibition... and now we were stuck in another country during a global failure.

He took a breath — then his tone changed.

“Forget that... listen to me, Justin,” he said quickly.

“Flights are going to be suspended from tomorrow. They don’t rely on Chrono directly, but teleportation hubs have already been shut down. Look for flights to get back home — right now.”

I opened my phone and searched — scrolling through routes again and again... but there were no flights from Norway to the US.

“Damn it...” my father muttered on the call.

There was a pause — just silence — as he thought.

“Tell me all the flights leaving Norway,” he said.

I sent him the list.

1.Nor – Bhu

2.Nor – Ind

3.Nor – FR

...

There were more than twenty routes, but I couldn't understand why we were even considering other countries.

A few seconds passed....Then he spoke again.

“Okay... the fastest flight from Norway to India leaves in three hours. Book it. Go to India immediately. Once you reach there — call me.”

“But dad—”

Beep.

The call ended.

For a moment I just stood there... staring at the screen.

Then we moved.

We packed everything quickly and left for the airport.

William had fully recovered by then, and when he and Anthony asked why we were suddenly leaving Norway... I had no answer. My dad hadn't explained anything.

But something felt wrong — and I knew we didn't have time to question it.

We met Erik one last time before leaving but He wasn't happy — that much was clear.

We were leaving earlier than planned... even after paying him for the entire trip.

“If you ever need me...” I said while stepping into the mag-train.

Erik placed his hand over mine — holding it for a second longer than expected — and gave a small smile. He said he would be fine... that everything would work out.

But before I left, I handed him twenty thousand dollars.

It took me almost five minutes to convince him, but he agreed at last because he needed it — that much was obvious.

After all... I had gotten that money without earning it.

“Thank you, sir... how do I repay this?” he asked, his voice slightly trembling.

“You don’t need to,” I said. “Just take care of yourself.”

He nodded — slowly.

We stepped into the mag-train, and it began to move. Through the glass, I could still see him — standing there, waving at us.

I kept looking... until he disappeared.

He was a good person — someone who had gone through more than most people our age.

He taught me an invaluable lesson – No matter how bad times get.. you should never give up. I cannot even imagine how he carried on without anyone else in his family... But I knew he would do good in his life.

As the train moved toward the airport, only one thought stayed in my mind.

Will we ever meet Erik again...?

For some reason — I felt like we would.

And when we did... he wouldn't be the same man, he would be someone who had made it.

Within two hours of departure, we reached India.

We stepped into the largest airport in the world — The Garv Airport.

It was beautiful... almost unreal. It looked better than most malls — clean, organized, and lined with stores from major franchises like Spark, Taste of Italy, Bucchi... and many more.

And surprisingly — everything was cheap.

Electric boards were placed across every section of the airport, allowing people to move faster from one place to another — completely free of cost.

For a moment... it didn't feel like the world was collapsing at all.

We spent a few hours exploring the place, and Anthony seemed to enjoy it the most. I called my dad after some time, and he told us to find a hotel and stay there for a while.

"Your dad is the best dad ever, Justin," Anthony said as he jumped onto the hotel bed and turned on the Holocaust.

"There's a swimming pool on the roof... I'm going there," William said casually.

“But William — I didn’t know you could swim,” Anthony replied, laughing.

The two of them instantly got into a playful fight — pushing each other, jumping across the room, laughing like nothing had happened... like the world outside didn’t exist.

For a second... everything felt normal again.

When they finally calmed down, the three of us went up to the rooftop pool together.

It was night.

The water was still, and above us stretched a clear sky filled with stars.

“We’re gonna get back home soon, guys... don’t worry. Technical issues don’t last long,” Anthony said while floating on his back.

“Yeah... I hope so,” William replied quietly, his eyes fixed on the moon.

For a few seconds, no one spoke.

Then—

Swoosh.

Something cut across the sky.

“A comet!” Anthony shouted, pointing upward.

“No, dumbos... look carefully,” William said, narrowing his eyes. “Comets don’t move like that... and they don’t leave trails like that either—”

“Is that...” I muttered, turning toward William.

He looked back at me — and we both knew.

Anthony looked between us, confused.

“What is it?” he asked.

I didn’t answer immediately.

Because by then... it was clear.

What we saw moving across the sky wasn’t a comet.

It was a fighter jet.

On the other hand, panic had begun to spread across the US. My dad decided to inform William’s parents first about us being in India and completely safe, mainly because he knew how sensitive they were.

“Mr. Ginart,” my dad said, shaking hands with William’s father, Warren Ginart.

He explained everything — how we had reached India because it was much safer than Norway during the crisis, and that we were all fine. They accepted it, though William’s mother, as expected, remained extremely worried.

“Mom, I’m good,” William said as he called her from India, and the conversation stretched for nearly an hour. From across the room, we could hear her voice repeating the same question again and again.

“William! Did you eat?”

We must have heard that line at least twenty times during the call. Perhaps if I had a mother, I would have understood that worry better.

But none of us could have imagined how quickly things were about to spiral out of control.

Norway had always been a country many nations kept an eye on — its military wasn’t strong enough to dominate, but it was strong enough to defend itself.

Back in 2156, Norway had entered a temporary war after attempting to develop nuclear weapons.

What began as a limited drone exchange between France, Russia, and Norway soon escalated into a broader conflict involving multiple countries, though ours stayed out of it.

They didn’t want Norway to succeed in building nuclear weapons.

But Norway did succeed.

The war ended sooner than expected, yet the rivalry never truly disappeared.

Over time, Norway’s entire infrastructure became deeply dependent on Chrono exchange, and that dependence would soon become its greatest weakness.

The moment the grid collapsed, something terrible followed.

We were sitting in our hotel room as usual when a strange noise began rising from the lobby below — voices gathering, footsteps rushing, a kind of urgency that didn't feel normal.

We stepped out and moved toward the crowd.

A large Holocaust screen in the center of the lobby had lit up, and people were gathered around it, watching in stunned silence.

We pushed our way through.

And then we saw it.

“Norway has been nuclear bombed by Russia.”

For a moment, everything around me went silent.

Erik.

That was the first thought that came to my mind.

I pulled out my phone immediately and called him. Once. Twice. Again and again. There was no response.

My hands began to tremble as sweat rolled down my skin, and I kept dialing his number, my fingers moving faster each time as if speed alone could change the outcome.

But nothing changed.

My friends tried to stop me at some point, but I barely noticed. I just kept calling, refusing to accept what I had just seen... what I had just heard.

Time passed — I don't know how much.

At some point, the calls stopped.

Not because I wanted them to... but because somewhere inside me, something had already understood.

Erik was gone.

The realization didn't come all at once. It settled slowly, like something heavy pressing down on my chest, making it harder to breathe with every passing second.

He had left an impact on me that no one else ever had.

He was someone who smiled even in the worst of times, hiding all his pain beneath the surface... and the future he had worked so hard for—

Didn't exist anymore.

When I woke up, I was back in the hotel room.

My friends were sitting beside me, and the grief on their faces said more than words ever could. For a moment I just stared at them, trying to gather myself, trying to understand how everything had changed so quickly.

“Now I see why your dad sent us here,” Anthony said quietly, resting his arm on my shoulder as I lay there.

I slowly sat up and removed his hand.

Erik’s loss still hadn’t left me... it felt like something heavy sitting inside my chest, refusing to move.

“This shouldn’t have happened... Erik... he didn’t deserve this,” I said, pressing my hand against my forehead as if that could somehow stop the thoughts running through my mind.

Neither of them spoke.

“I shouldn’t have come here,” I continued, my voice tightening slightly.

“Ever since we left for this trip, something terrible has been happening again and again... first we arrived late, then we got lost in that forest, and now this...”

I paused for a second, then let the words come out.

“It’s all my fault.”

“Justin...” William said softly, then leaned forward slightly.

“Listen to me properly. This is not your fault. Even if we hadn’t come here, the grid would still have collapsed, and Norway would still have been attacked. Nothing we did caused this.”

I didn’t respond.

He continued, more firmly this time.

“The only difference is... we met Erik. We got to know him. We got to remember him. Without this trip, he would’ve just been another unknown name in a news headline.”

His words made sense — logically, they were correct.

But grief doesn’t listen to logic.

“I still left,” I muttered. “I still walked away knowing he’d be there... I still said goodbye like it meant nothing.”

“You didn’t know,” William said immediately. “None of us knew. Stop blaming yourself for something no one could have predicted.”

Silence followed.

Not uncomfortable... just heavy.

We eventually moved to the rooftop without saying much. Hours passed as we sat there, watching the sky slowly change from orange to deep blue and then to black, the city lights below flickering like nothing had happened at all.

None of us wanted to go back inside.

Then—

Sniff

William and I turned at the same time.

Anthony was staring up at the sky, his eyes filled with tears.

I had never seen him like that before.

He didn't look at us immediately... he just kept staring upward, as if trying to find something that would make sense of everything.

"I'm scared," he said finally, his voice low and uneven. "I know I always act like I'm fine... like nothing bothers me... but I'm not like that right now."

I handed him a tissue and placed my hand on his shoulder, but this time I didn't say anything. He needed to speak.

"We shouldn't have come this far from home," he continued, shaking his head slowly.

"Everything is happening too fast. First that chip thing — which I still don't even understand why the professor told us — and now the grid failure... and now this war starting..."

He let out a weak breath.

“It doesn’t even feel real, Justin. It feels like we’re just stuck inside something we don’t understand... and it’s getting worse every second.”

I looked at him carefully.

“What bothers you the most?” I asked.

He hesitated, then answered honestly.

“That we won’t go back,” he said. “That something bigger is happening and we’re right in the middle of it... and we don’t even know why.”

For a moment, no one spoke.

Then William stepped forward and sat beside him.

“We’re scared too,” he said calmly. “Don’t think you’re the only one feeling this. Me, Justin, we’re as scared as you are..”

Anthony looked at him.

“But the difference is,” William continued,

“we’re still together. That hasn’t changed. And as long as that doesn’t change, we’re not as helpless as you think we are.”

Anthony wiped his face, listening.

“So spit that fear out of your mouth because we aren’t leaving you alone here,” William added, a faint smile forming.

“Talk to us. And don’t worry... when we get back home, we’re playing on my 8D console. I’m not letting you escape that.”

A small laugh escaped Anthony.

“Idiot,” he muttered, though his voice had softened.

I pulled both of them closer.

“We’re not going anywhere,” I said quietly. “Whatever this is... we deal with it together. That’s it.”

Anthony nodded slowly, and for the first time since everything happened, his breathing seemed steady again.

The three of us stayed there for a while... not talking, not thinking... just existing together in that moment, as if that alone could hold everything in place.

At the same time—

When my dad heard the news of the bombing, he had already been trying to contact Anthony’s parents, but the grid failure had disrupted communication and none of his calls were going through.

So he didn’t wait.

He got into his MV and drove there himself.

Their house wasn't far from ours, and the entire way there felt unusually quiet, as if the world itself had paused to process what had just happened.

But the moment he reached—

He stopped.

An ambulance was standing outside the house, its lights flashing silently in the night, and a few people had gathered near the entrance.

Someone was being carried out.

And in that moment... he already knew something was terribly wrong.

My dad searched the area, his eyes scanning every corner as he tried to find Anthony's parents.

His steps were quick, restless, and then he saw him — Anthony's father, Tom Matthews, standing near the ambulance as medical staff rushed around him while a stretcher was being pushed inside.

"Mr. Matthews!" my dad shouted, raising his hand as he moved forward.

But before he could reach him, the ambulance doors slammed shut with a sharp metallic sound, and within seconds the magnetic engines activated, sending the vehicle gliding forward onto the road.

My dad didn't waste a second. He rushed back, got into his MV, and followed the ambulance through the quiet streets, his hands tight on the controls and his focus locked ahead.

Within minutes, he reached the hospital.

He stepped out and hurried inside, his eyes searching again until he finally found Tom standing outside the operation theatre, completely still, staring at the closed doors as if nothing else existed.

My dad walked up to him, slightly out of breath, and placed a hand gently on his shoulder.

"Mr. Matthews... what happened?"

Tom didn't respond.

For a second, he just stood there, unmoving.

Then suddenly, he stepped forward and wrapped his arms around my dad, holding onto him tightly as if he had nothing else left to hold onto. His body trembled, and tears streamed down his face uncontrollably.

"Elena..." he whispered, his voice breaking. "She... she had a heart attack... our son... Anthony... he..."

He couldn't finish.

My dad placed his hand on his back, slowly patting it, trying to steady him before gently pulling him back to look at his face.

“Anthony is safe,” my dad said calmly, looking directly at him. “That’s why I came to your house. I sent them to India... I was worried something bad could happen.”

For a moment, Tom just stared at him.

Then a faint, fragile smile appeared through the tears, and he nodded slightly while gripping my dad’s arm.

“Thank you...” he said weakly.

But before anything else could be said, the doors of the operation theatre opened.

Both of them turned instantly.

A nurse stepped out, her expression serious, her eyes lowering for a brief moment before she spoke.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Matthews,” she said quietly. “We did everything we could... but we couldn’t bring her back.”

Silence followed.

The words didn’t just land — they stayed.

Tom’s expression froze as if his mind refused to accept what it had just heard, and then suddenly his knees gave way as he collapsed onto the floor.

My dad immediately bent down, grabbing his shoulders.

“Mr. Matthews... get up... please—”

But Tom couldn't stand.

His body had gone weak, completely drained of strength.

My dad helped him up slowly and guided him to a nearby bench, sitting beside him as Tom buried his face in his hands and broke down, his cries raw, uneven, echoing softly through the hallway.

Time passed.

Neither of them knew how much.

Then suddenly—* Thud.*

Tom pushed my dad away.

Hard.

My dad stumbled back slightly, caught off guard.

Sniff “It's your fault!” Tom shouted, his voice shaking with anger and grief.

My dad froze.

Tom stood up abruptly, his fists clenched, his eyes red.

“You could’ve told us sooner!” he shouted. “Elena would’ve... she would’ve—”

His voice broke mid-sentence.

My dad stepped forward slightly.

“Look, I—”

“Shut up!” Tom yelled, pointing toward the exit. “Get out of my sight... before I do something I regret.”

The hallway fell silent again.

My dad didn’t argue.

He looked at him for a moment... then slowly turned around and walked away.

Meanwhile, in India, we stayed close to each other, not really speaking much but not needing to either. Being together was enough for the moment, so we stepped out and walked through the streets, hoping it might clear our minds.

The city was unlike anything I had ever seen.

Every corner was filled with light, yet it didn’t feel artificial or overwhelming.

The streets were unbelievably clean, not a single piece of waste in sight, and the soft glow from mag cars and passing trains reflected across the roads more beautifully than streetlights ever could.

Energy flowed through the city silently, powered by endless rows of solar panels, and vending machines stood at almost every turn, accessible to anyone who needed them.

The air felt cold and pure.

There was no pollution.

This was the superpower of the world.

I had read about India before — how it had once been looted for centuries, how it had fallen behind, and then how everything changed after the tragedy of 2072.

The comeback had been something no one expected, yet standing there now, it felt completely real.

We kept walking without any real direction.

It helped... a little.

But not enough.

None of us spoke much.

Anthony checked his phone a few times, hoping for a call, but nothing came through. His dad had tried contacting him, but the grid failure had made communication almost impossible. Even I hadn't spoken to my father since yesterday.

The only way left now was something much slower.

A letter.

Anthony's father had sent one immediately after everything happened, writing down what he couldn't say through a broken system. It carried news that no one should ever have to receive this way... and yet, it was already on its way to us.

Dear Son,

This is your dad... and I don't know how to begin writing this.

I know you're in India, and I know things must already be difficult for you right now, but I'm proud of you for staying strong and taking care of yourself during all of this.

There's something I have to tell you... something I never thought I would have to write like this.

Your mom... Elena...

She passed away three hours ago.

We didn't know you were in India, and when she heard about Norway... the shock was too much for her heart to take.

Son, I don't want you to lose hope. I want you to—

The message did not end there.

The letter had already begun its journey, moving across countries and broken systems, carrying words that would change everything the moment they were read.

And no one could have predicted what would happen when Anthony read the rest of it.

My dad knew Anthony's father wouldn't stay silent after what had happened. Within days, a case was filed against him, accusing him of withholding information about Anthony being in India — information that, according to them, could have prevented Elena Matthews' death.

The courtroom felt heavy that day. My dad's lawyer stepped forward and explained..

“ Mr. Daniel Brown had tried every possible way to communicate, but the Chrono server failure had disrupted all systems, and by the time he reached their house, it had already been too late.”

Her argument was clear, but it wasn't enough.

Anthony's father had hired one of the best lawyers he could afford, and the pressure in the room made it obvious which side held more influence. After hearing both sides, the judge paused for a moment before giving his verdict.

“Mr. Daniel Brown is found guilty of negligence resulting in loss of life and is sentenced to fifteen years of imprisonment with immediate effect.”

The sound of the gavel ended everything.

Before he was taken away, my dad made one last request — he wanted to talk to me.

On the other side of the world, we were still trying to reach home, but nothing worked. The US grid had collapsed, and without Chrono servers communication had become nearly impossible.

Calls didn't connect. Messages didn't deliver.

Time just passed.

Two days went by like that.

Then Anthony's phone buzzed.

He looked at the screen, and a notification appeared — a physical delivery had arrived at the nearest post office.

The letter.

The same one his father had sent the day his mother died.

For a moment, none of us spoke. Anthony just stared at the screen, his expression unreadable, before slowly putting his phone down and getting up.

"We should go," he said quietly.

We didn't argue.

The walk to the post office felt longer than usual. No one spoke, and even the sounds of the city felt distant, like they didn't belong to us anymore.

When we reached, the clerk handed him a sealed envelope with his name written across it in familiar handwriting.

Anthony held it for a few seconds.

Then he opened it.

Slowly.

His eyes began to move across the words, and at first nothing changed, but then his expression started to shift. The light in his face faded, his jaw tightened, and his grip on the paper grew firmer with every line he read.

I looked at William... he looked back at me.

Neither of us said anything, because we could already see it.

Something inside him was breaking— and he hadn't even finished reading yet.

Son,

This is your dad... and I don't know how to begin writing this. I know you're in India, and things must already be difficult for you right now, but I'm proud of you for staying strong and taking care of yourself through all of this.

There's something I have to tell you... something I never thought I would have to write like this.

Your mom... Elena...

She passed away three hours ago.

We didn't know you were in India, and when she heard about Norway — the shock was too much for her heart to take. Son, I don't want you to lose hope... I want you to stay strong, because now you have to stand on your own. After completing your mom's last rites and delivering justice to her... I will not be with you anymore, because I cannot live without your mom.

I'm sorry to leave you alone... but consider this my last wish — you will stay strong, and you will carry on.

For a moment, I couldn't understand what I had just read... and for some reason his dad hadn't mentioned my dad at all — something that didn't make sense to me even then.

Anthony didn't react immediately. He just stood there, holding the letter, his eyes fixed on the same lines as if reading them again would somehow change what they meant... but slowly his grip tightened, his breathing became uneven — and before either of us could say anything, his body gave way.

He collapsed.

We caught him and rushed him back to the hotel, trying to wake him up... calling his name again and again, until finally his eyes opened — but the moment he came back, he pushed both of us away and sat up abruptly.

For a second, he just stared ahead.

Then—

He started laughing.

At first it was low... almost unnoticeable — but it didn't stop. It grew louder, sharper, more unstable... until tears began rolling down his face, his shoulders shaking while that same laughter kept escaping him.

“Mom... Dad...” he said between breaths — still laughing.

But there was nothing right about it.

We stood there, frozen, not knowing what to do... because this wasn't grief the way we understood it — it was something else.

We took him to a therapist immediately, hoping someone would know how to handle it... but even there he couldn't stop.

The laughter kept breaking into something more painful — something uncontrollable — and within minutes the therapist asked us to step outside.

We waited.

And from inside the room, we could hear him... shouting, crying — his voice breaking again and again in a way that made it impossible to ignore.

Those sounds stayed with me.

Because they didn't feel like someone grieving — they felt like someone falling apart.

When we were finally called back in, he was sitting there quietly... his eyes red, his face covered in sweat, and tears still rolling down slowly.

He didn't look at us.

He didn't speak.

"Leave him here for a few days," the therapist said calmly. "He needs time... and proper care."

We nodded.

There was nothing else we could do.

We said goodbye to him before leaving — even though we didn't know if he was really listening... and for the first time since all of this began, we walked away from him.

The moment we stepped out of the cabin, my phone rang — a sharp, sudden sound that cut through everything. For a second I just stared at it... then picked it up.

“Justin, listen to me carefully,” my dad’s voice came through, rushed... strained... like he didn’t have much time. “Stay in India — don’t withdraw any money, stay away from scans and everything else... and do not use teleportation of any sort.”

I frowned, my grip tightening around the phone.

“This is the last time you’ll hear from me for the next fifteen years...” he continued, his voice lowering slightly.

“Things have been... difficult here. I know you can handle this, Justin — I trust you.”

My heart sank — a thousand questions rushed through my mind, but none of them could find their way out, not after seeing what Anthony had just endured.

“Visit Dr. Malhotra,” he said quickly. “He lives in Chennai... he’s a friend of your professor, Mr. Hanks. He’ll guide you.”

There was a pause.

Then, more firmly—

“And Justin... don’t come into contact with any kind of scan. Not even once. Do you understand?”

“But dad, why are you—”

Beep

The call ended.

I stood there, staring at the screen... my reflection faintly visible on it, but for the first time, it didn't feel like me.

First Anthony.

Now me.

Something was wrong — not just with us... but with everything around us.

And whatever it was—

It had already begun.

A week passed... then two... then three. Anthony still hadn't recovered from the loss — he spoke less, reacted less, and most of the time just sat there, lost in his own thoughts.

It was only in the middle of the fourth week that we were finally allowed to bring him back.

"I'm... I'm fine, guys," he said quietly, avoiding eye contact. "It's just... it was too much for me."

We didn't say anything at first — we just hugged him.

"We're together in this... don't worry, brother."

He nodded slightly.

“So what now?” William asked, looking at both of us.

I took a breath and told Anthony everything my dad had said — about staying in India, about the warnings... about Dr. Malhotra in Chennai. My voice broke in between, but I forced myself to finish.

“So he wants us to visit Dr. Malhotra?” Anthony asked.

“Yeah...” I replied, holding back whatever was left.

World War 3 — that’s what people had started calling the Norway–Russia conflict now. It had spread beyond control, pulling in more than ten countries.

Norway was gone... completely wiped out, and its allies, along with countries affected by the nuclear fallout, had declared war on Russia and France.

But India remained out of it.

Safe... at least for now.

There were shortages — gas, petroleum — but nothing compared to what the rest of the world was facing, so we didn’t think much about the war anymore.

We went back to the hotel room, ordered food, and for the first time... we ate in silence. No jokes, no teasing — just the sound of plates and occasional movement.

“Did you... did you eat there, Anth?” William asked, trying to bring things back to normal.

Anthony didn't look up.

“No.”

That was it... he continued eating.

The Anthony we knew... wasn't fully back yet.

William's parents, on the other hand, had been trying everything to get him home. The grids had stabilized two days ago, but transport was still restricted — any route from India to the US crossed through war zones, and it wasn't safe at all.

But William's father wasn't someone who gave up easily.

He had connections — powerful ones. Politicians, military officials... even people close to the president. And after weeks of trying, he finally managed to arrange a military carrier that could safely bring us back.

William didn't know any of this, not until two days before departure, when his parents called him and told him everything.

Told him they were coming to take him home themselves.

For the first time in weeks— we felt something different.

Relief.

We hugged each other... laughed... even jumped around like we used to.

And for a brief moment...

Anthony smiled the way he used to.

The plane arrived in an open ground — far from any city, isolated and silent. We had to walk for hours to reach it, and by the time we got there, none of us had the energy left to say anything.

The moment the door opened, William's mom ran out and hugged him tightly. It was a beautiful moment... the kind you feel happy watching, yet something about it hurt at the same time.

Anthony's eyes filled with tears, and I gently placed my hand on his shoulder, trying to comfort him without saying anything.

She then stepped toward us.

"Anthony, I'm sorry for your loss. I hope you're doing okay, son," she said softly, pulling him into a hug and holding him for a moment longer than expected.

Then she turned to me.

"Justin... I really didn't expect that from your dad *sigh* but it isn't your fault."

I didn't understand what she meant, and for a second I thought of asking, but something about the moment stopped me.

“Anyway... I hope you find your way back soon,” she added, before gesturing William and Anthony toward the plane.

They didn't move.

“Come on, we don't have all day,” she said again, this time with a slight impatience in her voice.

“Mom... we're not going without Justin,” William said, looking directly at her.

From inside the plane, his father noticed they hadn't moved and stepped outside.

“William, are you serious? Get inside the plane right now,” he said, grabbing his arm firmly.

William pulled his hand away.

His father paused, then took a breath and spoke again, much calmer this time.

“Look... we can only take two of you. Just understand the situation.”

William didn't respond immediately. He looked down, thinking — and that small hesitation was enough to set Anthony off.

“What are you thinking?” Anthony said, his voice rising.

“We can't leave Justin like that... and I'm not going anywhere either.”

I looked at him.

He looked back.

And for a brief moment... I smiled.

“Let him go, Anthony,” I said quietly. “We can’t force him to stay here and struggle with us.”

Anthony turned toward me instantly, disbelief and anger clear on his face.

“Let him go? Who was the one who said we stay together? That our fear doesn’t matter as long as we’re together? Was that me... or was that you, Justin? Who said that?”

I didn’t have an answer. William still hadn’t lifted his head.

His father pulled his arm again, and this time William didn’t resist. He slowly began walking toward the plane.

Anthony didn’t move.

“Fine... you stay here if you want,” his mom said coldly. “But my son is coming with me.”

She turned and walked back.

We stood there in silence, watching William walk away. He turned back once — just once — and in that moment, it felt like he was trying to say something he couldn’t put into words.

I knew he wasn't wrong.

He couldn't just stay with us like that.

But Anthony didn't see it that way.

He grabbed my hand and started walking in the opposite direction, but my eyes didn't leave William. I kept looking until he disappeared inside the plane.

The engines started, the sound cutting through the empty ground as the aircraft slowly lifted into the sky.

Anthony didn't look back.

He didn't show me his face, but I knew what he was hiding.

And in that moment, without anything dramatic or loud... something between us quietly broke, leaving behind a space that none of us could fill anymore.

After everything that had happened, one thought refused to leave me.

This didn't start with the war... or the system... or even us.

It started the moment I received those forty years.

And somewhere deep inside, I knew—

Nothing about it was accidental.