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The Journey Throughout time

CHAPTER 1 - The Beginning of

Time

- Anna, Max, and Leon had known each other since childhood, but none of them could have predicted that their ordinary lives were about to change forever. The afternoon had started like any other—quiet, boring, and filled with nothing more exciting than cleaning.

Anna's house was old, the kind of place where every room seemed to hide secrets. The storage room in the basement was especially strange. Dust covered the shelves, the air smelled of old wood, and the light bulb flickered as if it didn't want to be there.

"I still don't understand why we're doing this," Max complained, lifting a heavy box. "No one has been in this room for years."

Leon adjusted his glasses and looked around carefully. "That's exactly why this place is interesting. Old places remember things."

Anna rolled her eyes but smiled slightly. "Just help me clean. The faster we finish, the sooner we're done."

As Max pushed an old shelf aside, something metallic hit the floor with a sharp sound. They all froze.

"What was that?" Anna asked.

Max bent down and picked it up. It was a small metal box, darker than iron, covered in strange symbols carved deep into its surface.

"This wasn't here before," he said quietly.

Leon stepped closer, his expression serious now. "Those symbols... they're not just decorations. They're a mix of ancient and mechanical patterns. I've never seen anything like this."

The moment Anna touched the box, the room changed. The air grew warmer, and a low humming sound filled the space. The symbols began to glow—softly at first, then brighter.

“Guys...” Anna whispered, her heart racing. “I think this thing is reacting to us.”

The box opened slowly on its own. Inside were two objects: a golden compass with no directions and a strange pendulum that moved without being touched.

Suddenly, the walls of the basement seemed to stretch and blur. Time felt unstable, as if the room itself was breathing.

Leon swallowed. “This isn’t just an object. It’s a gateway.”

Max clenched his fists. “To where?”

Anna looked at the glowing compass, feeling a strange connection to it. “To time.”

None of them knew it yet, but this was the moment their lives split into before and after. The discovery of the box was not an accident. It was an invitation—and time was waiting for their answer.

CHAPTER 2- The First Shift

- The compass began to spin wildly in Anna’s hands. The needle had no direction, no north or south—only

motion. The humming sound grew louder, vibrating through the walls and into their chests.

“Anna, drop it!” Max shouted.

But she couldn't. Her fingers felt frozen, as if the compass had become part of her body. The pendulum lifted into the air, swinging faster and faster without any visible force.

Leon backed away slowly. “This is a time reaction. I've read theories about this—objects that respond to human presence, especially when time is unstable.”

The light in the basement flickered violently. Shadows stretched across the walls, twisting into unfamiliar shapes. The room felt like it was collapsing inward.

Then—silence.

Everything stopped.

Anna opened her eyes. The basement was gone.

They were standing in the middle of a narrow stone street. The air smelled of smoke and iron. Wooden buildings surrounded them, and people dressed in old-fashioned clothes rushed past, speaking in a language that sounded familiar but outdated.

Max's voice trembled. "Where... are we?"

Leon looked around, his face pale but focused. "Not where. When."

Anna stared at her hands. The compass was still there, its glow fading slowly. "We didn't travel through space," she said. "We traveled through time."

A bell rang in the distance. Horses passed them, pulling heavy carts. There were no cars, no modern lights, no signs of the world they knew.

Leon knelt and picked up a coin from the ground. "This is real. This isn't a vision."

Fear crept into Max's chest. "Can we go back?"

Anna looked at the pendulum, now resting quietly. "I don't think time lets you leave whenever you want."

At that moment, Anna felt it—a strange pull, as if time itself was watching them.

And somewhere, in a time they did not yet understand, something had noticed their arrival.

CHAPTER 3 – Strangers In The

Past

- The three of them stood frozen in the middle of the street, painfully aware of how different they looked. Their clothes were clean, modern—completely out of place in a world of rough fabric, leather boots, and soot-covered faces.

“We can’t just stand here,” Leon whispered. “People are staring.”

He was right. A few townspeople had slowed down, their eyes filled with suspicion. One man muttered something under his breath, making a sign with his fingers as if to ward off evil.

Max lowered his voice. “They think we’re witches or something.”

Anna felt the weight of the compass under her jacket. “We need to blend in. Follow me.”

They moved toward a quieter alley, their footsteps echoing against stone walls. The sounds of the town—metal striking metal, distant shouting, the creak of wooden wheels—felt overwhelming.

Suddenly, a sharp voice cut through the noise.

“You there! Stop!”

A uniformed guard stepped into their path, gripping a spear. His eyes narrowed as he looked them over.

“State your names and your origin,” he demanded.

Leon hesitated for only a second. “We’re travelers. From... far away.”

The guard scoffed. “No one dresses like this unless they’re hiding something.”

Before Max could react, the pendulum beneath Anna’s jacket began to vibrate. She felt a sudden pressure in her head—images flashing before her eyes. A tower. Chains. Darkness.

“Anna?” Max whispered. “What’s wrong?”

She shook her head slightly. “Time is... reacting. I think we’re not supposed to be seen yet.”

Acting on instinct, Anna brushed her fingers against the compass. The world seemed to slow down. The guard’s movements became heavy, delayed—like he was walking through water.

“Now,” Leon said urgently.

They ran.

They didn’t stop until they reached the edge of the town, where the buildings gave way to a forest. Breathless, they collapsed behind a group of trees.

“That wasn’t luck,” Leon said. “The compass helped us.”

Anna nodded, her hands shaking. “But every time I use it, it feels like something pushes back.”

Max stared toward the town. “And what happens when time pushes back harder?”

None of them answered. But deep inside, they all knew: their presence in the past was already changing things.

CHAPTER 4 - The Keeper Of

Forgotten Time

- The forest was darker than Anna expected. Thick trees blocked the light, and the air felt heavy, as if the past itself was pressing down on them. Every sound—a snapping branch, the rustle of leaves—made Max tense.

“We can’t stay here forever,” Max whispered. “They’ll search the forest.”

Leon nodded. “But moving blindly could be worse.”

As if answering his words, a calm voice spoke from the shadows.

“You are not from this time.”

All three of them turned sharply.

An old man stepped forward, leaning on a wooden staff. His clothes were worn but clean, and his eyes—sharp, intelligent—fixed immediately on Anna’s jacket.

“You carry a device that does not belong here,” he said.

Max stepped in front of Anna. “Who are you?”

The man smiled faintly. “Some call me a historian. Others call me a guardian. I prefer keeper.”

Leon’s breath caught. “You know about time travel.”

The old man nodded slowly. “Few do. Fewer survive it.”

He gestured for them to follow. Hesitating only a moment, Anna did. Something about him felt... safe. Or at least, necessary.

They arrived at a small stone hut hidden deep in the forest. Inside, the walls were covered with maps—some familiar, others showing places that did not exist in their world.

"Time is not a straight line," the keeper said. "It bends, breaks, and remembers."

He pointed at the compass. "That object chooses its carriers. But every journey leaves a mark."

Anna swallowed. "What kind of mark?"

The keeper's voice grew serious. "On history. And on you."

Max clenched his jaw. "Can you help us get back?"

The old man looked at each of them carefully. "Eventually. But first, you must understand the rules."

Leon leaned forward. "What rules?"

The keeper extinguished the lantern, leaving them in darkness.

"The rules that keep time from destroying you."

CHAPTER 5 -The First Rule of Time

- The darkness inside the hut felt unnatural, as if the shadows themselves were listening. Anna could hear her own heartbeat, loud and uneven. Max shifted nervously beside her, while Leon remained completely still, absorbing every second.

After a moment that felt far too long, the keeper lit the lantern again.

“Rule one,” he said calmly, “time must never recognize you as a threat.”

Leon frowned. “What does that mean?”

“It means,” the keeper continued, “that the moment you draw too much attention, time reacts. Guards appear. Accidents happen. People disappear.”

Anna thought of the guard in the street. The way the pendulum had vibrated. “That already happened, didn’t it?”

The keeper nodded. “Time noticed you.”

Max ran a hand through his hair. “So what? We just hide forever?”

“No,” the keeper replied. “You learn to move with time, not against it.”

He unrolled an old map on the table. Symbols similar to those on the compass were drawn across it.

“These marks show moments where time is weak,” he explained. “Places where travel is possible—but dangerous.”

Anna leaned closer. “Is that how we got here?”

“Yes,” the keeper said. “And each jump weakens the boundary further.”

Leon’s voice dropped. “So if we keep traveling—”

“—you could tear time apart,” the keeper finished.

Silence filled the room again.

Then the pendulum moved.

Slowly, deliberately, it pointed toward the forest.

The keeper's expression darkened. "That's not good."

Max's stomach tightened. "What does it mean?"

"It means," the keeper said quietly, "that something else is traveling too."

Anna felt a cold chill run down her spine. "Something from the future?"

The keeper met her eyes. "Or something that wants to control it."

Outside, the wind howled through the trees, carrying with it a warning none of them were ready to face.

CHAPTER 6 - The Echo In The

Trees

•The wind outside the hut grew louder, almost rhythmic, like footsteps circling them. Anna felt the compass beneath her jacket pulse once—slow, deliberate.

“Tell me that’s just the wind,” Max said quietly.

The keeper didn’t answer immediately. He walked to the door and pressed his palm against the wood, closing his eyes as if listening to something far beyond sound.

“It’s an echo,” he finally said. “A disturbance left behind by a traveler who shouldn’t exist in this time.”

Leon stiffened. “You mean the thing the pendulum sensed.”

“Yes,” the keeper replied. “Time doesn’t like being followed.”

A sudden crack echoed through the forest. A branch snapped—not close, but not far enough to ignore.

Anna’s voice trembled. “Is it looking for us?”

The keeper turned to her, his gaze sharp. “It already knows you’re here.”

Without warning, the compass flared with light. Symbols spun wildly across its surface, faster than ever before. Anna gasped, dropping to her knees as images flooded her mind—burning cities, broken clocks, shadows stretching across centuries.

“Anna!” Max shouted, grabbing her shoulders.

Leon knelt beside her. “She’s connected to it. The device chose her.”

The keeper’s face tightened. “Then she is visible to whatever is moving through time.”

Outside, the trees began to bend unnaturally, as if something invisible was pushing its way through them. Leaves froze midair, suspended in silence.

“This is the second rule,” the keeper said urgently.

“Never let time isolate one of you.”

Max pulled Anna to her feet. “We’re not leaving her.”

“Good,” the keeper replied. “Because separation is how time erases people.”

A shadow passed between the trees—tall, distorted, wrong. It didn’t walk. It shifted.

Leon whispered, fear finally breaking his calm. “That’s not human.”

“No,” the keeper agreed. “It’s what remains when someone tries to own time.”

The pendulum swung violently.

“Run,” the keeper ordered. “Now.”

They didn’t hesitate.

As they fled deeper into the forest, Anna felt it clearly—

time was no longer just watching them.

It was chasing them.

CHAPTER 7 - The Broken Jump

•Branches tore at their clothes as they ran. Max could barely feel his legs anymore, but fear kept him moving. Behind them, the forest felt wrong—too quiet, too stretched, as if reality itself were thinning.

“Stop!” Leon shouted suddenly. “We can’t outrun that.”

Anna stumbled, the compass burning hot against her chest. “It’s pulling,” she gasped. “The compass—it’s reacting on its own!”

The shadow behind them twisted, glitching in and out of existence. Each time it reappeared, it was closer.

The keeper appeared beside them, breathing hard. “You don’t choose your jumps in panic,” he warned. “That’s how time breaks.”

But it was too late.

The pendulum shot upward, spinning wildly. The ground beneath their feet dissolved—not falling, not rising, but tearing away.

Anna screamed as the world shattered into fragments of light and memory.

She hit the ground hard.

Cold concrete. Sirens. Blinding white lights.

Max groaned beside her. "Please tell me we're dead."

Leon pushed himself up slowly, staring around in shock. "No... we're home."

They were in the middle of a city street. Cars were frozen mid-motion. Rain hung motionless in the air like glass.

Anna's breath caught. "Time stopped."

The keeper was gone.

Max's panic surfaced instantly. "Where is he?!"

Leon's voice was barely a whisper. "We jumped without him."

Anna felt the weight of it crush her chest. The compass dimmed, its symbols cracked.

"We broke the jump," she said. "And we left him behind."

Somewhere nearby, something moved—despite time being frozen.

A reflection shifted in a car window.

Leon swallowed. "It followed us."

Anna tightened her grip on the compass. "Then this isn't the present."

"It's a fracture," Leon said. "Between times."

And fractures don't stay stable forever.

CHAPTER 8 - A World Without Motion

- The city stood frozen in an unnatural silence. Rain hovered in the air like suspended glass, and the distant scream of a siren was trapped mid-echo. Anna reached out and touched a raindrop—it didn't fall. It didn't move.

"This feels wrong," Max said, his voice sounding too loud in the stillness.

Leon studied the street carefully. "Time isn't stopped," he said slowly. "It's... paused unevenly."

Anna felt a sudden wave of dizziness. The compass pulled again, weaker than before, like a damaged heart struggling to beat.

"I think this place exists between seconds," she said. "Not past, not present."

As they moved forward, their footsteps echoed strangely, as if the sound arrived late. Then Max froze.

"Did you see that?"

In the reflection of a shop window, something moved.

Not a person. Not a shadow.

A distortion—like reality folding in on itself.

Anna's chest tightened. "It's here."

The air grew colder. The reflection stretched, pulling itself out of the glass. A figure formed—humanoid, but incomplete. Its face was blurred, shifting between ages.

"I was chosen," it spoke, its voice layered with echoes. "Time belonged to me first."

Leon stepped back. "You're the traveler."

The thing tilted its head. "I am what remains of one."

Anna felt a sharp pain as memories that weren't hers flooded her mind—experiments, obsession, centuries of isolation.

“You tried to control time,” she whispered.

“And time erased me,” it replied. “But you—” its gaze locked onto Anna “—you were chosen again.”

The compass cracked further.

Max moved in front of Anna without thinking. “You’re not taking her.”

The figure smiled—broken, wrong. “You cannot protect what time wants.”

The ground trembled.

Time began to restart.

Slowly.

Violently.

CHAPTER 9 - Chaos In Motion

•Time returned slowly, like water leaking from a broken dam. Cars fell from the air, rain splashed violently, and pedestrians blinked in confusion as the world snapped back into motion. Max grabbed Anna's arm, yanking her behind a frozen car.

"We need to move," he shouted, his voice almost drowned out by the sudden chaos of rushing people and falling objects.

Leon scanned the streets, eyes wide. "Everything we just saw... nobody else remembers it. But the world knows something changed."

Anna clutched the compass. Its glow flickered like a failing heartbeat. "It's reacting. I can feel it—like it's alive."

From the shadows of a crumbling alley, the distorted figure appeared again. Not fully visible yet, but its presence twisted the air around it. The world bent slightly in its wake.

"It's here to claim the compass," Leon whispered.

The figure's voice echoed across the street. "You cannot hide what is mine."

Max faced it, determination in his eyes. “We’re not letting you take it. Not without a fight.”

Anna felt the pendulum swinging violently from her jacket. Memories of the previous jumps flashed—loss, fear, and desperation. She realized this fight wasn’t just about survival; it was about protecting time itself.

The streets turned into a maze. Cars, carts, and buildings seemed to bend and shift as if reality itself was responding to the figure’s will.

A child tripped nearby, frozen in time for a heartbeat, then fell, laughing without knowing why. Time was no longer predictable.

Anna whispered, “We have to get out... or it will trap us.”

Leon nodded. “Through the old subway tunnel. It’s the only safe path for now.”

They ran, dodging falling debris and warped shadows. Each step felt heavier, each breath sharper. The figure followed silently, bending reality with its gaze.

Finally, they reached the dark entrance of the subway. Anna turned back briefly. The figure paused at the street corner, observing them, waiting.

Max exhaled. "We made it. But it's not over."

Anna clutched the compass tightly. "No... it's just beginning."

CHAPTER 10 - The Time keeper Revealed

- The subway tunnel smelled of damp stone and rust. The dim light flickered, casting long shadows that seemed to crawl along the walls. Anna, Max, and Leon pressed forward cautiously, their breaths echoing in the narrow space.

"We can't stay in the streets," Leon said. "It would catch us immediately."

Anna clutched the compass. "But it knows we're here. I can feel it."

Suddenly, the air shimmered, and a figure stepped out from the darkness at the end of the tunnel. It was the distorted being—but now, for the first time, it was fully visible. Its body flickered, half solid, half shadow. Its eyes glowed like burning coals, and its voice was layered with the echoes of centuries.

"I am the Time Keeper," it announced. "Or what remains of one."

Max swallowed hard. "Time... has a keeper?"

The figure stepped closer. "Yes. But I am not your friend. I am the remnant of all who tried to control time. And you—Anna—carry the last key."

Anna felt the pendulum swing violently in response. Memories not her own surged in her mind: past travelers lost, timelines broken, entire cities erased.

"Why me?" she whispered. "Why did it choose me?"

The figure's gaze pierced her. "Because you can understand it... and because you must. Fail, and time itself will crumble."

Leon stepped forward, voice trembling. "What do you want from us?"

"I want only this," the Time Keeper said. "Follow the rules, survive, and learn. Every mistake, every leap... changes everything."

A loud rumble shook the tunnel. Stones fell from the ceiling. The figure extended a hand toward the compass.

“Do not touch it recklessly,” it warned. “Or you will pay.”

Anna, Max, and Leon exchanged fearful glances. They knew one thing: they were far from safe, and the real journey—the one that would test their courage, their unity, and their wits—was only just beginning.

CHAPTER 11 - The Second Rule Broken

- The rumble in the tunnel slowly faded, but the silence that followed felt heavier than the noise. Dust drifted down from the ceiling, and the Time Keeper’s form flickered, as if even speaking had cost him strength.

“You have been warned,” he said. “Yet time has already bent around you.”

Before anyone could respond, the compass pulsed sharply. Anna gasped, dropping to one knee as a sharp pain cut through her head.

“Anna!” Max shouted, rushing to her side.

Leon knelt beside her, panic breaking through his calm. “What’s happening?”

Anna struggled to breathe. Images flooded her mind—different versions of the same moment. Streets collapsing. People disappearing. A single choice branching into countless outcomes.

"I... I saw futures," she whispered. "Too many."

The Time Keeper's expression darkened. "You looked ahead without permission."

Leon froze. "That's the second rule, isn't it?"

"Yes," the Time Keeper replied.

"Never observe a future you are not prepared to lose."

The tunnel shook again, harder this time. The lights shattered, plunging them into darkness. Somewhere above, the city screamed—sirens, alarms, panic.

Max clenched his fists. "So what now? We just wait until everything breaks?"

"No," the Time Keeper said. "You move. You repair what you damaged."

Anna forced herself to stand. The compass was cracked further now, its light unstable. "I didn't mean to break the rule."

“Intent does not matter to time,” the Time Keeper said coldly. “Only consequences.”

He stepped back, his form beginning to fade. “Your next jump will decide more than you understand.”

Leon’s voice shook. “Wait—where do we go?”

The Time Keeper’s final words echoed through the tunnel as he disappeared:

“To the moment where the fracture began.”

The pendulum swung once.

And the world tore open.

CHAPTER 12 - The Origin Of The

Fracture

- The sensation of the jump was different this time. There was no falling, no spinning—only a crushing pressure, as if time itself were folding them inward.

When the pain faded, Anna opened her eyes to the sound of distant thunder.

They stood on a hill overlooking a city—familiar, yet not. The buildings were older, the streets narrower, but the shape of the skyline was unmistakable.

Leon's breath caught. "This is our city... decades ago."

Max scanned the area nervously. "So this is where it started?"

Anna felt the compass grow warm again. "Yes. This is the moment time first cracked."

Below them, a research facility buzzed with activity. Scientists moved hurriedly between buildings, carrying equipment marked with the same symbols carved into the compass.

Leon's face went pale. "That symbol... it's the same."

They moved closer, hiding behind a fence. Inside the main lab, a younger man stood at the center of a glowing machine. His eyes burned with obsession.

“That’s him,” Anna whispered. “Before he became... that.”

The pendulum trembled violently.

“He was trying to look into the future,” Leon said slowly. “To control outcomes.”

Anna shook her head. “He didn’t just look. He forced time to answer.”

Inside the lab, alarms blared. The machine overloaded, light spilling across the room like liquid.

Max grabbed Anna’s arm. “This is it—the fracture.”

Time screamed.

The man at the center of the machine vanished, torn between moments. The symbols burned themselves into the walls—and into time itself.

Anna staggered back, tears in her eyes. “This is where everything went wrong.”

Leon swallowed. "And if we change this..."

"We might erase ourselves," Max finished.

The compass pulsed once—decisive, final.

Time had brought them here for a reason.

CHAPTER 13 - The Third Rule Of

Time

- They stayed hidden on the hill as the research facility below descended into chaos. Sirens wailed, lights flickered, and people ran in every direction—unaware that history itself had just been wounded.

Anna couldn't take her eyes off the laboratory. "If we stop this," she whispered, "none of what happened after will exist."

Leon nodded slowly. "Including the Time Keeper. Including the fracture."

Max's voice was tense. "Including us."

The compass suddenly grew unbearably hot. Anna cried out, dropping it into the grass. The pendulum lifted on its own, swinging once—firm, deliberate.

Then a voice echoed, not from the air, but from time itself.

"Rule three: You may witness the origin, but you may never erase it."

The ground trembled beneath their feet.

Leon's face went pale. "Time just spoke."

Anna picked up the compass, her hands shaking. "It's not allowing us to fix this directly."

Max clenched his jaw. "So what are we supposed to do? Just let it happen?"

"No," Anna said slowly. "We're supposed to redirect it."

She looked back at the lab. Inside, the younger version of the man—the one who would become the Time Keeper—was being pulled apart by his own creation.

“If we can’t stop the fracture,” Leon said, realization dawning, “we can change what comes after it.”

A sudden scream echoed from the lab. The man vanished completely, swallowed by light and distortion.

The air went still.

Anna felt something shift inside her—like a door closing forever.

Max whispered, “We just watched someone disappear from time.”

Leon looked at Anna. “And time watched us watch.”

The compass pulsed once more, softer now.

They had crossed a line.

And time would never forget it.

CHAPTER 14 – The Cost Of

Witnessing

- The jump back was silent.

No light. No tearing pain. Just absence—followed by weight.

Anna fell to her knees as the world reformed around them. They were no longer on the hill, no longer in the past. They stood in an abandoned industrial district, the sky above them gray and heavy.

Max staggered, catching himself on a rusted railing. “That was... different.”

Leon didn’t answer. He was staring at Anna.

She was shaking.

“Anna,” he said carefully. “What did you see?”

Anna swallowed hard. Her vision blurred as fragments of the past replayed in her mind—not just the fracture, but after it. Consequences spreading outward like ripples.

“I saw what comes next,” she said quietly.

Max snapped his head up. “You broke the second rule again?”

“I didn’t mean to,” Anna said quickly. “It wasn’t intentional. When we left... time showed me something.”

Leon’s expression tightened. “What did it show you?”

Anna hesitated.

In her mind, she saw Max—older, wounded, standing alone in a broken timeline. She saw Leon disappearing between seconds, erased without sound. She saw herself holding the compass, the last one left.

She shook her head. “Nothing useful. Just... chaos.”

Leon studied her closely but said nothing.

The compass pulsed faintly, almost apologetically.

Then Max gasped, grabbing his arm. Dark lines spread beneath his skin, branching like cracks in glass.

“What’s happening to me?” he asked, panic rising.

Leon rushed to him. “This is temporal backlash.”

Anna’s heart dropped. “Because of the fracture?”

Leon nodded grimly. “Witnessing the origin leaves a mark. Time takes payment.”

Max winced as the lines spread further. “So I’m the cost?”

“No,” Anna said firmly, stepping forward. “I won’t let time take you.”

The compass reacted violently.

Leon's eyes widened. "Anna, don't—"

Too late.

The pendulum swung.

And somewhere deep within time, something shifted in response.

CHAPTER 15 - When Time Pushes

Back

- The pendulum's swing sent a shockwave through the air. The ground beneath them cracked, not splitting open but misaligning, like two versions of the same place failing to agree.

Max cried out as the dark lines on his arm froze in place, no longer spreading—but not disappearing either.

"It stopped," he gasped. "Whatever it was... it stopped."

Leon grabbed Anna's wrist, his grip tight. "What did you do?"

Anna's breathing was shallow. "I redirected it. The cost."

Leon's eyes widened. "You redirected time's payment?"

"Yes," she said, her voice trembling but steady. "I didn't erase it. I moved it."

The air grew heavy. The compass vibrated violently, its cracks glowing faintly.

"That's not how this works," Leon said. "Time doesn't lose."

As if in answer, the world around them shifted. Buildings flickered—old factories overlapping with newer ones, windows appearing and vanishing in the same wall.

Max looked around in horror. "Why does this place look like it's glitching?"

Leon swallowed. "Because time is compensating."

A figure stepped out from the distortion.

Not the Time Keeper.

This one was human—or had been. A woman, her face marked by exhaustion and grief, her outline unstable, like she was being pulled in multiple directions at once.

“You took what wasn’t yours,” she said, her voice echoing strangely.

Anna felt a sharp pain in her chest. “Who are you?”

“I am the payment you delayed,” the woman replied. “A future that should have ended.”

Leon’s voice dropped. “A displaced timeline.”

The woman’s eyes locked onto Anna. “Time spared your friend. So it took me instead.”

Max shook his head. "This isn't fair."

"Time does not measure fairness," the woman said softly. "Only balance."

Anna stepped forward, tears burning her eyes. "Then take it back. Take the cost from me."

The woman's expression softened—just for a moment. "That choice... will come. But not yet."

The distortion collapsed inward, pulling the woman with it.

Silence followed.

Leon released Anna's wrist. "You didn't save Max."

Anna whispered, broken, "I postponed the inevitable."

And time remembered.

CHAPTER 16 - The Weight Of

What Was Delayed

- The silence after the distortion collapsed felt heavier than any sound. The industrial district settled into a single version of itself, the flickering buildings choosing one timeline over another with a final, unsettling stillness.

Max leaned against the railing, breathing hard. The dark lines on his arm remained—quiet now, but unmistakably present.

Leon broke the silence first. “It’s not gone,” he said. “Whatever you delayed—it’s still attached to him.”

Max looked at Anna, trying to smile. “Hey. I’m still here, right?”

Anna couldn’t meet his eyes. The compass felt heavier than ever, like it was filled with lead instead of light.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Leon said, his voice sharp. “You moved the cost without knowing where it would land.”

Anna finally looked up. “I couldn’t let him be taken.”

Leon's jaw tightened. "And what about the woman? The future you erased by postponing the balance?"

"I didn't erase her," Anna shot back. "She said it herself—it was delayed."

Leon shook his head. "Time doesn't delay without interest."

As if summoned by his words, the pendulum swung once—slow, deliberate. A wave of cold washed over them.

Max groaned, dropping to one knee. The lines on his arm flared faintly, branching further, crawling toward his shoulder.

"It's getting worse," he said through clenched teeth.

Anna rushed to him. "No. No, no—this isn't how it's supposed to go."

Leon knelt beside them, his voice lower now, quieter. "Time is narrowing its options. If it can't take the cost from the past... it will take it from the present."

Anna's chest tightened. "From Max."

Leon nodded. "Or from you."

The compass reacted violently, its cracked surface glowing with unstable light. Anna felt a pull—not outward this time, but inward, as if time were tugging directly at her.

A voice—familiar, layered with echoes—spoke from nowhere and everywhere at once.

"You have carried what was never meant to be carried alone."

The Time Keeper's presence filled the space, though his form remained invisible.

Leon whispered, "He's back."

"Not fully," the voice replied. "Only enough to warn you."

Anna swallowed. "Warn us about what?"

“About the choice that approaches,” the Time Keeper said.

“One of you will anchor the cost. The other two will be allowed to continue.”

Max shook his head immediately. “No. Absolutely not.”

Anna felt tears rise. “There has to be another way.”

“There is always another way,” the Time Keeper answered. “But time chooses which ones remain open.”

The pendulum stilled.

And for the first time since this began, Anna understood something with terrifying clarity:

Time wasn't asking anymore.

CHAPTER 17 - The Future She

Didn't Tell

- The air felt tight, as if the world itself was holding its breath. Max sat on the cold ground, his back against the railing, while Leon stood a few steps away, arms crossed—not in anger, but in restraint.

Anna hadn't moved.

The Time Keeper's words echoed in her mind again and again:

One of you will anchor the cost.

Leon broke the silence. "You saw this coming, didn't you?"

Anna flinched.

Max looked up sharply. "Saw what?"

Leon turned to her fully now. "When you broke the second rule. When you said you saw 'nothing useful.' That wasn't true."

Anna's voice came out small. "I didn't want it to be."

Max struggled to his feet. "Anna. What did you see?"

She closed her eyes.

“I saw the moment time takes payment,” she said quietly. “Not the how. The who.”

Leon’s breath caught. “And?”

Anna opened her eyes, tears spilling freely now. “It wasn’t you, Leon.”

Max stared at her. “So... me?”

She shook her head desperately. “No. Not you either.”

Silence.

Leon’s face changed. Understanding hit him slowly, painfully.

"You," he said.

Anna nodded.

"I saw myself," she whispered. "Anchored. Frozen between moments. Keeping the fracture stable so the rest of time could move forward."

Max stepped back. "No. That's not happening."

"I didn't tell you because I thought I could outsmart it," Anna continued. "Redirect it again. Find another way."

Leon's voice was tight. "And now?"

"Now time is done waiting."

The compass began to glow—brighter than ever before. The cracks sealed briefly, as if preparing for one final use.

The Time Keeper's voice returned, closer now. "The future you saw is not punishment. It is function."

Max's fists clenched. "She's not an object."

"No," the voice replied. "She is a balance."

Anna stepped forward. The pull inside her chest intensified, painful but clear.

"If I do this," she said, looking at them both, "the fracture closes. Max survives. The displaced futures return."

Leon swallowed hard. "And you?"

She smiled weakly. "I stop moving."

Max shook his head violently. "Then we break time again."

Anna reached out, gripping his hand. "We already did. This is how we fix it."

For the first time since they met the compass, it felt calm.

And that terrified her more than anything else.

CHAPTER 18 - The Last Jump

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The place where time chose to end things was not dramatic.

There were no collapsing worlds, no storms of light—only a vast, silent space where moments drifted like dust. No ground, no sky. Just now.

Anna stood at the center of it.

The compass floated in front of her, whole again, its cracks gone as if they had never existed. The pendulum hung perfectly still.

“This is where it happens,” she said softly.

Max’s voice broke. “Then it’s where we stop it.”

Leon stepped closer, his eyes red but focused. "If there's a way to share the cost—"

"There isn't," Anna interrupted gently. "Time already decided."

The Time Keeper appeared—not broken this time, not flickering. He looked almost human again.

"You understand now," he said to Anna.

She nodded. "I do."

She turned to Max and Leon. The space around them trembled slightly, reacting to her resolve.

"You have to remember," she said. "Even if time tries to smooth me out."

Max grabbed her shoulders. "Don't talk like you're already gone."

She smiled, a real one this time. "I'm not gone. I'm just... staying."

Leon swallowed hard. "What will you be?"

Anna looked at the endless moments drifting around them. "A pause. A hinge. The thing that keeps the fracture from opening again."

The compass lowered into her hands. For the first time, it felt warm—not heavy.

The Time Keeper raised his hand. "Once you anchor, you cannot move forward. Or backward."

Anna took a slow breath. "Then do it before I change my mind."

Max shook his head. "Anna—"

She hugged him tightly, then Leon. For a second, time hesitated.

Then the pendulum swung.

Light spread outward—not blinding, not violent. Gentle. Final.

Anna felt herself stretch across seconds, minutes, years—then settle.

The fracture closed.

Time exhaled.

And the world moved on.

CHAPTER 19 - After Time Healed

- The world did not celebrate its survival.

There were no monuments, no memories of fractures or frozen streets. Time moved smoothly now, seamless and unaware of how close it had come to tearing itself apart.

Max stood on the platform of a quiet train station, watching people pass by—laughing, arguing, living. None of them knew what had been lost so they could keep moving.

Leon joined him, holding two cups of coffee. He handed one over without a word.

"It's stable," Leon said after a moment. "Every reading confirms it. No anomalies. No echoes."

Max nodded. "So it worked."

"Yes." Leon hesitated. "She worked."

Max's grip tightened around the cup. Somewhere in the back of his mind, there was a gap. A place where a name should be. A face. A voice.

Sometimes, when the world went quiet, he felt it—

a pause between seconds.

A stillness that didn't belong.

"Do you remember her?" Max asked suddenly.

Leon looked away. "Not... clearly. Just impressions. Like trying to remember a dream after waking up."

Max swallowed. "I remember how it feels when time slows. Like something is holding it together."

Leon nodded slowly. "That's her."

They boarded the train in silence.

As it pulled away, neither of them noticed the briefest hesitation in the air—

a single second that didn't move forward right away.

Then time continued.

Because someone was holding it.

CHAPTER 20 - The Moment That

Never Moves

- Time is not empty.

It is layered.

Every second presses against another, like pages stacked too closely to ever be read at once. At the center of those layers, where pressure would normally tear reality apart, something held.

Someone.

Anna did not see time anymore. Seeing required sequence. Beginning. End.

For her, everything existed simultaneously.

She felt the past as a gentle weight—memories without pain. She felt the future as possibility without shape. And the present was no longer a passing moment, but a fixed position, like the calm eye of a storm that never formed.

She did not breathe.

She did not blink.

Yet she was not gone.

Time flowed through her.

She understood now why the fracture had chosen her. Not because she was the strongest—but because she could let go.

Moments brushed past her awareness:

Max standing on the same train platform months later, still choosing the same spot without knowing why.

Leon pausing mid-sentence in a laboratory, feeling that he was about to remember something important—and then not.

A child being born at exactly the second the fracture once widened.

Balance.

Every life continued because time no longer needed to correct itself.

Sometimes, time hesitated.

In those pauses, Anna felt echoes of who she had been—not sadness, not longing, but recognition.

She remembered laughing.

She remembered fear.

She remembered choice.

And she understood that none of it had been erased.

It had been used.

The Time Keeper was gone. His role complete. His presence unnecessary now that time had learned stability.

Anna was no longer human.

But she was not less.

She was function.

She was continuity.

She was the reason time could move forward without tearing itself apart.

And if the universe ever came close to breaking again, it would not scream.

It would slow.

It would pause.

And Anna would be there—

unchanging, unmoving—

so that everything else could change.