

Fragments of Tomorrow

I woke up suddenly, inside a library.

My cheek was pressed against cool varnished wood, and thin afternoon light spilled through the high window. A heavy book lay open before me — Einstein's "Relativity: The Special and the General Theory". I blinked hard. Words swam in front of my eyes: *spacetime*, *entanglement*.

"Hey, you dozed off again.", a voice said--- familiar yet precious, **rare**.

I turned my head. My friend, Maya sat on the chair next to me, her dark hair falling like ink over the pages of her notebook. Her pen hovered above an unfinished equation.

"Could you explain this part?" she asked, tapping the book. "About time dilation."

Her tone was casual. Familiar. Normal. Everything *was* normal.

Just one little problem--- I had no idea how I got there. It was nothing like walking in a trance-- my mind was completely blank! It felt like transitioning from a dream into someone else's life, but still not awake.

I forced a smile, hoping it didn't look like a grimace. "Sure," I said.

I glanced at the clock above the librarian's desk. 3:41 p.m. *Wait, what day? What month?* I had no idea.

Maya's eyes studied me. "You okay? You look... disturbed."

"Umm, yeah," I lied. "Didn't sleep much."

We worked another hour. Or rather, she worked, and I nodded at intervals, scanning the text. The concepts of the book felt familiar, as if those were the only concepts I had been working on for a very long time. But there was something at the back of my mind that was not letting me focus... as if I were forgetting something urgent.

When she packed her bag, she gave me a crooked grin. "Tea? My treat. Lemme fetch one for you"

I almost said yes. But something inside me whispered, cold and sharp like a cracked glass, **"Don't let her leave your sight."**

"I'll walk with you," I said.

"Paranoid much?" she teased, but her eyes softened. "Come on then."

The café down the street buzzed with students and steam. I trailed behind her. My head felt like it was trying to remember something but couldn't. Every time she stepped out of my sight — just behind a pillar or a corner— my chest tightened.

And then, as she stood at the counter, chatting with the barista, the memory hit--- not slowly, not gently, but like a wave slamming through a broken door.

*Heavy Rain.
A wet alley behind this same café.
A scream swallowed by thunder.
Maya's body on the pavement, eyes wide but sightless.
A man's silhouette slipping into the storm, knife glinting and gone.*

*My own hands red with her blood.
And a voice — my own voice — whispering: 'You can change this'.*

I gasped and the world fractured for a heartbeat.

"Hey," Maya said, returning with two cups. "You really are off today."

I stared at her. Alive. Warm fingers brushed mine as she handed me my cup.

I would have to save her.
Or... I already did?

My temples throbbed. The memory (*could I even call it that?*) felt true. It hadn't *happened*, not here, not yet. But it had happened *somewhere, sometime*.

And something else was starting to reveal itself from behind some curtain in my mind:

A warning, a conversation.

I was inside a metallic box, kind of like a sarcophagus. But it seemed familiar, in the sense that I knew what principles it was built on, what it was going to do.

"As soon as I turn it up, you will be entangled with your past self for a few seconds, or rather your brain will be. Whatever you think of, whichever memories you see, your past will experience those. But..." said a voice.

"Hmm, but my past self won't get all these memories at once?" I completed.

"Yes, memories are not a concrete thing. Your brain will need time to interpret those signals, you will see flashes only, at first. It will be hidden behind a veil as the brain won't know where these signals are coming from. The full message will take time; it's better if there is something during that time to trigger it."

"Not something, someone. She will be there.", I was sure.

"You realize you are the second person to attempt this? The first test was not exactly successful." The voice showed a hint of concern.

"Don't worry, doc. Turn the thing up.", I strengthened my will.

"Ok, all the best. Think whatever you can in these few seconds. I can't give you further than that, it will fry your brain."

I had never put that much effort before in reliving those memories than I did then. The chamber lit so bright I felt it with my eyes closed.

That night, I couldn't sleep. I stared at the ceiling, replaying the day, the flash of memory.

Time travel? No... not exactly. I haven't come from the future. But those flashes had. It sounded absurd even inside my skull. Was I losing my mind?

Time is not linear. That was Einstein, wasn't it? Time and space are woven into a fabric--- spacetime. And fabric can tear, it can fold.

Had I folded reality?

"Instinct comes first, then comes the memories. The brain trusts your memories only after verifying their truth, but instinct--- they are almost involuntary. They are not evaluated, just acted upon", a voice echoed inside my mind; clearly mine, but I didn't remember speaking them... yet.

And my instinct was only telling me one thing: **PREVENT HER DEATH.**

The next day bled into the next.

I watched over Maya, smiled when she rolled her eyes at my caution.

For a while, nothing happened. And a small traitorous part of me wondered if I was just broken. Maybe none of it was real. Maybe I'd invented all this to explain my daydreaming. But I have never daydreamed like this before. Why now?

Maybe this was just how madness worked...

Then, Friday night, as we left the physics building --- it happened.

We were going through the old parking lot. I felt before I saw it: that shiver of déjà-vu turning razor-sharp: A shape detached from the shadows. Hooded, knife in hand.

I moved before I even realized what was happening, and shoved Maya aside. His knife caught my arm as I slammed into him, both of us crashing to the ground. Pain exploded. My vision went white. I grappled, roared, teeth bared like an animal. The blade clattered away, spinning across the pavement.

People, now hearing the commotion, rushed towards us. The man fled.

Maya knelt beside me, hands shaking. "Oh my God, oh my God, you're bleeding—"

I looked at her, she seemed unhurt. "I'm fine," I gasped, though warm blood soaked my sleeve.

The hospital lights felt too bright.

As they stitched my arm, Maya sat nearby clutching my jacket like an anchor. She didn't speak until the nurse left.

"You... knew," she whispered. Not a question. "You moved like you knew."

"I just reacted," I said.

But she looked at me like she could see the hole in my lie.

Morning came. The world was soft and blurred. She drove me home. The soft rain pattering on the car felt welcome after last night's downpour.

At my apartment door, she hesitated.

"You scare me sometimes," she said quietly.

"I scare me too," I admitted.

She smiled faintly, "Get some sleep, my guardian."

When she left, silence wrapped the room. I lay on my bed, staring at nothing. And then, I experienced another flash.

The machine.

Hidden somewhere; forged by desperate obsession of fixing my life, and a lot of help from ...someone. A machine with enough power to punch consciousness backward through time.

A note in my own handwriting taped to its console:

Memory can't be sent in one piece across the jump, but instinct can be... theoretically.

I hoped I never needed to use it again.

I had saved her. She lived.

But if the message was from the future, would I need to build it again? If I don't, would I create a paradox? Most importantly, was the purpose of the heist fulfilled, or there was some other memory, waiting to be recovered?

A week later, I woke up in the library:

Hawking's book open before me.

Maya beside me, pen poised, asking about singularity; her voice soft, familiar.

And I had no idea how I got there.

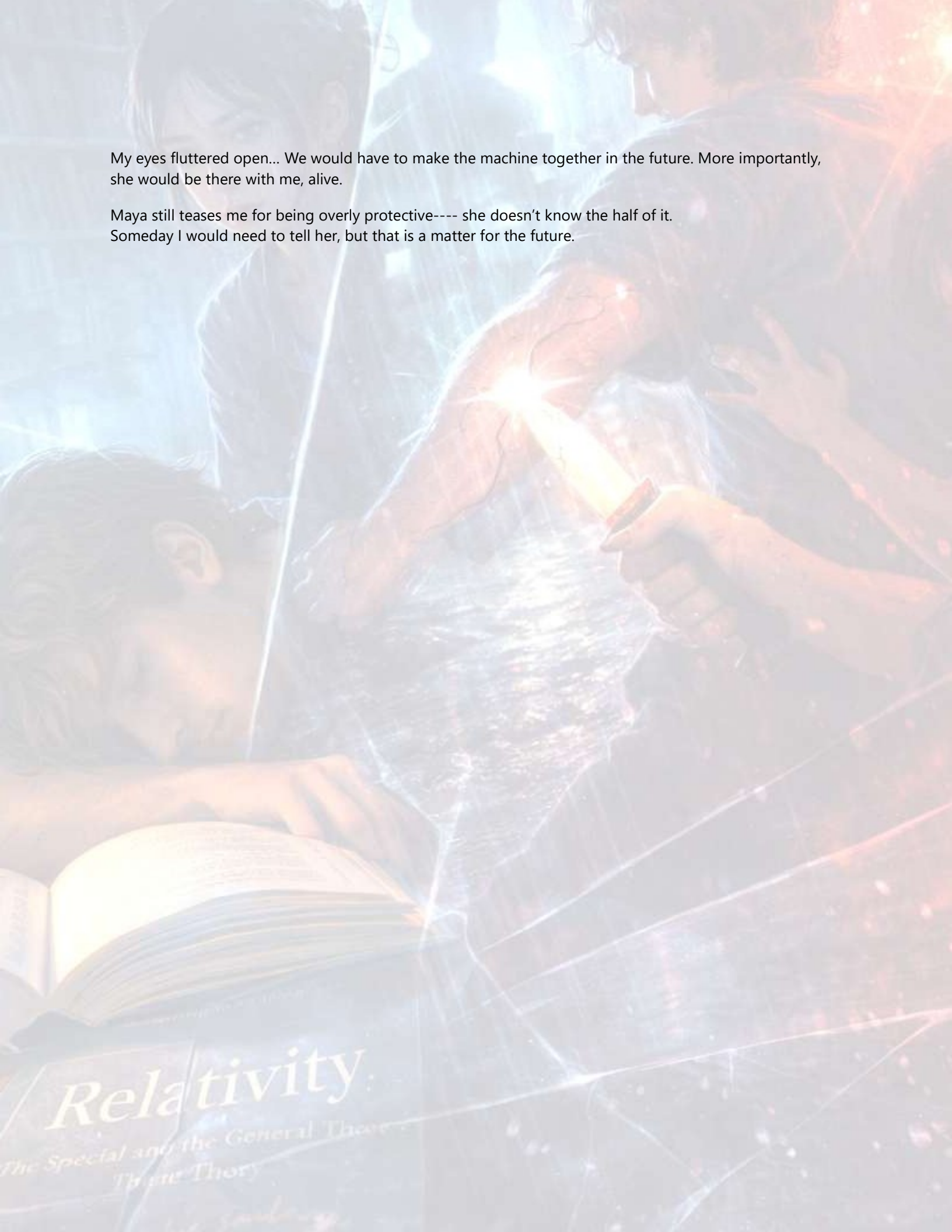
Something fluttered at the edge of my mind: Another conversation?

No, the same conversation. Just clearer and complete, some parts rewritten.

"...to trigger it".

"Not something, someone. **You** will be there."—my voice.

"All the best, my guardian."



My eyes fluttered open... We would have to make the machine together in the future. More importantly, she would be there with me, alive.

Maya still teases me for being overly protective---- she doesn't know the half of it. Someday I would need to tell her, but that is a matter for the future.