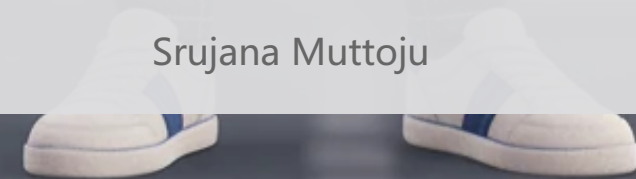




The Two-Hour Secret

Srujana Muttoju





Leo and his three best friends sat around a heavy oak table in the university library as the final bell echoed through the halls. While most students rushed for the exits, they spread out their blueprints, determined to solve the final puzzle of their engineering project.



As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting long, orange shadows across the stacks, a strange draft caught Leo's attention. He pushed aside a row of dusty encyclopedias to reveal a small, brass handle hidden in the wood paneling.



With a collective breath, the boys pulled the handle and stepped into a forgotten archive filled with ticking clocks and glowing vials. The air smelled of old parchment and ozone, a secret world tucked away from the modern campus outside.



A small mechanical owl perched on a high shelf suddenly clicked to life, its brass wings whirring softly in the dim light. It hopped down and began to hop toward a heavy iron door at the back of the room, beckoning them to follow.



Behind the door lay the heart of the college's history: a massive, unfinished machine known as the Chronos Mirror. It was designed to show the past, but it sat silent and broken, covered in decades of cobwebs.



Using their combined skills, the four friends set to work, tightening bolts and recalibrating the delicate glass lenses. Leo directed the team while they used the very theories they had been studying all semester to bring the machine back to life.



Suddenly, the room erupted in a soft blue glow as the Chronos Mirror flickered into existence. Holographic images of students from a century ago danced across the walls, showing them a map of a hidden treasure buried on the grounds.



They hurried out into the cool night air, guided by the moonlight and the mental map they had just memorized. The campus felt different now, alive with the whispers of the thousands of students who had walked these paths before them.



Beneath the roots of the Great Oak, they unearthed a small, weathered copper box sealed with a wax stamp. Inside, they found letters of encouragement and old photographs, a bridge across time left by the very first graduating class.



As the clock tower struck the final hour of their stay, the boys walked toward the main gates with the box tucked under Leo's arm. They had stayed for extra study time, but they left with a bond and a secret that would last a lifetime.