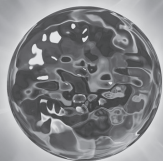
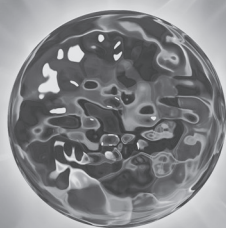


FADED  
GLIMPSES  
of TIME



# FADED GLIMPSES of TIME



NYAH NICHOL



**Common Deer Press**

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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*This book is dedicated to all the people  
who brought me light and laughter during the pandemic.*

*To name a few:*

*Dad, Mom, Silas, Everett & Titus*

*Aryssa and Shaela (coolest sister duo)*

*Kim (Stacy's Mom)*

*Aiden (dance battle opponent, fencing expert)*

*Eric (Romeo & Paris)*

*Sydney (belay & chicken dance buddy)*

*Astin (mediumest friend, funniest banana)*

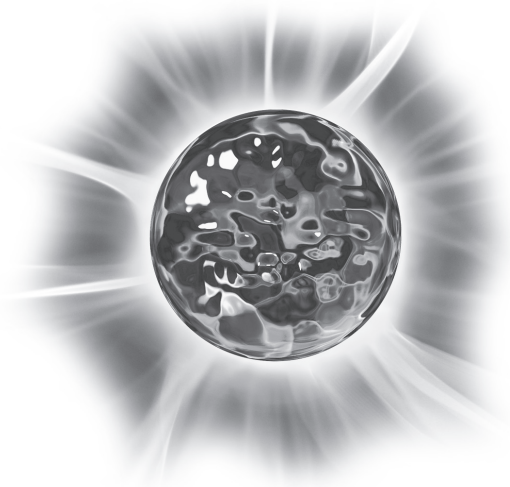
*Brooke (oldest friend)*

*Mr. Yoshida's Social Studies class*

*Mrs. Cherniwchan's Gym class*

*And my Rockwall family*

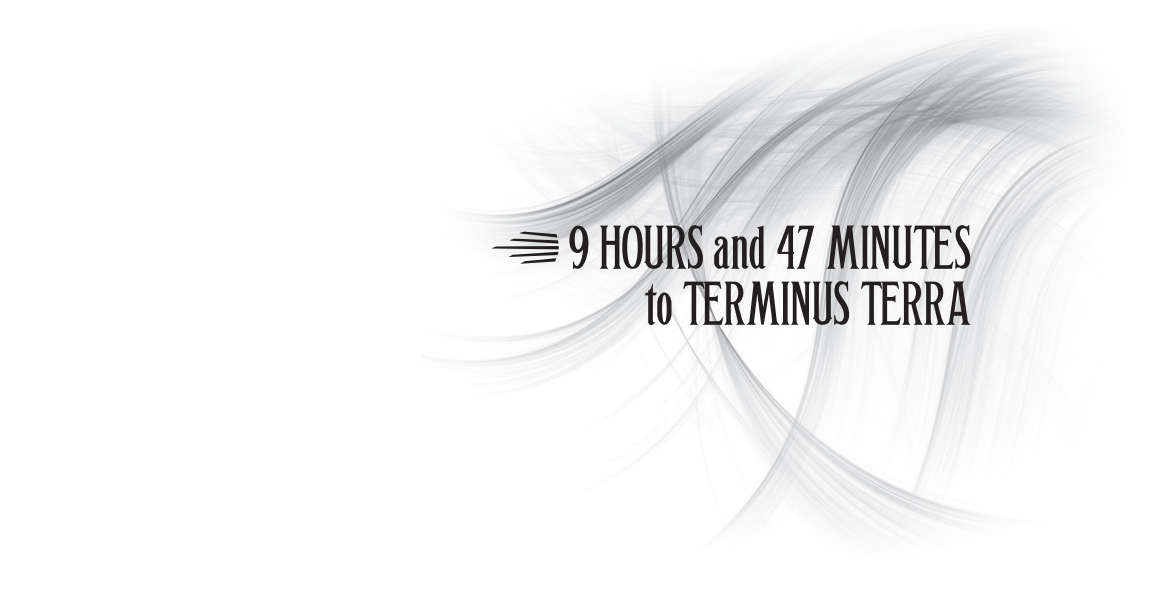
≡ PART ONE ≡  
**WREN DERECHO**





## ≡ PROLOGUE

**F**ailure was on the horizon.  
Everything was falling apart.  
I had made a crucial mistake.  
But there was no going back.  
I had misunderstood time.  
Along with the dimensions it bound us to.  
I was unprepared for its anomalies.  
I stood, helpless, as my world crumbled apart at the seams.  
Nothing could save us now.  
It was over.  
The orb always won.



## ⇒ 9 HOURS and 47 MINUTES to TERMINUS TERRA

October 1, 2059, 3:43 pm...

The time machine disintegrated into wisps of smoke around me, and the floor opened under my feet. I squeezed my eyes shut and clenched my jaw as I plummeted into the darkness. I landed awkwardly on a cold hard surface, sprawled on my side. I winced and imagined the bruise it was going to leave.

My eyes flickered open. I was back in my room, back in my timeline that was hopefully now set on the right course. I had successfully managed to change my future. I saved the timeline and my world from destruction created by the mysterious blue orb and my own villainous tyranny.

“Wren.”

I looked at the doorway to see Rob, my guardian and the man who had watched over me for the past two years after my uncle passed away. He cautiously stepped into my room. He was the person I trusted the most, my only family. He also happened to be the security director at a top-secret government organization named DAIR: Department of Advanced Innovation and Research.

Rob couldn't help but notice the state of my room, and, by his expression, I could tell he was in utter disbelief. It looked like a tornado had swept through, tossing debris in every direction. However, my unfinished time machine, Tempus II, stood tall and unscathed. It was the only thing unaffected when the future version of Tempus had opened a portal into my room, triggering the mayhem that lay before us.

Rob quickly recovered from the chaotic sight and chose to disregard the mess for the moment. He turned his attention to me. "I know you've had a difficult time lately, but I want you to know there are people here who really care about you and want to help you."

His eyebrows raised in surprise when I rushed over to embrace him tightly.

My voice shook. "It's over. I'm done with the time machine. I'm done with the orb."

I had left the devious power source in the hand of my friend Alex as the future collapsed all around him. Well, technically, it was Alex's future self who made the heartbreaking but necessary decision not to travel back with me.

Resetting the timeline had cost the lives of my friends. We had grown so close in such a short amount of time, and my heart ached when I recalled the traumatic events that had led to their sacrifice. It was all the incentive I needed to make sure everything progressed the way it was supposed to. I would never let the orb control me or get inside my head again.

As I wondered where Alex would be in this new, altered time, I heard footsteps behind me. "Hi, I'm Alex Donahue."

My pulse quickened at the sound of his voice, and I spun around. Even though I had thought about this moment, it was still a shock to see him younger and not weighed down by stress. He had the same gentle smile and dark hair poking into his eyes, but he seemed lighter and happier in his manner. He was a more innocent version of the man I had met in the future who had endured so much hardship and suffering. I remembered he had the same type of robotics as me, although his mainly worked as leg braces. His left hand was also completely replaced by metal and wires.

I broke away from Rob's embrace. "Wren Derecho."

He walked over and pretended to whisper even though Rob could totally hear him. "I can't believe you locked out Rob. You're pretty crazy, aren't you?"

I laughed as I replied, "You have no idea."

As my eyes met his, my heart skipped a beat, and I inadvertently



stumbled backward. My mind struggled to process the shocking difference I hadn't noticed until now.

Trembling, I managed to murmur, "Your eyes are blue."

"What's the matter?" he asked, startled by my odd reaction after having been introduced to him only moments before.

My voice escalated, "Your eyes are BLUE!"

I blinked hard twice, biting down on my parched tongue to wake myself up. I felt my entire body tense up as I realized there was no waking up from this dream. His eyes were perfect mirrors of the orb's deep ocean blue.

"Wren! What's gotten into you?" Rob exclaimed. "Wait...What happened to your face?"

"This isn't right!" I shouted, ignoring his concerns as I recalled my future self.

My older self had those same-coloured eyes after she'd succumbed to the orb's alluring power, and she had ended up being enslaved by it. I had risked everything to destroy that orb.

*Did it somehow take control of Alex? Here, in this timeline?*

"I stopped the orb. I stopped everything. Your eyes shouldn't be blue," I repeated over and over, but the more I said it, the more my confidence waned. "I abandoned the orb in an alternate collapsing future. It shouldn't be...it can't be...Is it in your head?"

Alex glanced at Rob uneasily, and Rob could only respond with a small shrug and a bewildered expression. He waited a moment for Rob to step in, but noticing that he was at a loss for words, he looked back toward me.

"What are you talking about?" Alex questioned. He spoke in a gentle but confused tone, and his thin lips turned up in a slight, nervous smile. "My eyes have been blue since birth. I know it's an uncommon colour, but you have nothing to be worried about."

His smile was meant to calm me down, but it did just the opposite. It felt like the orb was mocking me.

I took a few deep breaths and gulped down the rising lump in my throat. "In the original timeline, your eyes were hazel."

Rob reached out to put a comforting hand on my shoulder.

“The original timeline? Wren, how would you know what colour Donahue’s eyes are? You’ve never met him until now,” he said softly, and I winced. Puzzled, he rubbed the back of his neck. “What’s going on? When were his eyes hazel?”

Alex was alive in this timeline—this altered timeline that now felt terribly wrong—but he didn’t know me. My face felt warm as a tightness grew in my chest. Even though I knew this would be the situation I was coming back to, I had been unable to prepare myself emotionally. That wasn’t even considering the possibility that somehow the orb was still able to manipulate the present reality.

The orb’s words that had haunted me throughout my time in the future replayed in my mind, and I suppressed the urge to escape in panic and terror.

*You can’t fight me. . . I won’t leave you. . . you’ll regret this moment for eternity. . . you are nothing without me!*

I snapped out of my swirling thoughts in numbing disorientation.

Rob tried again, squeezing my shoulder, “Wren, what are you afraid of? If you tell us what’s wrong, we can help you.”

Even though Alex and Rob were with me, I felt alone and detached from reality.

“Everything is wrong,” I muttered.

The thought of the orb’s voice returning in my head made me tremble. It had invaded my mind shortly after my arrival to the future and tormented me relentlessly. It had been the one to destroy my future self, and I would never forget the feeling of helplessness as the orb violated my mind, making my own thoughts untrustworthy.

Alex took a step closer, but it only increased my anxiety. For a moment, the image of my future self reaching to pluck the orb out of my grasp flooded my memory. She had taunted me with her supernatural abilities and lethal blue lightning.

“The same lightning could still be coursing through my veins,” I reasoned out loud.

Rob and Alex stared at me in stunned silence. Clearly, they thought I was out of my mind. My pulse thundered in my ears, and I dug my

metallic fingers into my forehead, attempting to force the traumatic memories out of my mind.

"No, no, no. This can't be happening. It's impossible. The orb was destroyed," I mumbled to myself as I started pacing around the room. Uncontrollable tears welled up in my eyes. "It didn't happen...nothing happened. It's gone. It's over."

Rob pushed up his round, silver-rimmed glasses and repeated, "Wren, slow down and let us help you." He watched me intently, but didn't try to invade my space.

My gaze flicked from Rob to Alex, then to the vast blueprints scattered on the floor, and then back to Alex's worried face. "It makes no sense! Zero sense! It isn't scientifically possible."

Rob straightened up and pulled out a rectangular glass screen from his shirt pocket. "Wren, I'm going to call in some of our specialists from the medical department to take care of you. I'm sorry. I should have gotten you help earlier. You're going to be okay."

"No!" I lunged forward to clamp my robotic fingers on his forearm. "No one can know. You don't understand. I need to protect you..." I glanced at Alex. "And you too. I don't think I stopped it. The orb could destroy everything!"

"Whoa, okay, okay. I hear what you're saying, but regardless of what the orb may or may not do, you need to let someone look at you. We don't have to tell them anything," Rob insisted and gestured toward the door.

I pressed my hands over my eyes in frustration. "What if I made things worse by believing that we could control the timeline? What else is different about this timeline compared to the other one?"

I didn't expect either of them to answer me, and they didn't. Rob reached over to place his hand on my back, but it provided little comfort.

Rob skimmed over the multiple missed messages on his device. "Wren, I don't know what's going on here, but I know it's going to be okay. It's just...right now is not a great time—"

"Rob!" I inhaled deeply, on the verge of sobbing. "I messed things up, and you can't fix it this time. You can't fix me."

I looked down at my robotic hands, remembering waking up in this very facility after the car accident to see the silver metal attached to my broken body. My uncle had fixed me. And after my uncle was gone, Rob had taken care of me. He tried to mend the brokenness in my life. He tried to fix everything I threw at him. But now, things were bigger than the both of us. And it was all my fault.

Rob sighed.

Alex interrupted as he spotted blood soaking through my sleeve, “Your arm...”

I pulled up my sleeve to reveal bits of glass and debris embedded in my upper arm. Surprised, I watched the blood seep from several wounds I had sustained on my harrowing adventure. Gingerly feeling the small gash above my eye, I realized I was a bit of a mess. I became aware of the throbbing pain in my head and the aching muscles in my back and suddenly felt an overwhelming wave of exhaustion wash over me.

My robotic fingers began to emit random sparks, and my metal joints felt stiff from the strain of the last few days. I glanced at the scraped-up battery implant in my wrist. A small red light blinked intermittently. I would need to take care of that soon.

Alex moved his hand toward the cut on my bicep, and, instinctively, I jumped away from him, still feeling agitated. My stomach churned with anxiety. I longed to talk to someone who understood me, but in this timeline, my friends didn’t even know me. And if I didn’t have them, I would have to face this alone.

Rob slipped his screen back in his pocket, ignoring the incoming messages. “Alex is right. You need medical attention. At least let me help you with that first.”

I stared blankly at them, not knowing what to say to convince them I wasn’t insane, especially since I wasn’t sure of it myself. It was then that Alex noticed the warped safe at the back of my room.

“Rob, look at this.” He walked over and ran a finger over the lump of metal that had once been the lock. “What happened here?”

“It was a VU—a vaporizing unit,” I blurted, remembering my first encounter with Alex.

He had time travelled from the future to convince me to help him

defeat my evil older self. When I'd refused, he zapped the lock to retrieve the orb. According to the rules of time, all of that had happened just minutes ago. But to me, after spending twenty-seven life-changing hours away from this timeline, it seemed like a distant memory.

Rob and Alex exchanged hesitant glances and turned to look at me. "How did you...?" Rob began.

I hurried over to them.

"It won't be there." I shook my head, then shook it again to convince myself. Knowing the orb couldn't be in the safe calmed my nerves enough for me to speak more reasonably. "I'm not crazy. Rob, if you want the orb, which is why you came here in the first place after we talked outside—wait, that still happened, right?"

"Yes...?"

"So, I think most things are the same, like they were supposed to be in the old timeline..." I thought out loud, then turned toward the safe. "The orb's not there. It no longer exists. I left it in a collapsed future. None of us is ever going to see it again."

The hinges of the safe door creaked as Rob slowly swung it open. I gasped. Inside, the orb radiated its usual hue of blue. An agonizing memory of the otherworldly object, lost until this moment, thrust itself into the forefront of my mind.



Everything happened in the blink of an eye, but I relived it in slow motion.

My dad shielded my mom with his shoulder as she turned her face toward him. The crackling blue lightning rained down from looming dark clouds overhead. My mom's russet hair covered most of her eyes, but I could see her mouth twist into a blood-curdling scream. My dad's emerald-green eyes widened almost comically.

The front of the car had been obliterated. The unnatural lightning seemed to be alive and choosing where to strike. In a split second, my parents were gone forever.

I became aware my seat belt was twisted across my chest, making

it difficult to breathe. In agony, I attempted to claw at it, but my fingers—made of flesh, blood, and bone—were useless. I slumped my head back, and a burst of pain shot through my body. There was no escape from the warped skeleton of the car.

I drifted in and out of consciousness. Just before the darkness took over, I caught a glimpse of a glowing blue sphere rolling across the glistening pavement.



## ≡ 9 HOURS and 4 MINUTES to TERMINUS TERRA

October 1, 2059, 4:26 pm...

**M**y jaw fell open at the sight of the orb. My heart skipped a beat before my throat constricted. My breathing turned shallow and painful; it felt like I was suffocating.

The three of us stood in silence for a few long seconds.

I stared at the orb, frozen in place. I was once again unable to tear my gaze from its incandescent beauty. My mind wrestled against something deep and powerful inside me, but, eventually, I broke myself away from its influence.

I snapped my head to the side with immense effort. "Impossible."

"Is that the orb?" Alex asked, intrigued, yet with a hint of recognition in his voice.

I paused before choking out, "Don't touch it! It's not from this world, and it will stop at nothing for power and world domination." My throat felt like sandpaper. "Too much...this is too much."

"So, what are you trying to tell us? You said the orb was gone, but it isn't. Can you start at the beginning?" Rob prompted, trying to be patient.

I swivelled on my heels, tugging on my hair. I felt the colour draining from my face. I wanted to scream. I wanted to cry. I wanted to bolt out of the room, but I couldn't leave them alone with that dangerous object.

Rob continued when I didn't answer him, "Wren, you know how to handle the orb better than any of us. But, like we talked about earlier, I think we should bring it to people who specialize in other-worldly technology and alien power sources. They'll know what to do."

I turned back toward Rob to see him fix his gaze on the safe, his fingers twitching. "Rob, the orb is *my* burden. I can't let anyone else get consumed by its power! You have to understand...you have to trust me."

"What do you mean by 'anyone else'?"

"It got me. I wasn't strong enough. I don't know if I'll ever get rid of it," I grieved, looking up to meet his dark eyes filled with obvious concern.

I inhaled deeply, trying to find the right words. I needed to get my point across, and it was imperative that they saw I was being serious. The tremors shaking my body calmed slightly as I tried to get a grip on my emotions.

"If you allow anyone else to mess with the orb, the results could be catastrophic. Trust me, only I know the extent of its power."

"You know I can't do that," Rob argued.

In the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of metal on the floor. I glanced down and recognized the cracked watch Alex's future version had given me. I must have dropped it.

I snatched it up and held it out. I recalled the engraved words on the back and recited it excitedly, "*Aut viam inveniam aut faciam.*" I will either find a way or make one...the orb found a way, or it created one that existed outside the boundaries of time and physics...as we know them. It seems impossible."

Wide-eyed, Alex pulled up his sleeve to reveal the original watch on his wrist, minus the cracked face and weathered features. "Where did you get that?"

"From you," I responded.

"How did you...? What...?" he stammered in disbelief. "William Derecho gave me this watch years ago."

"I know."

Rob interjected, pushing up his slipping round glasses again, "Okay, you need to start from the beginning, Wren."



“I don’t know where to start. Tempus III...the orb...my evil, insane future self as a superpowered dictator...” I rambled, waving a hand at the pyramid-shaped machine and the safe before I stopped myself.

I took a moment to gather my thoughts, and then gestured toward one of the tables where we could sit down. Before any of us could take a step, we were interrupted by a middle-aged lady rapping her knuckles on the already-opened door. She was dressed in a gray suit and had almond-shaped eyes framed by horn-rimmed glasses. Silver streaks peppered her sleek black hair.

“I’m sorry for interrupting,” she said, clearly not sorry at all. “Director Mallick, we’ve been waiting for you in the control centre. Do you need to get your TetraScreen looked at? I don’t think my messages are coming through.”

Rob turned away from us as the lady briskly walked out. Even the click of her heels echoing in the hallway sounded annoyed. He fished out his TetraScreen and shot a glance at Alex.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Who was that?”

He hesitated before explaining, “Oh...it’s nothing. Um, just an upcoming mission: Operation Aquarius Deep. That was the Director of DAIR, Everlyn Li. Basically, my boss. I would love to stay here with you, but as you can see, I have other pressing matters to attend to. But, I will expect to continue this conversation once the operation is complete. We’ll deal with the orb when we get back. For now, Donahue, stay with Wren. Take her to the infirmary, and I’ll find someone else to look after Wren before you’re deployed.”

I wrinkled my nose, insulted that he thought I needed a babysitter, even though I was turning eighteen soon. However, this was not a battle I wanted to fight right now.

As Rob rushed out, I noticed Alex studying the orb. He’d barely heard Rob’s instructions. Alarmed, I slammed the safe door closed, jolting Alex out of his trance.

Instinctively, I grabbed his arm, so he’d look at me. I shivered as his blue eyes shifted to my face.

I warned him, “Do not go near the orb. You have no idea what it can do...Or do you?”

Alex jerked his arm back, and I released my grip. “I told you I don’t.” He quickly realized that his reaction alarmed me and apologized. I explained, “I’m telling you that because I don’t want you to get hurt.”

He nodded slowly, realizing the seriousness in my voice. Shaking his head and looking around, he questioned, “Should I escort you to the infirmary now?”



DAIR’s infirmary wing took up almost half of the floor. These doctors provided agents and employees with first-class care and recovery without having to go to the hospital in Ashborne. I assumed they had seen some unique and strange cases in the past. I had only been here once before, but my memory of that experience had grown hazy. This was where my robotics had been attached to my broken body nearly eight years ago.

This time, since my injuries were relatively minor, Alex led me into a small, stark-white room. The unmistakable odour of disinfectant wafted up to meet us as we entered. The few nondescript cots set up in the corner contrasted with the shiny high-tech machinery that lined the walls in odd, irregular shapes. An overwhelming number of buttons, levers, and screens were embedded into their sleek surfaces. I glanced to the side to see my blurry reflection staring back at me from the curved surface of a rounded, silvery-white contraption.

“Don’t worry,” Alex assured me, mistaking my curiosity for alarm. “Your wounds don’t look that serious. Dr. Flores will have you patched up in no time.”

I waved a hand at my surroundings. “What’s all this for, exactly?”

“Well, that machine is for locating and extracting foreign, metal objects—like bullets—I believe. That’s what those needle-thin scalpels are for.”

Alex turned around and pointed out a large but flat rectangular machine. “That looks like it would be some kind of...uh...X-ray device.” He squinted and leaned forward. “And that one...Could be a light source? It’s probably very important.”

Clearly, he had no idea what those machines were used for, and his uncertain smile made me laugh. I critiqued, “Do we really need all this stuff?”

“DAIR’s advancements in technology have always attracted unwanted attention. Some people would kill for it. DAWN—that stands for Designated Agents for the World’s Needs, if you didn’t know—anyway, its sole purpose is to keep people safe from dangers unknown to them,” Alex told me as we walked over to a cot. “We risk our lives for the continuation of humankind, meaning we’re going to get hurt, and it’s better to be prepared for the worst. Besides, look at all this room we have. We can afford to fill it up with fancy machines.”

I bit my bottom lip, wanting to change the subject. I had been one of those people who had suffered due to DAIR technology. Its first experimental time machine had caused a time storm, which resulted in my parents’ deaths and my near-fatal injuries. I had mixed feelings about the technology developed here, even though the robotics designed by my uncle in this facility had saved me.

“DAWN’s the security division of DAIR, right? Rob doesn’t really talk about his work with me.” Alex nodded, and I continued, “So, you do whatever it takes to limit the public’s knowledge about advancing technology. For their own good.”

Alex frowned, and his tone hardened. “It’s a little more complicated than that. We protect humanity from deadly threats and imminent danger. We do what we have to do, and we do it well.”

“In the future I travelled to, there was no DAWN or DAIR. No one to protect Ashborne and the world from a tyrant. Only you, Cass, and Tolli were there. It took you guys years to formulate and execute a plan to stop my future self.”

He furrowed his brow as he tried to process my words. Curious, he asked, “Who’s Cass?”

I wondered where Cass was. I narrowed my eyes, trying to sort out the two timelines I had lived through.

I explained to Alex, “Her name’s Cassandra Viola, but you and Tolli called her ‘Vee.’ We were childhood friends. She lived down the street from my house, before my parents died. You haven’t met her yet?”

“Nope. But I know who you’re talking about. She’s one of the new agents.”

He turned away to greet the stout doctor with mocha-coloured skin who had appeared at the other end of the room. She pulled her hair back into a tight bun while she made her way toward us.

“Hello, I’m Dr. Flores. Let’s take a look at you.” The doctor’s large, kind eyes studied the gash on my forehead and moved down to the multiple bruises and scrapes across my legs. I pulled my sleeve up to show her my arm. “Looks like you’ve been on quite an adventure, miss.”

“I have,” I replied as she gathered tools to extract the pieces of glass implanted in my skin.

The shock had fully worn off now, and I was starting to feel a sharp, throbbing pain in my arm.

As Dr. Flores dabbed the gash above my eye, Alex lingered close by for a little while before saying, “I don’t think you need me for this. I can come back in about half an hour.”

“Wait,” I blurted, “please stay. I want to explain.”

I weighed the consequences of revealing all the secrets I knew of an alternate future to him. I was desperate to lighten the heavy burden I carried, and my gut told me I had to trust him. In the future, we’d only had each other. I remembered the night up on the roof of the warehouse when his future self had told me that I could redeem myself. He wouldn’t give up on me. If there was anyone in this alternate timeline whom I could trust with the information I held, Alex was that person. And I refused to give up on him either.

I held up the watch I had in my hand, and he paused before reaching out for it. He studied it, comparing it to the one on his wrist while I started jabbering away about my trip to the future. Eventually, he handed the watch back to me, and I slipped it on.

I told him everything I could think of about travelling through the threads of time with his future self, Tolli, and Cass. I described evil Wren taking over Ashborne and the bubble shield she created to protect the city that had ended up imprisoning it. It was difficult to explain the complex mission to stop her, but I did my best. I told him how encountering the physical orb I had brought into the future had been fatal for

her, and she'd been banished from existence. The two of us couldn't exist in the same timeline. Unfortunately, the timeline was drastically affected by my actions, and the future had become unstable the moment I'd set foot in it. After evil Wren had been defeated, the timeline's disintegration accelerated. As we raced back to Tempus III, the entire reality began to collapse. I had barely made it out alive. Before the time machine brought me back, I'd handed the orb to the older version of Alex and watched him fade away into nothingness.

Alex nodded his head occasionally, but I could tell he was confused. I didn't blame him.

A shiver crawled up my spine when I described the orb and the impossible abilities it possessed. How had it ended up back in the safe? The laws of time travel or quantum physics shouldn't have allowed it.

While I spoke, I studied Alex's mysterious blue eyes. He seemed like the same person I had left behind in the broken shards of time. But I still had a gut feeling that something was off. I had more insight into who he was after spending time with him in the future, but, then again, he would now be walking down a completely different path. His eyes were evidence of a change, whether big or small was yet to be determined, but he didn't seem to be under the orb's influence. Perhaps I was just being overly paranoid. Maybe it was just an unexplainable ripple in the threads of time. Like the two watches existing together. Yet a part of me felt unsettled every time he looked at me.

Dr. Flores worked quietly. If she thought I needed more help than the superficial wounds she was treating, she didn't let on. As she finished stitching up the cut on my bicep, a familiar bulky figure with tangled, golden hair rushed in.

"Donahue! There you are! Mallick said I'd find ya here."

Dr. Flores smiled and left to clean up her supplies.

Tolli's pale-blue gaze fell on me and my robotics. My cheeks flushed with excitement to see my friend alive. His mouth broke into a playful grin, reflecting the personality of the man I had met from the future.

"No idea you had a girlfriend, buddy."

"We just met a few minutes ago," Alex answered curtly, clearly uncomfortable with that statement.

Tolli paused for a few seconds, then laughed awkwardly, “Uh...Is this a bad time?” His eyes darted back and forth between Alex and me.

I wanted to hug him. I wanted to both laugh and cry because he wasn’t dying from a bullet wound and lying in a pool of his own blood. But, it was evident he didn’t know me, so with great effort, I remained silent and looked away.

Oblivious to my thoughts, Alex inquired, “Why were you looking for me?”

“I noticed you were missing during our training exercise this afternoon.” Tolli quickly closed his mouth when I turned back toward him.

“And?” Alex prompted.

“Uh...you know for that thing we gotta do later with those guys—”

Alex interrupted, “Wren knows a little of Aquarius Deep. Tolli, this is Wren Derecho.”

Tolli held out his hand and clarified, “My name’s Trevor, actually, but everyone calls me ‘Tolli’...wait, Derecho? Are you related to William Derecho?”

I shook his hand and replied, “I’m actually his niece—was his niece.”

“Oh. Right. I’m sorry.” Tolli stared at me and slipped his hands into his pockets without saying anything more.

I smiled. “It’s okay. You guys can keep talking about Aquarius Deep.”

Tolli looked relieved and nodded his head. His tone shifted as he addressed Alex. “Okay, the reconnaissance team on the island just contacted the control centre. Everything is in place. Cyril doesn’t suspect a thing! His machine is as good as ours.”

“Wait, you guys are retrieving Whispers of Amelia? That’s the main component of the third time machine,” I exclaimed before I could stop myself.

Whispers of Amelia was the key to the third version of the time machine from the future—the only successful one. I realized this mission had higher stakes than either of them was aware of.

Tolli stared blankly at me, like I was speaking a foreign language. His lips parted slightly, but words escaped him.

“Yeah, I think that’s what it’s called,” Alex answered for his friend. “A guy named Cyril Elton-Blackwood built it based on designs stolen from DAIR. We’re not sure exactly what it does, but we know it’s dangerous. The operation tonight will be to take back what’s rightfully ours.”

Tolli chipped in, “We’ve prepared for this mission for months. It’s the biggest one we’ve had in a while.”

“It’ll go smoothly,” Alex added. “We have nothing to worry about.”

Tolli hesitated before replying with uncertainty. “We have to talk, though. Remember when you suggested...”

“I don’t know. I can’t talk about that now.” Alex shot a glance at me. “And there are some other things I have to figure out first.”

Alex pressed his lips together, a distant look in his eyes, while I wondered about the consequences of harnessing Amelia’s power. Someone else could discover how to time travel and put us in an even bigger mess.

Alex turned back to Tolli and assured him, “We’ll leave with everyone else. Don’t worry.”

Tolli seemed satisfied and lightly punched him in the arm. “Well, then, I’ll see ya later, Donahue. Nice to meet you, Wren.”

He stepped back and walked out the infirmary’s door.

“Tolli’s hair is even wilder than his future self’s,” I remarked, causing Alex to snicker but not reply.

I noticed he was rocking slightly on his heels and wringing his hands.

“You look worried.”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” he shrugged. “In an organization full of secrets, paranoia is common. Tolli and I wanted to have a backup plan just in case, but it’s better to leave things to Rob and Director Li. They’re the best of the best. Maybe you’ll get to watch the operation from the control room. I doubt Rob will be able to get you any more help today, but he’ll want you close by.”

He appeared reluctant to say anything more about Tolli’s visit and gestured toward the exit. “I guess we’re stuck together until I have to meet up with my team. Your robotics need a tune-up, anyway. Luckily, I can assist you with that. How about we do that first and talk to Rob after?”

I nodded and stood up. As we walked to the infirmary exit, I waved thanks to Dr. Flores, who was calibrating one of her many monitoring devices. She returned my wave with a smile and a nod.

I couldn't help but feel uneasy knowing this reality now had a completely different future. Changing the timeline hadn't felt like my choice, but in the end, I had believed it was the right thing to do. Now I wasn't so sure. On top of altering the future, time travelling had also unexpectedly affected the past. Alex's eyes were proof this timeline wasn't the same as the last one, and the orb's presence in this reality was truly baffling.

*Why was it still here?*

So far, it hadn't done anything but loom in the back of my mind. Waiting for something to go wrong was almost worse than the orb's taunting voice in my head.

But, there was something else I couldn't place my finger on. Perhaps I was paranoid too.





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## ≡ ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nyah Nichol was born and raised in Cold Lake, Alberta, where she currently attends Cold Lake High School. A few of her many hobbies are reading, playing her ukulele, crocheting, climbing, and doing anything artsy. She has three younger siblings who can be annoying at times, but sweet, awesome, and very entertaining the rest of the time. She has an amazing mom and dad who love her very much and support her in everything she does.