

NYAH NICHOL

BROKEN
SHARDS
OF TIME

SHE'S ABOUT TO FACE HER GREATEST
ENEMY: HER FUTURE SELF.



BROKEN SHARDS OF TIME

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Nyah Nichol



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THIS IS AN EXCERPT FROM AN UNCORRECTED PROOF. FINAL EDITS ARE STILL IN PROGRESS.

This book is dedicated to:

Mom and Dad, the most amazing parents
ever.

Silas, my brother and bestie,

Everett, my sister and proud owner of two
hermit crabs, Hermie and Hermie 2.0,

Grace, my godmother, who is a writer
like me,

and Titus, my crazy little brother who
sometimes wears two underwear.

PART ONE: WREN DERECHO

2 HOURS and 59 MINUTES to SILEO TERRA

May 27, 2070 9:01pm . . .

I didn't think it would come to this.

I never intended to be against the world.

Now I was about to face my greatest enemy: my future self.

One of us had to win.

One of us had to fight harder.

One of us had to be stronger.

I chose what was right, yet somehow it was wrong.

I tried to write my own destiny, but my story was engraved in stone.

The past had molded me, but I refused to let it define me.

I followed the path I carved out, yet I was unfamiliar with where I ended up. I selected the best option but wound up with the worst outcome.

The future seemed like an endless maze, yet too suddenly, it passed.

That was how I ended up here. I had gotten myself into this crazy upside-down catastrophe, and now I had to see it through.

18 YEARS, 2 MONTHS, 11 DAYS, 9 HOURS, and 15 MINUTES to SILEO TERRA

March 16, 2052 2:45pm . . .

Blurred lights flashed continuously just like the searing pain coursing through my body. My parents were here a split second ago. It didn't make any sense. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to feel. I didn't know what to think.

The skeleton of the sedan still surrounded me, and I was aware of my seatbelt holding me in tightly. Lightning and thunder encircled me drawing my attention to the storm outside.

“HELP ME, PLEASE”, I tried to force out the words gurgling in the back of my throat but failed miserably. With every agonizing second that passed, I felt myself fading away.

Seconds felt like hours. So much pain. And then darkness.

Time passed. I drifted in and out of consciousness, but I was aware that I wasn't trapped in the car anymore. The next thing I knew I was hearing voices that seemed distant, yet somehow, I knew they were not. My ears struggled to work properly.

Nyah Nichol

“She will die.”

A few faint words in the spreading darkness squirmed their way into my mind. I felt a thin sheet that had been loosely laid over my body being pulled up to my chin.

“We haven’t tested it on humans yet.”

The voices were so familiar, yet I could not recognize them.

“It’s the only thing that can save her.”

18 YEARS, 2 MONTHS, 11 DAYS, 10 HOURS, and 56 MINUTES to SILEO TERRA

March 16, 2052 1:04pm . . .

“**S**tormy, can you get in the car?” Mom asked impatiently as she popped her head into my room. Her cropped hair, styled in a pixie cut, was a darker auburn compared to mine. I studied the freckles sprinkled across her face. I liked how they softened her stern expression. She spun around and disappeared down the hall.

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered. My name wasn’t Stormy, but my parents liked to call me that because when I got angry, I resembled a storm. My real name was Wren Derecho.

Annoyed, I slowly put the book down on my nightstand. I always chose reading to calm my mind. After an argument with my mom earlier that day, I dived into the novel I had just gotten from the library, and I really wanted to finish the chapter I was on. I had been irritated because Dad told me he was leaving again for “an extended period of time” after we visited my uncle. He always

Nyah Nichol

left with barely a day's warning, and my mom just went along with it, cancelling appointments and postponing plans with friends and family. It made my blood boil. I had told my mom that it wasn't fair that our schedules always had to revolve around Dad and his work, but deep down, I was just upset that he wouldn't be around again.

Still sulking a little, I manoeuvred down the winding staircase and through the short hallway to the garage door. My uncle, William Derecho, wanted to show my father something he had been working on. Naturally, I too was curious. Uncle William was a skilled and talented inventor, a scientist of sorts who worked for a government organization named the Department of Advanced Innovation and Research, but my father and his associates just referred to it as D.A.I.R. My uncle was everything I wanted to be when I grew up. I loved spending time with him working on our special experiments. The last time I saw him, he let me help him build a fully functional miniature-sized rocket outside the government facility. He even let me attach the nose cone all by myself.

I slammed our sedan's door shut and waited in the backseat staring out the window, absentmindedly twisting a piece of my red hair with my finger. My dad's voice startled me, and I turned to see him looking at his phone in the shadows of the garage. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, his familiar square frame leaning against the workbench became more visible. I noticed that the salt and pepper patches that had just recently started appearing on the sides of his clean-cut brown hair made him look more sophisticated.

"Looks like they're starting early," he mumbled, pulling at his bottom lip with his thumb and index finger. He always did that when he was nervous. My dad worked for the same mysterious organization as my uncle. However, he spent most of his days trav-

Broken Shards of Time

elling instead of at the large government headquarters even though a lot of the projects he helped with were stored there. He was very secretive about his work and rarely said a word about it to anyone. All I knew was that he specialized in sourcing out uncommon materials. Dad had once told me that there were secrets stored within the drab walls and cracked bricks of the large building – secrets containing ancient and modern-day breakthroughs. Uncle William said that one day those secrets would ultimately save the world.

Dad slid into the passenger seat. “Stormy, you need to remember to be careful and to stay out of the way. The work they’re doing is dangerous . . .” I stopped listening as he rambled on about all the rules I had to follow. Sometimes I thought Dad forgot that I was only ten years old.

It was going to be a long car ride but so worth it. I couldn’t wait to see Uncle William because I knew he would set up a fun experiment to do with me.

As soon as Mom jumped into the driver’s seat, we hit the road. I drummed my fingers on the armrest and gazed out the window. After more than an hour of riding in silence, I noticed dark clouds beginning to gather above us while Dad made yet another phone call. He was pretty much on it for work all the time. That’s why Mom usually drove.

“Is it just me, or is it getting darker out?” I asked. My eyes scanned and searched the sky. Suddenly, a great crash of thunder shook the whole car shattering our peaceful drive. The thunder was followed quickly by a blinding flash of lightning. My mom slammed on the brakes, and my heart began pounding so hard I thought it would burst out of my chest.

18 YEARS, 2 MONTHS, 8 DAYS, 23 HOURS, and 53 MINUTES to SILEO TERRA

March 19, 2052 12:07am . . .

Δ ching all over, I rolled onto my side. My body felt stiff, and my eyes flickered open to see that I was in a room with dazzling lights and walls that felt like they were about to close in on me. My eyes hurt from the bright lights, so I closed them again. I struggled to lift my hand to brush away matted ginger tresses from my face.

As I tried opening my eyes again, I saw something flash in my line of sight, reflecting the artificial light, but I couldn't recognize what it was. Icy pain covered my forehead. Something was wrong. My mouth opened and closed trying to produce moisture to my tongue and throat. My heart started to race. I heard a soft clink when my fingers reached my cheek, and I slowly began to recognize a dreadful chill that had spread throughout my body. Panic filled my brain as I realized that the flash of light had come from my hand. Both my hands felt so heavy. I painfully leaned over the

Broken Shards of Time

side of the bed and saw a distorted reflection of my face in the shiny tile floor. A hoarse cry escaped from my mouth as I stared at the smooth hard substance that was spread across one side of my face. It was the same material as the metal around my fingers. Metal. METAL?!

Uncle William entered the room immediately and ran over to me. “Wren, it’s okay. You’re okay. You’re safe. I’m here.”

He leaned over and pulled me close. I slowly wrapped my arms around him, thankful to see someone familiar. Tears collected in my eyes as I looked up at him. He gently helped me lie back down on the bed and perched on the edge of the bed close to me.

I croaked, “Where am I? How long have I been here? Where a-are Mom and Dad?” My voice trembled, terrified at the answers that were about to tumble out of his mouth.

Uncle William bowed his head low avoiding my urgent pleading eyes and pushed back his straw-like blonde hair. Uncle William didn’t cry very much, so I was shocked to see his eyes so red and puffy with dark pits circling his deep eye sockets.

“We couldn’t . . . they were . . . they didn’t make it,” he gulped, choking back tears.

No, he must have been mistaken. My face grew hot as mixed emotions of intense anger and overwhelming sorrow battled for supremacy. It didn’t make sense. This kind of stuff wasn’t supposed to happen. Not to me.

“Three days.” I barely heard his hushed voice. “It’s been three days since the accident. I’m sorry . . . I’m so sorry.”

His eyes finally met mine again, but we had nothing to say. My face was expressionless as my brain tried to process his words. I stared around blankly at my surroundings. The metal, there was so much metal. And it hurt, like a ghost of my former flesh haunt-

ing me and dragging me into its icy tomb. It itched at the seams. I silently dragged five heavy metal fingers across the blanket spread over my lower body, careful not to snag the IV implanted in my forearm.

With all my strength, I started to force myself out of the bed and immediately my body gave out as if my muscles were made of jelly. Uncle William jumped up to catch me and helped me lie down again. The weight of the immense anger coursing through my veins came crashing down, and the only way I knew how to deal with it was to slam my fist into the bed rail. It groaned and screeched as it contorted, and the sounds echoed eerily off the walls.

I screamed in pain and instantly felt tears running down my face. I shrieked, “What did you do to me?!”

Gloom and exhaustion had taken its toll on my uncle. His eyes were filled with sorrow, as he tried to control the quiver in his lip. Finally, he sighed, “Wren, you were badly hurt, and you wouldn’t have made it. Your body was so damaged that our only hope to save you was to operate and give you robotic parts, but you’re okay now. Remember the robotics I’ve been working on for a while, something to combine humans and robots?”

“I thought it wasn’t ready,” I retorted, squinting my eyes accusingly. My breathing slowed and my throat constricted as I realized I was the guinea pig.

“We had no choice.” He quickly dug into his shirt pocket for a small mirror and handed it to me, “Look.”

The mirror showed my right cheek glazed with sleek metal. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. I already knew that my hands had been replaced, but then he showed me the long thin line of metal that crept down my spine and snaked down my legs ending

Broken Shards of Time

at my kneecaps. It curled around my legs like leg braces opposed to the implanted metal on my face and hands.

I was speechless.

My uncle held out his hand and waited until I placed my metal fingers in his grasp. “It’ll be okay,” he repeated, “I’m here. I’ll take care of you.”

I took a few deep breaths.

“Let’s just take this one day at a time, okay?” Uncle William sat down close to me.

I shuffled over to lean into his chest, noticing that the nerves in my legs were still intact.

After sitting in silence for some time, Uncle William spoke up. “Wren, I found this at the scene.” He pulled a glowing object out of his pocket, and I noticed his fingers tighten around the mysterious item for a moment before opening his hand. It was easy to see that he was mesmerized by its beauty. “I’m not sure what it is, but . . . well . . .” he whispered, “I don’t think it’s from this world.”

I stared at the tiny blue marble that glowed softly in his palm. It looked like the ocean reflecting the sun, shimmering with a million fragments of light. I couldn’t look away.

A figure quietly entered the room, and out of the corner of my eye I noticed his smooth brown skin and the glare off his glasses that came from the orb’s luminescence; however, my focus was locked on the beautiful, mysterious object.

“She’s awake.” His voice was deep but hesitant.

Uncle William discreetly pocketed the orb.

“Have you told her?” the man questioned grimly.

Uncle William responded, “Only what I needed to, Mallick.” He then turned to face me. “Wren, this is Rob Mallick. You can call him Mr. Rob. He worked very closely with your father and I . . .

Nyah Nichol

. he was a good friend of your father's.”

I immediately dropped my gaze at the mention of my dad. My eyes closed, desperately trying to catch the tears that streamed down my face. My father. My mother. I tried not to think of that day, that day where everything went wrong. But it was too late. I could still hear the screams and the crash of thunder and see the flash of lightning across the sky, and for a moment, I wished I could turn back time.

12 YEARS, 8 MONTHS, 17 DAYS, 15 HOURS, and 37 MINUTES to SILEO TERRA

September 10, 2057 8:23am . . .

“**W**ren? Are you coming?” Uncle William whispered outside my room. I opened the door to let him in. My room was not a typical teenager’s bedroom. I had set up several desks in all the available space, and my impressive collection of tools and small gadgets littered the room. The walls were covered in blueprints which could have passed for wallpaper.

“Yeah, just changing a battery again. Be out in a sec,” I answered, closing the small battery case that was implanted in my wrist.

The batteries vastly improved my finger movement and helped me to walk. Although it had been extremely difficult to get accustomed to, it was extraordinary what the robotics now enabled me to do. Uncle William and I had been constantly updating and improving them for the last five years since the accident.

“We need to hurry. They’re waiting for us.”

Nyah Nichol

“Well, it’s not like they can start without their speaker,” I smiled faintly and followed him out, taking in the dull brick walls of the hallway.

The corridors were bare and drab, but each of the rooms were filled with supplies and computer screens and different projects, so each door emitted a blue-green glow through its window as we passed by.

I clenched my teeth as we walked, ignoring the butterflies that fluttered in my stomach. Uncle William and I had been working on something big.

I remembered Mr. Rob’s exact words all those years ago when he explained what happened surrounding the accident, “We were testing the machine and needed to find a suitable power source. We discovered that it could be powered by flowing electrons in lightning, but when we tested it, we didn’t know that it would create a time storm, opening a hole into a different dimension for a brief moment. It was as if there was a black hole absorbing the sky, but the radiation emitted through it was not from this world. That’s how we figured out the existence of another dimension. Time was bent during the storm, and our clocks went haywire. Unfortunately, that was what also caused the accident. The opening allowed the small blue substance to travel here. We believe that the time storm was drawn to the orb, and it landed on the road you were traveling on near the facility. Your car was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

I completely lost it that day, the news triggering a fit of rage. I didn’t mean to, but I just snapped and kept pummeling the wall until the bricks began to crumble.

Nightmares haunted me every night, and I used to cry a lot but not anymore. Now I control it. I no longer allow my emotions to

Broken Shards of Time

take me hostage. At first, I thought every night about what I could have done differently so that I could have saved my parents. I felt so desperate and without hope until one day the solution became clear in my mind.

What I needed was answers, and the only way to get answers was to travel through time.

“You know Wren, we should name our time machine.”

My attention snapped back to the present. I looked up at Uncle William. “We should name it something Latin. Isn’t it your favourite language?”

He laughed, “I guess so, I am very fond of it.”

“Hmm . . . so what is Latin for ‘time machine’?”

Uncle William bit his bottom lip and replied, “Tempus machina.”

“How about just Tempus? I like that name.”

“Me too.”

We entered a room set up with two rows of seats facing a transparent wall. Through the wall, we could see our machine covered by a white tarp. Above it was a hole in the towering dome-shaped ceiling. That whole room was dedicated to time travel. On the left, there was a metal door that connected the two rooms.

I chose a seat in the back on the far-left side as people started to file in and take their seats around me. They were all agents that formed the government’s division of time studies, and they were all dressed identically in formal gray suits and black ties.

I felt extremely out of place. Their eyes were like piercing needles as they stared clinically at my strange metallic robotics.

Uncle William strolled up in front of the group. “First of all, thank you for coming today. I believe we have experienced a major breakthrough in the field of time studies.” His charming smile

Nyah Nichol

made him appear confident and personable all at the same time.

“Time is a mysterious thing,” he continued while pacing. “For anything to exist, it must exist within time; in fact, time gives birth to beginnings and determines endings for everything. Think of a child: He grows up, lives for a time, and then dies. Although time makes his existence possible, it also makes the process of aging and death inevitable. Time will eventually take us all. Dimensions such as height and width and length can all change because of time; however, what if one was to remove oneself from the timeline? Could one travel to another time? Perhaps even another dimension in time? Could one halt the effects of time itself, or even reverse the inevitable aging process we all must travel? Could it be that immortality is at our fingertips? Vast knowledge might just be accumulated in a fraction of a second.” He snapped his fingers for emphasis and then continued.

“How would this change the way we currently view the rules of time? Would they still apply? Would it be possible to change events in the past without changing the current timeline? What precautions would we need to take to ensure this? Friends, the possibilities are endless, but so too is the inherent danger. We must concede the possibility that changing the past may have dire consequences as the timeline could be corrupted in a multitude of ways: economies could be sabotaged, technologies could disappear, life-saving inventions might never be invented, and important historical figures and events could cease to exist plunging our world into anarchy and darkness. Timeline corruption could also unleash all kinds of unnatural natural disasters as the strain on the timeline may cause tectonic plates to shift, volcanoes to erupt, and mother nature herself to implode. The list goes on. The things that have brought us here today would be in jeopardy. But we must also ask

Broken Shards of Time

whether it is even possible to corrupt the timeline. Does time have the power to correct itself? Or, better yet, do we possess the ability to change what time has already determined? With all this in mind, it is our conviction that future time travel is far less dangerous than past time travel because we simply do not have solid answers to these questions yet, and we cannot afford to risk altering the timeline without these answers. However, we must start somewhere, so it is our recommendation that we begin with the future. Every series of events in the past shapes the present and the future. If we could launch the machine using the power created from the lightning discharged from a time storm – which is an irregular storm where the lightning seems to act as a living creature – it could open a portal to the dimension that contains the threads of time. We have analyzed the lingering radiation and concluded that we could attach ourselves to a thread. The danger here is that we are unsure if the threads will be altered if we interfere with them, but if our calculations are correct, we should be able to arrive at our desired destination quickly and without incident. Think of it as riding on a subway train that travels at speeds far greater than light itself creating a shard of time that becomes unstable allowing us to bend it according to our wishes. Manipulation of the shard would enable us to create a ‘station’ where we could safely arrive at the destination of our choosing. Potentially, we could move forward on a timeline resulting in a successful expedition to the future.”

Mr. Rob interjected in an attempt to clarify, “In short, ladies and gentlemen, we don’t just believe time travel is possible, we know it’s possible, and we’ve learned how to control it.”

As he opened the floor to questions, I slipped my hand into my pocket and grasped the familiar blue orb. Uncle William usually kept it with him but had given it to me right before walking into

Nyah Nichol

the meeting room, even though I sensed that he was somewhat reluctant to allow someone else to hold it. I felt special and important knowing he trusted me with it and that only a few people had ever laid eyes on it.

That reminded me, Uncle William was going to introduce me to Mr. Rob's assistant and friend, Alex, soon. He had said that he felt like it was time to tell Alex about the orb, and hopefully, he would be an asset to our project. He only told me a little bit about Alex's background, but I was surprised to hear that he was sixteen, just older than me by a year. It would be nice to have someone my age to talk to.

I stopped listening to the questions, bored with the tedious answers I already knew. Heat radiated in my pocket from the orb. Usually, it was cool to the touch, kind of like the metal on my hands. Now, it seemed as if it was . . . alive.

Uncle William finished addressing the crowd, turned to the connecting door and walked through. He strode toward the time machine and discarded the tarp revealing a metal pyramid and a door that made up almost the entire front panel of the machine. Impenetrable windows were on each side, and the gleaming silver made it look otherworldly. He swung open the door revealing a single seat facing away from the crowd. The control desk was visible from my seated position, and there were faint buzzing noises and a glow coming from the screen.

Suddenly, a digital voice from the building's intercom announced, "We will be testing the machine in ten, nine . . ." Everyone started murmuring around me.

I got a quick glimpse of panic in Uncle William's wild-eyed face before he leapt into the machine. With swift fingers, he started pressing buttons frantically, but a sudden rumbling beneath our

Broken Shards of Time

feet caused the door to slam, locking him inside.

“Eight, seven, six . . .”

My eyes searched for Mr. Rob for answers, but I couldn’t see him through the crowd of gray suits who were now all standing.

“Five, four, three . . .”

I rose from my seat. Something had gone wrong. My heart leapt in my throat as I heard faint pounding sounds from behind the time machine’s door.

“Two, one . . .”

This couldn’t be for real.

“Zero.”

A deep rumbling came from the depths of the time machine coinciding with the crash of thunder above it. Tremors shook the floor beneath my feet, and a streak of blue light, alive with power, streamed in through the hole above the time machine. However, it didn’t just strike the pointed tip of the machine like it should have, but rather it veered toward the door that connected the two rooms.

I shoved my hand into my pocket only to find a small round hole. The orb was gone! I then realized that it must have burned a hole in my pocket, and because of my robotics, I wouldn’t have felt the heat on that part of my leg. My eyes desperately scanned the ground until I saw it rolling towards the other room. The lightning and the orb – they were attracted to each other. I dove onto the floor and grabbed the orb before it got to the door but that didn’t stop the lightning. I covered my face with my arms as the blue lightning blew the connecting door to smithereens. I looked around, disoriented from the blast.

Loud screams drew my attention to the transparent wall where Uncle William, inside the time machine, was surrounded by lightning. Tempus was ablaze. I leapt to my feet and screamed, “Uncle!”

Nyah Nichol

but my voice was drowned out in the sudden fierce wind.

I ran toward the time machine, but the lightning jumped from the machine to me. It weaved through my fingers and flickered against the orb. Scared, I quickly threw it, and then everything exploded.

The violent blast propelled me against the wall, and as suddenly as it had all begun, it ended. There was only silence. I couldn't move, but I could open my eyes. The orb sat in front of me glowing its usual blue, both mesmerizing and terrifying. I slowly reached out and grabbed it. Clenching it in my metal fist, I turned my gaze to the machine, but it wasn't there. Tempus was no more. The explosion had completely destroyed it and all that was left were small jagged pieces of the shell scattered on the ground. The lightning, now also glowing a deep, brilliant blue, returned through the hole in the roof and vanished.

No, not again.

12 YEARS, 8 MONTHS, 16 DAYS, 23 HOURS, and 45 MINUTES to SILEO TERRA

September 11, 2057 12:15am . . .

I could hear someone questioning Mr. Rob outside the room.

“What do we do?”

“I have no idea. There’s no explanation for that explosion. The machine wasn’t even supposed to be turned on.”

“What about her?”

“She has to stay here, she has nowhere to go.”

“For how long, Mallick?”

Silence. All the conversations that concerned me since Tempus had blown up yesterday ended like this.

I slumped against the door. I was in Uncle William’s workspace. Cluttered papers and half-finished designs filled all the available space. If that wasn’t messy enough, I had all my supplies stored haphazardly in one corner.

Surprisingly, I hadn’t been injured too severely, just a few cuts and burns marks. I suppose I should have been grateful, but I sure

didn't feel like it. The pain on the outside was minimal compared to the inside.

Uncle William hadn't planned on turning anything on yesterday. He knew that the machine wasn't ready to be tested. The presentation was only meant to secure more funding for the project. What had happened? What had gone wrong? But even so, why did it blow up instead of just jumping to another time? I had no answers. The orb had somehow triggered the explosion and messed things up. Now, there was no Uncle William, and there was no time machine.

I picked up the nearest table and hurled it in frustration. It collided with the wall with a thud, and its contents clattered onto the ground. I dragged my metallic fingers through my hair and then clutched the orb in my pants pocket. I knew what to do and I needed Mr. Rob. Even though I had never admitted it or even knew how to ask for it, I needed his help. I needed Uncle William. I needed my parents. Tears began to well up in my eyes.

Slamming my fist against the wall, I released some of the storm brewing inside of me. The clang echoed in my ears. Sinking to my knees, I curled up in a ball and tried to shrink away.

12 YEARS, 8 MONTHS,
9 DAYS, 6 HOURS, and
26 MINUTES to SILEO TERRA

September 18, 2057 5:34pm . . .

“I have to do it. I have to rebuild the time machine.” Mr. Rob’s dark eyes stared at me; he wasn’t sure how to reply.

We were in my room, sitting across from each other at a cluttered table. Uncle William’s blueprints for Tempus were laid in front of us.

He sighed and took off his glasses, rubbing his eyes in frustration, “Wren, what you need is help to overcome your grief. You need people to help you work through the trauma in your past. There are people in this building that specialize in that.”

“This is what I need.” I smoothed out the blueprints and set the orb in between us.

Mr. Rob muttered, “I don’t know.”

He reached for the orb, but I quickly snatched it away.

“This is the answer,” I insisted, cradling the orb. “This is the last part of my uncle I have left. This is all I have left. You can’t

Nyah Nichol

take it away.” My eyes grew teary until my room started to blur together. I wiped my eyes and looked up at Mr. Rob. He looked defeated. “Mr. Rob, I need supplies. You have to understand that this is what I want, and this is what I need.”

Mr. Rob bit his lip. “Okay, okay,” he said gently. “For now, you do whatever you need to do and when you’re ready to listen to me and talk to other people – there’s a life outside your room you know – you let me know.” Mr. Rob inhaled deeply. “Deal?”

I quickly nodded with a smile; Tempus would live again.

10 YEARS, 7 MONTHS, 26 DAYS, 8 HOURS, and 52 MINUTES to SILEO TERRA

October 1, 2059 3:08pm . . .

This was my daily routine: wake up, work, build, eat, build, work, eat, scream in a fit of rage, bang on the walls, talk to Mr. Rob, work harder with no intention of ever stopping to sleep, fall asleep anyway. Repeat. That had been my life for the last two years.

I didn't remember much of anything else. My life before the accident felt like a vague memory, a dream from long ago.

Fingering the orb in one hand, I carefully screwed in the hinges on the door of Tempus II with the other. I was almost finished, but would it work?

I opened the door and placed the orb on the control desk. The computer analyzed it immediately. 'POWER SOURCE' in bold letters appeared on the screen. Accessing the keyboard, I brought up a digital image of the lightning trigger. The trigger's purpose was to convert the lightning into usable energy that would hold open the dimension accessing the threads of time. The trigger was

also the part that malfunctioned last time; however, this time, I had added a nice spot to place the orb below the pointed tip.

I propped up a ladder to the side of the pyramid-shaped machine and checked that the trigger was securely in place. There was no doubt in my mind that the lighting would strike it this time. I climbed down the ladder and jumped to the floor, surprised by the feelings of hope and excitement growing inside me.

I scarcely left my room unless I needed food or had to meet my tutor. I had made sure that I was able to access most things that I needed in it – I had moved out the extra desks to make space for Tempus II. Blueprints were still scattered around the walls but now, they all were associated with the rebuilding of the time machine. They couldn't exactly drop me off at the nearest orphanage with these robotic parts of mine, so I was allowed to remain, tinkering and building and creating. One of the only times I left this room was to go for walks with Rob, otherwise, he would just come see me in my room.

A knock on the door jolted me out of my thoughts, and I quickly slipped the orb into my pocket before opening the door. I expected it to be Mr. Rob but I hesitated when I saw that there was a lady dressed in a dark frumpy pantsuit beside him. Her low ponytail was pulled back tightly, making her bird-like features look even sharper. The serious expression on her face was a fitting accessory to her overall look. Her lips pursed together tightly.

“Good afternoon, Wren. This is Ms. Quinn, and she has been instructed to examine your workplace.”

“Why?” I asked suspiciously.

“Safety, health, etcetera,” Ms. Quinn replied curtly. Her exceptionally long pointed nose made her look so snooty. She peered down at me, and I sensed the air of superiority that engulfed her.

Broken Shards of Time

It made the hair on my neck bristle, and I suppressed the anger that rushed to the surface.

“Give me a second,” I grumbled and shut the door more roughly than I meant to.

A large safe sat under the table at the back of the room, and I quickly chucked the orb in and locked it up. I tidied up a little as I casually walked back to the door. I didn’t mind making them wait. As I reopened the door, Ms. Quinn impatiently pushed past, and Mr. Rob waved me over to him.

“Need some fresh air?” he asked gently, his eyes glancing down the hallway.

I nodded. He led me through the labyrinth of the complex. I looked over at him and made note of how confident he always looked. He was taller than most people, but he never slouched.

We approached a security guard at the main doors. This particular guard had icy blue eyes and never had anything nice to say. I looked away as Mr. Rob walked up to him.

The guard looked at his watch. “You have fifteen minutes before she needs to come back inside,” he grumbled and waved his hand dismissively.

Mr. Rob and I walked out of the building matching each other’s strides. I took a deep breath and welcomed the cool crisp air that flooded into my lungs. Autumn had arrived, and the air was wonderfully chilly. The sky was a dreary gray; enormous clouds masked the normal intensity of the sun as it made its way towards the horizon.

I expected one of our usual chats, but Mr. Rob looked like he was deep in thought.

After awhile, I broke the silence. “So, Mr. Rob, what’s on your mind?”

Nyah Nichol

He looked down at me and smiled warmly. “Wren, I think you’re old enough now that you can just call me Rob.”

“That’s what was on your mind?”

He gave a short laugh but seemed to be choosing his next words carefully. “Wren, do you remember the last time you were out here? Outside?”

How long had it been? I frequently lost track of time. I replied nonchalantly, “Oh, it has to have been a couple of days, right?”

Rob sighed and mumbled, “It’s been a week and a half.”

I noted the concern in his tone and stared at him blankly. “Wasn’t that far off though,” I said lightly, “I’ve been working a lot lately. I got the parts I was waiting for, and I think I’m getting close.”

“Do you even know how long you’ve been living here?”

“Yeah, but it’s all okay with me. I don’t expect to ever leave,” I answered and then smirked, “Except through the time machine.”

“Seven years.”

“That sounds right. You told me I was turning seventeen and□”

“*Seven* years.” He looked comical when his features were stern, and his brows furrowed. Rob stared at me for a few seconds before looking off into the distance. “That’s too long. You are my responsibility and I’ve let you down. I’m sorry I haven’t helped you the way you needed to be helped. You should be living a healthy, normal life. You should be healing from your grief. We should have helped you reintegrate into outside world. You know, like going to regular school instead of getting tutors.”

I stiffened at the mention of regular school and grumbled, “I’ve gone through more tutors than I can count because I’m smarter than all of them, and they treat me like I’m a kid.”

Broken Shards of Time

A moment of silence passed. Then, when I thought we were done, he continued, “We aren’t sure what to do with you. I’ve been debating whether to tell them about the orb. I just don’t know.” Frustrated, he removed his glasses and massaged his temple. “Maybe it would be best if other people looked at it. I know William didn’t want the other members of the organization to know of it at the time, but we could make it a new project. William certainly must not have wanted to hide it for this long.” He sighed again, “To be clear, I’m asking you to give it up. Let other . . . professionals handle it. I’m sure William would have understood. I only let you keep it because that’s what he told me he wanted if anything happened to him – keep it safe I mean; not necessarily let you hide it. You shouldn’t feel like you’re trapped here. You’re still a child. Let’s talk about what direction you’d like to go.”

“I don’t want them to take it. I need it. It’s mine . . . my uncle’s. I will never give it up.” Glaring at Rob, I seized his arm. “Don’t do anything, please. I’m fine.”

I was surprised to see the shock reflected in his eyes.

“Wren?” Rob’s voice was shaky, “What happened?” His face paled. “Your eyes turned bright blue.”

“Sorry,” I released my grasp and staggered back, disoriented from the peculiar pressure in my head. “I don’t know what came over me. Just a little tired today, I guess.”

With his sleeve, Rob wiped away the sweat that beaded across his forehead, “I’m sorry, Wren. I’ve made up my mind.” He turned his back and stepped away in a hurry.

I raced past him. I was faster and stronger, and I wasn’t going to let him take it. He yelled for me to stop but I couldn’t. Even though he was sprinting as fast as he could to keep up with me, I beat him back to the building by a long shot.

Nyah Nichol

I ran straight to my room, weaving around a few people and quickly dodging a surprised Ms. Quinn right outside my door. I locked it and listened as the fast-paced clicking of her heels faded. I bent down and allowed myself to catch my breath, but only for a second. Thundering knocks came from the door, and the concerned voice of Rob echoed through the hallway outside, “Wren, you must listen to me. The orb is not safe, and I’m afraid it’s hurting you.” I knew I couldn’t keep him out forever. I needed a plan. But first, I had to get the orb.

The pounding at the door paused. I froze, trying to hear what he was doing outside. Suddenly, a strong gust whipped my hair across my face. Wind? As I looked around, papers and tools began spinning and whipping into the corners of the room. Tables started toppling over and sliding along the ground. I grabbed one and used it to steady myself. I looked around in confusion. I quickly blinked my eyes as I noticed the ceiling rippling like it was made of liquid.

Despite the wind, I heard the clicking of someone trying to pick the lock of the door. I gritted my teeth but I didn’t look away from the ceiling. Slowly, the liquid-like surface turned dark. A black hole appeared in the ceiling of the room, and then even more slowly, a large, rectangular metal machine started descending through the hole. A scream wrenched out of my throat. Maybe Rob was right. Maybe I did need some serious help if I was starting to experience vivid hallucinations.

All movements around me came to a stop as time slowed down . . . and finally froze. Papers hung in mid-air and my trusty ladder that was propped up against Tempus II hovered above me, eerily hanging in suspense.

The machine had touched down. Its door unlatched, revealing

Broken Shards of Time

the figure of a rugged man. Even though shadows hid most of the details on his face, I could still make out his intense expression. I continued blinking my eyes, hoping to wake myself up.

He stepped forward and stared at me for a few long seconds before speaking. “Wren Derecho?”

I didn’t move. I didn’t make a sound. His piercing hazel eyes were terrifying.

“Don’t be scared. My name is Donahue, and we’ve come from your current future. 2070 to be exact.”

“Am I dreaming?” My whispered question was directed to myself rather than to the stranger.

“No, you’re not dreaming,” he exhaled slowly, “Wren, we desperately need your help. Your future is not a particularly good one. When you combine the orb with the time machine, it merges with your robotics. You become the most powerful person on the planet, but it slowly takes control of you. Harnessing the orb’s power, you create a ‘perfect city’ out of the city of Ashborne. In an attempt to eliminate all threats and danger you end up taking away all freedom to achieve strict order. You are the only one who can stop yourself. We need your help.”

Clouds swirled around in my brain. I gawked at him and tried to steady my voice. “No, actually, I’m going insane. I’m the one who needs help. So, thanks for the offer, but I’m going to take a hard pass.”

Donahue nodded and looked at me for a few seconds. “Where’s the orb, Wren?”

“Wha-what? What are you, um . . . talking about?” Naturally, my eyes darted toward the safe.

He walked over to the safe, and I lunged to stop him, but he clasped onto my wrist with an iron grip, holding me at arms’

length. I tried to wrench my hand away, but he was surprisingly strong.

With his other hand, he revealed a navy-blue pistol-like weapon with a long barrel. I stopped fighting him and held my breath, my body tense with fear.

“Ever heard of a V.U.?” he asked, almost sadly. “Don’t worry, I won’t use it on you.”

Donahue pointed the weapon towards the safe and pulled the trigger. I watched in amazement as the strange weapon zapped the safe’s lock and immediately melted a hole right through the door. The lump of molten metal oozed onto the floor, and the safe door swung open. When he saw the glowing orb, his grip loosened slightly, and I wriggled free and snatched the orb up before he had a chance.

“Wren, I need you to cooperate.”

I looked down at the orb in my hand and shoved it in my pocket.

He grabbed my arm again and began to drag me toward his machine. I screamed and tried to wrench my arm out of his grasp. When I tried to punch him with my free arm, he quickly twisted his body so that I only barely connected with his elbow. He winced and clenched his jaw, yet he didn’t loosen his grip. I lost my balance and fell to my knees. He still didn’t stop dragging me. I slammed my fist into the back of his legs to slow him down, and to my surprise, a familiar clang filled my ears.

“What are you?” I asked. Cold and dread filled my body.

“The same as you,” he replied, as a twisted grin grew on his face.

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