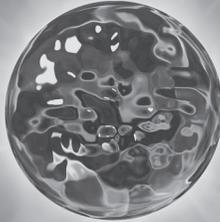


FADED GLIMPSES of TIME



NYAH NICHOL



Common Deer Press

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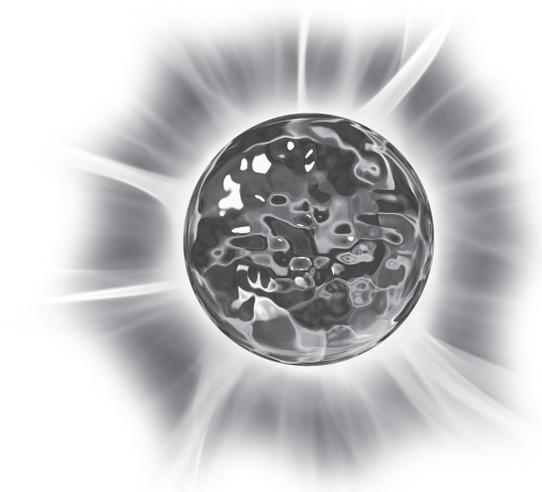
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≡ PART ONE ≡
WREN DERECHO





≡ PROLOGUE

Failure 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.