First 3 Chapters

HELIO TROPEZ

Book One of the Timeline Redemption Series

A Novel of Time Travel and the Evolution of Humanity

C.M. Rieger

Golden Age Timeline Publishing

Praise for Helio Tropez

A richly imagined world filled with intriguing characters. From the first chapter, I was hooked. If you like visionary fantasy, it\'s definitely worth reading.

— Joanne Taylor, Booksprout

I loved it! A hard sci-fi story involving time travel, a Matrix-like villain, and strong alien family support brings together one epic story! I couldn\'t put it down.

— Sarah Anderson, Reedsy

From the very first chapter, it had me enthralled. The journey of Hadden and Tia through the different timelines and flashbacks was truly intriguing. I particularly enjoyed the subtle but very clear references to the real situations which are damaging the human race as we know it. I\'m looking forward to reading more books from this author.

— Christine Azzopardi

The author is a masterful writer who knows how to capture her reader's attention immediately, and then not let go. There is a metaphysical aspect that makes the book so much more than just a good read. Fans of science fiction/fantasy novels will enjoy this novel, but readers who are seeking something with more in-depth will be even more thrilled to explore this fascinating world.

— Paige Lovitt, Reader Views

C.M. Rieger\'s ability to reveal just enough to intrigue is amazing. The story draws you in with surprising twists and turns. Resolutions are hard won and beautifully human with all of the flaws and surprising, bright insights that lift us out of the ordinary.

— Catherine Steele

PART I: THE ESCAPE

CHAPTER 1

Hawaii—December 21, 1960

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The tropical sun blazed against Hadden Violetta's tanned face, each ray cutting through his exhaustion like a blade. That morning, his parents' words echoed in his mind---*Trust your intuition, no matter what the stakes*. Today that philosophy never felt more dangerous or more apt. At twenty years old, still finding his footing in the Air Force, Hadden faced a choice that would have seemed impossible just weeks ago. The precognitive dreams had been relentless, each one crystallizing around the same inescapable truth: today, on the winter solstice, he would need to steal a plane and traverse a time vortex.

As he leaned against an ironwood tree, he squinted at the sun, a mere sliver of golden light breaching the horizon. The scent of cheap mulled wine lingered from last night's Christmas party. He drew a quivering breath to steady himself and wiped perspiration from his brow before bursting into a sprint through the dense undergrowth.

As he emerged from the sheltering shade, the humid, fume-laden atmosphere of the air force base assaulted his senses. He darted between pockets of darkness, seeking refuge behind a discarded shipping container. Peering around the corner, Hadden watched the ground crew huddle in conversation; their preparations were nearly complete. A supply truck rumbled through the entrance, and the ground crew abandoned their posts to help with the offloading---exactly what Hadden had counted on.

With only a skeletal staff remaining to cover the morning shift, most were nursing Christmas party hangovers. It was the same party where Col. Loman had cornered him again, insisting he spend the holidays with the Loman family instead of flying home to Seattle. The invitation sat heavy in his gut, especially when no other recruits received one, yet his ego liked the attention. It might lead to a promotion of some kind, he hoped.

Hadden rubbed the tender bruise behind his left ear, the one he'd discovered only this morning. Had someone tampered with his Amethyst Amplifier? His parents had installed the device on him when he was a child for protection from SIM interference and to boost his abilities. Now it seemed---gone. But he'd have to worry about that later. For now, he had other concerns.

The penalty for stealing an Air Force plane was extensive. He could face charges of treason, theft of government property, desertion---leading to imprisonment or worse. Not to mention, they might shoot at him or the plane, causing death or dismemberment. His heart thundered in his ears, but Hadden couldn't stop himself. Something deeper drove his actions that day.

The F-100 Super Sabre stood alone now, its canopy open. After looking in both directions, he broke cover. Hadden sprinted across the runway, hoisted himself into the cockpit, sealed the canopy shut, and donned the pilot's helmet. Even without a photographic memory, he'd have known what to do. The countless hours of training had made running checks second nature; his hands moving from switch to button without so much as a hesitation. As the engines roared to life, the ground crew

looked up, startled. The pilot emerged from the latrine with a confused expression, his eyes darting back and forth between the ground crew and his no-longer-idle aircraft.

Hadden thundered down the runway, with the crew waving their arms to stop him. The jet's engine screamed as it lifted him into the air, barely missing an emergency vehicle that had stationed itself in his way. Crew members grasped their weapons as the base disappeared into the background. Shots rang out in the distance, but Hadden was too far away now. He breathed a sigh of relief. As he entered the cloud cover, Hadden touched his Amethyst Amplifier to activate cloaking, but it didn't seem to work. Another sign someone had tampered with it. All he could think of was deactivating the radio signal instead.

In the distance, the Makapu'u Lighthouse jutted like a beacon of hope against the azure sea. A humpback whale breached in the choppy waves below, and Hadden barrel-rolled in response before dropping low over the water. The whale breached again, splashing down in great plumes of foam. Hadden smiled. He felt free, even if only for a few rare moments. As he climbed to five thousand feet, he veered northeast toward the Big Island. The engine vibrated in his chest when he leveled out the plane.

The sky remained empty---no pursuit aircraft, not yet. But they would come. The question that had tormented him for weeks clawed at him again: why risk everything for such madness? The answer lay in his mother's tear-filled eyes the day he'd enlisted, in his father's ignored warnings about SIM agents who would exploit his abilities. Three months of sleepless nights and half-remembered nightmares had proven them right---someone had already begun weaponizing his gift. If this desperate gambit failed, at least he would have tried to undo the damage his stubborn pride had caused.

His hands trembled on the controls---the same tremor that had plagued him since the nightmares started. Fractured images flashed through his mind: a needle, voices in the dark, Col. Loman's daughter watching from a doorway. He struggled to focus, pressing his fingers against the bruise that shouldn't exist.

Right now, however, Hadden had to focus. Deep in his long-term memory lay a story he needed---a tale about his father flying through a vortex that warped time, blurring the edges of one reality with another. The tale possessed such vividness; it was as if he'd lived it firsthand.

Air Force personnel rarely discussed these anomalies. Places like the Bermuda Triangle remained an unsolved mystery as far as civilians were concerned, but Hadden knew better. His father came from a place where people could travel between timelines and dimensions. A well-kept secret in one world was common knowledge in another.

He scanned the horizon until he saw it: the tubular cloud that marked an underwater volcano where he could access a time-travel vortex. As he neared it, the instrument panel grew erratic, dials leaping like fleas. Instead of pointing to magnetic north, it spun before locking onto true north. His breath quickened as he unfolded the handwritten note. It contained five images, a date, and a set of numbers.

The dreams had started five nights ago. Each morning he'd jolt awake, drenched in sweat, fragments of impossible visions seared into his memory. First, the tubular cloud near Kilauea volcano, spiraling with unnatural precision. Second, a futuristic

city bristling with skyscrapers, one crowned by what looked like a flying saucer, all dominated by a snow-capped mountain he recognized as Mount Rainier. Third, a domed house in the place where his family home once stood. Fourth---an old bathhouse sign with his nickname secretly scrawled in the Matrix language.

And finally, the time-space coordinates themselves---numbers that burned behind his eyelids until he'd scrawled them on paper just to make them stop. The date to complete this task? December 21st, 1960. Today. The winter solstice, when the barriers between worlds grew thin.

The Hawaiian vortex could bridge both time and distance. If the coordinates were correct, it would land him in his childhood neighbourhood of West Seattle in July---fifty years in the future. There was only one person who could have sent him a message like that.

But even if this mission proved successful, it went against every time travel regulation that had ever existed. His father, Rand, had whispered stories of entire family lines vanishing when someone created the wrong paradox. Yet, this was a summons he couldn't ignore --- an emergency he had to address.

Gripping the controls, he held the plane steady, pushing it to maximum speed, then plunged into the centre of the great cylinder. The cloud swallowed the aircraft whole. Inside, flashes of forked lightning erupted all around him. Thunder shook his rib cage. Swirling black clouds formed a tunnel ahead of him. As the engines strained against the magnetic pull, sparks flew from the intake vents. Still, the plane glided forward as if on a frozen lake. His hands clenched the steering shaft, the plane shuddering so hard that metal plates separated. Was this how timeline violations felt---reality itself rejecting his presence, trying to tear apart the paradox he was creating?

When the tailpiece erupted in a fireball, his breath caught in his chest. Pressing his neck against the headrest, he tucked his chin to his chest, brought his elbows in close, and yanked the ejection lever.

The canopy flew off, and the charge beneath the seat fired, launching him clear of the plane. Seconds later, the chair fell away as his parachute opened. He watched in anguish as the plane flew into the distance, trailed by a cloud of black smoke. As he fell into the abyss, his stomach churned. Wind screamed in his ears, and sodden clouds engulfed him in the pitch-dark. Hadden prayed for a soft landing.

When the clouds parted, the moon hung full in a starry sky. A landmass covered in silver skyscrapers sparkled in the twilight, most of them standing taller than anything he'd seen before. One looked like a flying saucer on top of a tower, like in his dream. He maneuvered his parachute away from the buildings and toward the ocean shore. In the distance, the white cap of Mount Rainier looked on over his hometown. He recognized it, but Seattle had exploded in size, sprawling as well as stretching skyward.

Yet, despite the immensity of the city, no people or vehicles roamed the area. He splashed into Puget Sound, close to Alki Beach Park. Freeing himself from the chute, he swam through the choppy waves to the familiar shoreline. He dragged himself out of the water and studied both ends of the shoreline. Not a soul. It must be the middle of the night.

Dripping wet, he hiked up the rocky beach to a picnic bench. Between the slats, a newspaper caught his eye. He squinted to read the date in the moonlight and shook his head in disbelief.

"It worked..." he muttered, spinning around in a circle, trying to see what this new century looked like. "2010. That's... that's unbelievable."

Up the beach, the old bathhouse sign remained, with his nickname still carved into the rotting wood. This was the place. A few blocks away, he spotted the futuristic mansion with the dome---built on a familiar plot of land. Hadden shook off the water and headed toward it. That's why he'd come after all. Summoned by an enigmatic force, he sought to meet the person who had sent him the message.

His seventy-year-old self.

CHAPTER 2

Seattle---July 18, 2010

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At 1:11 a.m., Tia Violetta ended her video coaching call. Her father always paid attention when the clock said 1:11, but she was never sure why. Diane Belmont, her client, was never easy. The elderly heiress insisted on late-night sessions, her voice brittle with exhaustion as she described the latest machinations of her corporate board members and family---circling vultures in designer suits, waiting for her to weaken. It would take Tia days to untangle the psychic residue from tonight's session alone, to rebuild the protective boundaries that her relatives systematically tore down. Exhausting work, but Diane was beyond desperate.

Tia flopped onto the four-poster bed, rubbing her forehead. After dimming the lights and pouring lavender drops into a diffuser, she breathed a sigh of relief. Indigo fabric canopied both sides of the bed, helping her mind relax.

Her domed apartment hovered above the rest of her father's estate as a separate area. That made it okay, she told herself, to still live at home at almost thirty years old. The interior was a marvel of Feng Shui, decorated in lush shades of aquamarine and magenta, and accented in gold. Matching Ming vases brimming with violets adorned each tabletop. Mounted on the curved walls were Klimt's famous paintings "The Kiss" and "Mother and Child." At the top of the dome, a gold pentagram hung from a crystal chandelier.

After seven clients in a row, Tia was famished. A kitchenette lined one wall of the apartment. On her way there, she glimpsed her gaunt face in the mirror and grunted. She kept neglecting to eat. Tia told herself that her looks didn't matter because she lived the life of a recluse. As her father often said, the world outside was a dangerous and unkind place. It was better to lie low.

Bowl in hand, she entered an indoor greenhouse next to the kitchenette. Shelves of hydroponically grown plants glowed in the pink LED lights: alfalfa sprouts, lettuce, and basil. She harvested some of each, returned to the kitchenette, and set her newly gathered ingredients on the counter. Beside it, a multi-tiered food dehydrator housed other plants from the greenhouse. From the top shelf, she took a flaxseed cracker she'd made the day before.

Fetching a jar of cashew spread, she took a seat at a tiny kitchen table next to the window. A pink placemat shared the surface with a vase of purple roses and a matching napkin rolled in a silver ring. Usually, she read a romance novel as she ate, but not tonight. After placing the napkin in her lap, Tia devoured the food, barely chewing each bite. It wasn't the tastiest food, but the only kind that wouldn't result in hives and rashes.

To passersby, her father's mansion looked like it had crash-landed from another world. Its curved walls of burnished steel caught the Pacific light, while porthole windows gazed out like unblinking eyes. The structure seemed to flow over the bluff above West Seattle Beach, defying gravity and convention alike. Tia had watched countless beachcombers pause mid-stride to point and whisper about the architectural anomaly looming above them.

That night, pressed against the cool glass of her bedroom window, she traced the familiar ache that lived beneath her ribs. What would it feel like to walk those sandy paths below? To feel salt spray on her skin instead of indoor air? Tia had spent her twenty-nine years mostly within these steel walls, and she wasn't sure why.

A flash of ginger broke her reverie as Cuddles materialized on the windowsill with feline grace. The neighbor's cat had earned her name through sheer persistence---she demanded affection like tribute.

"There you are," Tia whispered, wrestling the window latch open. Cuddles flowed into her lap, a warm weight against the evening chill.

For precious minutes, Tia lost herself in the rhythm of stroking soft fur, feeling the cat's purr vibrate through her bones. Then, as suddenly as she'd arrived, Cuddles sprang back to the sill and leaped to the oak's waiting branches, disappearing into the darkening world below.

The silence that followed felt heavier than before. Tia pressed her palm against the glass, watching the cat's shadow merge with the street's mysteries. Each time Cuddles left, she carried a piece of Tia's longing with her---that sharp, sweet envy of a creature who could slip between worlds as easily as breathing.

At her vanity table, Tia removed the seventeen pins that held her hair in place, allowing each French braid to uncoil before brushing out her hip-length hair. Once her routine was complete, she had to laugh at her reflection. Before going to bed, she often looked like Cousin It from the Addams Family. Fortunately, only her father had ever seen her like that, but he made enough playful jokes to compensate for those who missed out.

Before changing into pajamas, a thump resounded from below, and Tia groaned. This usually meant her father needed help with something downstairs. He'd taken to banging the ceiling with his cane to get her to venture down. Weary but resolute, she placed a headband on to keep her wiry hair at bay. Before descending the spiral staircase that led to her father's section of the mansion, she took a breath to steel herself. Once the jewel of architectural magazines, the mansion now echoed like a forgotten mausoleum. Disrepair and clutter reigned in whichever room her father chose to haunt.

A maze of decades-old newspapers, moldy books, broken-down appliances, and electrical cords ran haywire in all directions. It made a fine haven for spiderwebs and dust bunnies. Cobwebs ran from light fixtures down to dead houseplants, while piles of old books choked the already narrow hallway. Dust and mold filled the air as she carefully avoided stepping on anything, moving with well-rehearsed precision. As she neared him, the cacophony of three television sets grew louder. Floor-to-ceiling windows looked out over the ocean, but tattered curtains hung askew across the glass while overgrown trees pressed against the exterior, turning what should have been a million-dollar view into a claustrophobic tangle of fabric and shadows.

When she entered the living room, her father lay stuck in the "feet up" position in his reclining chair. His domed head gleamed in contrast to the fringe of long, frizzy gray hair.

"I'm uh... well..." he looked at himself, assessing his situation, then looked back to Tia.

"Stuck?" she offered.

"Exactly! Did I wake you? I'm sorry if I did."

"No, Dad. It's fine; I was still awake. I'm going to push from behind the chair," Tia said, rolling up her sleeves. She heaved, but to no avail. After several attempts, she slumped exhausted in a nearby chair, awaiting the next instructions. Her father said nothing and simply squeezed his eyes shut.

"Maybe I should call that care center," she suggested in a thin voice. "Remember someone keeps leaving SRA Home Care flyers in our mailbox? Maybe it's a sign. You know, how you like to talk about synchronicities...?"

"No! Try again," he growled. "That could be an artificial sync."

Whatever that meant.

She tried again to no avail. "I can't do it, Dad. I'm not strong enough."

The corners of his mouth sagged downwards. He blinked a few times as though trying to piece something together in his mind. "Someone is outside the house, trying to get in."

"Haven't I told you not to pay attention to bad visions like that? They just make you lose sleep."

"But I'm often right!"

"I don't remember any of them being right."

"But you need to believe me..."

She stopped. *Are we really having this conversation again?* After a few moments of tension, she mustered her courage and said, "You need help so you can get out of that chair. They'll only be here for a few moments."

He scowled. "Ten minutes, and ten minutes only."

She nodded and regained her composure. Searching in a hidden box, Tia found the stack of flyers she'd stashed there. After dialing the landline, however, the phone rang at least ten times. She was about to hang up when a cheerful out of breath woman answered.

"SRA Home Care!"

"Hi, um... my name is Tia Violetta, and we have a bit of a situation."

"What kind of situation?" She asked in a Boston accent.

"My seventy-year-old father is stuck in his reclining chair, and I can't get him out. We're going to need someone quite strong to help."

"Your father is a big one, then?"

"Uh-huh."

"Okay, then. We'll send our on-call nurse, Mary."

"I'm sorry," Tia said quickly, "but I think we might need a man in this case."

"It's okay. Mary used to be in the military."

"Got it." Tia replied, though doubted she could help.

As they waited, Tia peered into her father's fridge. The vegetables she had put in there had turned rubbery. Instead, TV dinners and fast-food containers filled every

shelf. She walked back into the living room but paused when something crunched underfoot. Amidst shattered glass and a fallen curtain rod, a photograph lay on the floor. Removing the glass shards, she studied the image.

"Your magazine cover broke, Dad!"

He hummed his acknowledgment. "I dropped it by mistake and couldn't pick it up again," he said, keeping his eyes closed but moving his hands in front of him in tai chi--type movements, quite unconcerned.

On the cover, eight-year-old Tia stood beside her father on the lawn of the Violetta mansion. The Seattle Magazine caption read: "Genius Investor Builds Space Age Home." She made space for the now glassless frame on the mantel. Three additional photos captured Tia at various ages, but strangely, he displayed no other family members.

As he watched her cleaning, her father cleared his throat and said, "You know you don't need to keep doing that therapy work, honey. I'm going to put another 10K into your account tomorrow..."

"You don't need to do that, Dad. I make an okay income. And it's called 'performance coaching,' actually. I like doing it."

"These people you work with, they rob your energy and hardly pay you anything."

"Yes, I know what you think about all that... it's fine, okay?"

"Still, I worry. You're on the computer with clients every day, all day. It's too much."

"I'm in demand. By the way, the organizer of a conference for people in the coaching industry has invited me to speak."

"What?" he said, with that familiar facial tic that emerged whenever he got anxious. "Where?"

"Los Angeles."

"You're not thinking of going, are you?" His face was now in full twitch mode.

A jolt of energy ignited in Tia's solar plexus, stealing her breath. "It's an honour to be asked. How could I turn them down?"

That familiar heaviness settled behind her eyes whenever she spoke about the possibility of leaving the house---that strange internal warning system she'd never quite understood. Her throat tightened, making the words harder to form, as if her body knew something her mind hadn't quite grasped yet. These episodes had become so routine she'd stopped questioning them.

"My community wants to hear about the techniques I've developed. I have a full practice based on referrals alone. I thought you'd at least be proud of me," Tia said pleadingly.

"I am proud of you!" he said with a force that startled them both. They glared at each other, unable to speak for a few moments. Averting his gaze, he muttered, "I just know they will try to..."

"Harm me? Who would try to do that? Why would they try to do that?" She demanded.

A rapid clicking sound echoed throughout the old estate. The doorbell hadn't worked for years, and her father didn't want it fixed. Instead of a chime, it sounded like someone trying to start a car with a dead battery. She ventured to the foyer, shocked by how quickly the SRA person had responded. As Tia opened the door, a stocky woman lifted her fist to pound on it. She squinted at Tia in a blue, rumpled caregiver's uniform.

"I'm Mary Redus from SRA Home Care." Exhaustion rolled off the edges of her Bostonian accent. The dark circles under her close-set eyes spoke of burdens too painful to tell.

Mary brushed past her, leaving Tia shocked as the woman darted around stacks of rubbish, down the long hallway and into the main living room. *How does she know where to go? And why does she sound just like the woman who answered the phone?*

The woman planted herself in front of Hadden, assessing the problem with the practiced eye of someone who'd faced this before. She tilted her head and drummed her fingers on her elbow.

"I'm Mary, Mister Violetta, and we're going to set you free. But first, let me understand the mechanism." She crouched down, examining the chair's lever system. "Looks like the release is jammed. Tia, can you find me something thin and strong? A butter knife, maybe?"

As Tia rummaged through the kitchen debris, Mary tested different angles of approach. "How long have you been stuck, sir?"

"Too long," Hadden grumbled, avoiding eye contact.

"The first attempt is always gentle," Mary explained to Tia as she returned with the knife. She worked the blade into the chair's mechanism while explaining what she was doing. "Sometimes these old recliners just need the right touch."

The knife approach failed. Mary wiped her hands on her uniform. "Alright, Plan B. Tia, we're going to need to coordinate this. On my count, you push from behind while I pull from the front. But we do it steady, not sudden. Got it?"

Their first coordinated attempt budged him slightly, but not enough. "Almost," Mary said, breathing hard. "One more time, but this time we rock him first to build momentum."

On the third attempt, with Mary directing their timing like a conductor, Hadden finally popped free.

He winced as he staggered to his feet, flailing for balance. Grabbing his two canes, he steadied himself, but when the two women rushed to help him, he pushed them away.

"I'm fine!" he insisted, stalking off to the bathroom, cursing in a foreign tongue.

"What language is he speaking?"

Tia shrugged. "I've only ever heard him speak English... Well until recently."

Mary looked intrigued. "Where is he from?"

"I don't know. Maybe born here in Seattle?"

"I'm sorry. I thought you were his granddaughter."

"His daughter, actually."

"Oh... really?"

Tia nodded, knowing she looked more like a teenager with her tiny frame and Rapunzel-length hair.

"Lately, he's been mumbling these strange words." Tia fussed with her mane of wild hair. "When I ask him what he's saying, he either ignores me or says it's the Matrix language."

"Matrix? Like in the movie?"

"Maybe...?"

They both stifled a laugh.

Mary cleared her throat, growing serious. "With his physical limitations and growing dementia, he needs to be in a care facility. A skinny thing like you can't possibly give him the help he needs."

"Try telling that to him."

Mary surveyed the unkempt mess and raised her eyebrows.

"I try to tidy things," Tia explained, "but he stops me. He used to be fanatically tidy, but now he's gone in the opposite direction. I try to help, but he prefers to be alone."

"He needs to be in a well-equipped senior care facility," Mary repeated.

"I know, but he made me promise I would never put him in a home."

"It's not good for him here. This house is a firetrap. That said, the only place that could take a man of his size is where I work, SRA, but it's not cheap."

"We have the money. It's just that he would hate it there."

Mary raised her eyebrows. "Oh, yes. He's the owner of Violetta & Burres Investments. I remember reading about him. He's some kind of genius?"

Tia nodded, feeling that familiar discomfort of being seen as the weird father and daughter cloistered away in the UFO house.

Mary leaned in closer. "Are there any relatives who can help?"

"No."

"Your mother also passed away?"

"I don't know where my mother is. She left when I was a child and didn't keep in touch."

"What kind of mother would abandon her own daughter?"

Tia stayed silent, giving the caregiver a look that told her to mind her own business.

Mary looked sideways and cleared her throat. "So, you've lived here your entire life?"

"I live in the upstairs apartment. It's a totally separate living space, but I need to be close by, given his situation."

"Neighbors or friends?"

She shook her head. "As I said, he likes his privacy."

"So, there's no one else who can help you?"

"Listen, I understand you are trying to help, but my father would be upset if he knew I talked to you about all this."

Mary handed her an in-home caregiver leaflet from SRA. "I just want to be helpful, but only in a way that works for you. If you hire someone like me, I can clean this place up, make it safe for him, ensure his every need is taken care of so that you can focus on your own life again."

Tia shook her head. "He won't allow anyone else in the home except me unless it's an absolute emergency."

Mary sighed. "It's your home, too. This is as much for you as it is for him."

Tia busied herself clearing cobwebs from a door frame, unsure what to say. An inner pressure that had been building up over many years---swelled even more---causing a pressure in her solar plexus.

The bathroom door opened, and he weaved his way toward the stair lift at the base of the grand staircase. "Thanks for your help," he grumbled. "You can go now."

They watched as he lost his balance partway there. Mary lunged forward like a defensive linebacker, righting him before he could topple. She guided him toward the stair lift, buckled him in, and took him to the top. Maybe he felt too exhausted to resist, or perhaps Mary was the kind of person he would finally "let in." Nevertheless, as she followed, Tia marveled at how he softened under her care. Mary found his walker at the top of the stairs and led him to the bedroom door, where he stopped.

"Thank you. I'm good from here," he said with genuine appreciation.

She nodded and closed the door behind him.

"You know," Mary said as they headed back downstairs, "I've seen a lot of families in situations like this. The hardest part is usually admitting you need help."

"We manage," Tia said automatically.

Mary paused on the landing, looking back at the chaos they'd just navigated. "Managing and thriving aren't the same thing."

The heavy-set woman pointed at the SRA brochure in Tia's hand. "Look it over. I'm not just saying it to drum up business, you know?" Mary said. "I think he'd love being there. You could have your life back and keep him safe at the same time. Imagine that."

Tia stared at the floor and nodded, not trusting her voice to speak past the lump in her throat.

Mary stepped onto the front porch and opened her umbrella. "Just let me know, okay? You don't have to deal with all this alone."

Tia nodded, watching Mary navigate the overgrown path to her car. The taillights disappeared around the curve, leaving Tia standing in the doorway, breathing the cool night air.

She looked down at the SRA brochure still clutched in her hand. In-home caregiver services. Professional. Discreet. Affordable.

It was the first time she'd had a real conversation about her situation with someone who offered practical help instead of judgment.

Tia closed her eyes, letting the fresh air fill her lungs. For just a moment, she allowed herself to imagine going to that conference in Los Angeles. Meeting other coaches. Maybe even... meeting someone special... dating like other women her age.

The familiar pressure began building behind her eyes. Her throat tightened slightly, that strange internal warning she'd learned not to ignore. Before stepping back inside, Tia folded the brochure and slipped it into her pocket for safekeeping. Maybe one day.

✦ ✦ ✦

As Tia returned indoors, a crashing sound made her flinch. She wheeled around to see a man stumbling out of the bushes.

"What the hell!" Tia backed against the front door.

He held his hands up. "My apologies, Miss, I didn't mean to scare you," he said. "I may have the wrong house. I'm looking for a Mister Hadden Violetta."

Tia drew her sweater around her waist. He was just a teenager wearing a military helmet and jumpsuit.

"What are you doing here? Leave before I call the police."

"No, wait. Please. My name is... um... Addy. Does a man named Hadden Violetta live here? He would be... I guess seventy years old by now."

The man shivered, water dripping from his jumpsuit.

Tia opened the front door and stepped inside the landing, pausing, poised to shut the door. "There's no one here by that name. You have the wrong house. Now, leave!"

She slammed the door hard and double-locked it.

"What happened? What's going on?" Hadden shouted from the bedroom.

Tia tiptoed upstairs and peered inside his room. "This time, you were right. Someone is outside. A strange man jumped out of the bushes and scared the heck out of me. Maybe one of those weird fans of yours. He wore a helmet and jumpsuit, and he was all wet!"

"What did he say?"

"He asked if you lived here, but I said no."

His eyes grew wide. "Did he give his name?"

"Um... I think he said Addy."

"Addy? Bring him in! Now!"

Tia stared at him. "But you hate having strangers in the house."

"He's not a stranger. Let him in."

"I---Okay..."

"Bring him into the living room. I'll meet you down there shortly. And if he's wet, bring him a towel and some of my old clothes from the hall cupboard."

Tia hadn't seen her father get so worked up about a visitor in a long time. She padded downstairs again and unlocked the front door. The man stood shivering in the chilly night air, looking lost. "Come in. My father says he knows you."

"He does live here? Addy said, surprised and relieved. "Thank you so much, Miss. He climbed the stairs, his helmet swinging from a finger. "You're his daughter? That's... ah... amazing."

"Why is that so amazing?"

"It's just that..." he stammered, staring at her long, frizzy mane. "My mother had the same kind of hair."

"Really? How exactly do you know my father?"

"Ah... I'll let him tell you about that."

Tia stared at him for a moment, then led him into the living room. "Why were you lurking in our yard in the middle of the night?"

Addy glanced around the room, awestruck. "I just wanted to dry off first before knocking. This is quite the place. Mister Violetta has done well for himself."

Tia narrowed her gaze but said nothing. *Perhaps he's a con man*. He stopped in front of the three flat-screen TVs and ran his hands over the controls, inspecting them closely.

She noticed a puddle of water forming around his feet. "I'll get you a towel and some dry clothes. My father will be down in a few minutes."

As Tia gathered a tracksuit for him, she couldn't help but notice he looked like a family member. In fact, he could even be her brother, with that same dark, wiry hair and facial features. What if...? But no, that was ridiculous. Her father would tell her if she had siblings. Wouldn't he?

"Try these," she said, holding out the clothes and pointing to the bathroom. "There's a towel on the shelf."

"Much obliged, Miss."

"You can just call me Tia."

"Tia," he nodded, "copy that."

He emerged from the bathroom with a bemused expression, holding his arms up as he assessed his new attire. "This is quite the space-age outfit."

"Yes... right."

Maybe he comes from a rural part of the world and doesn't get out much. He stopped at the mantelpiece and held up the magazine cover image.

"Is this him?"

She squinted. "Yes. Sorry, but how long has it been since you last saw him?"

He hesitated before answering. "A very long time."

As she boiled water in the kitchen, Tia peered at him wandering around the living room, concerned he might steal something. Addy moved through the room as if he were cataloging everything---running his fingers along the edge of the flat screens, lifting the remote with both hands as if it were made of precious metal. He turned it

over repeatedly, examining each button with the intensity of an archaeologist studying ancient artifacts.

"Here you go---hot cocoa to warm you up."

"Much obliged," he said, taking the mug and sipping from it. He hummed contentedly. "So good."

"Did you want to turn it on?"

His eyebrows lifted. "Turn what on?"

"The TV."

Addy looked from her to the black screens and back again. "That's a television set?" His voice carried the same wonder that children use when seeing magic tricks. "Sure."

She picked up the remote and pressed the power button. The sudden burst of light and sound made Addy stumble backward, nearly dropping his cocoa. His free hand shot out as if to defend himself from the screen where starships wheeled through space, firing weapons in brilliant flashes.

"Are these... are these in your atmosphere now?" His voice was tight with what sounded like genuine panic. "Has the war reached Earth?"

"What? No, this is a TV show." Tia studied his face---the colour had actually drained from his cheeks. "Ever heard of Battlestar Galactica?"

Addy blinked several times, his breathing gradually slowing. "A... show. Of course." He attempted a laugh that didn't quite convince. "Copy that. Just very... realistic."

One of the actors spoke, and Addy's head snapped toward the left speaker, his body tensing as if expecting someone to emerge from that direction.

"It's surround sound."

"Surround sound?"

Tia nodded once and furrowed her brow. "The audio doesn't come from the TV. We've got separate speakers for it."

"Pretty nifty."

Her father hobbled into the room with his two canes. Tia helped ease him into the chair, and Addy sat across from him. The two men nodded to each other but said nothing for a few moments.

Tia tapped her fingers on her knees, looking from one to the other. "How do you know each other?"

Her father cleared his throat and looked sideways. "It's a long story, Tia. I'll tell you later. Addy and I just need to have a chat..."

Tia nodded, but she couldn't help feeling left out. "Of course. I'll let you two catch up. Just call up if you need anything."

As she backed out of the room, Addy stood up and nodded to her as she left. *How old-fashioned,* she thought and smiled back at him.

"Don't go to sleep just yet, honey," her father called out. "I'll call you back down in a bit."

Puzzled by the request, Tia shrugged. "Okay. See you soon."

Maybe Addy needs a ride to the airport. Closing the door behind her, Tia climbed the spiral staircase to her apartment. As she lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling, curiosity looped in her mind. Her father had been increasingly strange the past few days --- urgent, almost relieved, as if he'd been waiting for something. He'd told her once, cryptically, that *something important is going to happen soon, and when it does, trust it*. She'd assumed it was one of his episodes. She hadn't assumed it would be a young man arriving in the middle of the night.

Who was this stranger who had stumbled onto their property in the middle of the night? What made him so special that her father let him into the house?

Unable to bear it, she tiptoed to the floor radiator and placed an ear against the grate, but she couldn't make out what they were saying. Frustrated, she crawled back onto the bed and thumbed through a magazine, only half concentrating, her heart drumming faster and faster.

CHAPTER 3

☆☆☆☆☆

The stale air in the living room carried the musty weight of neglect, and Addy's throat tightened with each breath. He forced his gaze to the peeling wallpaper, anywhere but at the old man, who wheezed as he shifted forward on his cane, flesh cascading in soft folds that spoke of years of overindulgence.

"Speak in Matrix," the old man whispered.

Addy nodded and closed his eyes, looking for the words in his mother tongue. After several moments, he shook his head. "I can't seem to remember..."

"I forgot---they took out your amethyst already," Old Hadden tutted.

"I thought something was off!" Addy said, feeling behind his ear. "Are you saying SIM agents took it, because only they would---?"

"---yep. Last night---in your timeline---and then wiped your memories of the experience. But don't worry, I've got another one. They're a bastard to make, but I have a few extra now," he said as he sifted through the old food containers that had piled up on the coffee table.

Addy kept feeling around on his skull. No wonder he couldn't cloak the plane, and he felt so out of sorts---like he'd lost a vital organ. The warning from his parents was justified. SIM agents had already tampered with him. A sense of dread crept up his spine.

"Besides losing your amethyst, it's the time jump of fifty years," Hadden said, as if reading his mind. "Back in 1960, wireless technologies were on the brink, but now they're thousands of times more intense. We're like frogs in hot water, slowly being boiled to death. With the time jump and losing your amethyst, you must be feeling out of sorts."

Addy nodded, rubbing his forehead. "That's an understatement."

Lifting away a stack of books, Hadden uncovered a gold-plated container, inside of which were five tiny gold boxes. "Each of these contains an Amethyst Amplifier. I developed one for myself thirteen years ago, which slowly restored the abilities I lost to SIM. One is for you, one for Tia and other family members."

He hungrily reached for one of the gold boxes, but Hadden withdrew his hand.

The old man glanced over his shoulder. "I must warn you that once you install it in your skull, there's a brief window where the amethyst unscrambles your soul signature before re-scrambling it for protection. It's like an IP address becoming visible on their monitors before the masking settles. So you'll get on SIM's radar for a few moments, if someone is watching..."

"Roger that," Addy replied, still holding out his hand eagerly.

"Not yet. I'll reinforce the SPS in hopes of hiding that initial surge. Hopefully, that will buy us some time." He closed his eyes, waving his hands in intricate patterns.

"An SPS?" Addy asked, recalling his classes as a boy. "I haven't set a Secure Protective Space for years."

"It's okay. I'll do it."

"Whose radar would I be on, specifically?"

"Those in the psychic warfare project. The ones who discovered you."

"What do you mean, discovered me?"

He sighed impatiently. "Remember when you took those district-wide tests at school? As a Voyant, you scored in the top one per cent on photographic memory, remote viewing, and clairvoyance. That's why they recruited you."

"They recruited me to be a pilot, not to use my psychic abilities."

Hadden dismissed his statement with a wave of his hand. "A ruse. There is a hidden group, unbeknownst to most of the people in the Air Force, except those at the very top. They're SIM agents who target people like you. They knew how much you wanted to fly. Why make it harder than necessary to recruit you?" Gnarled, swollen fingers handed Addy one box. "This gold box is a crystal shield to avoid detection by SIM. I've never taken the gem out since creating it---just to be on the safe side. Don't open it until I give the word."

Addy examined the tiny box, smooth and sturdy between his fingers. "How did you make an upgrade of the Amethyst Amplifier?" He said, barely containing his shock. Replicating a highly advanced consciousness technology without the help of gem smiths in Helio Tropez seemed impossible.

"It wasn't easy," he said proudly, as if knowing Addy was one of the few people who would recognise the skill required to achieve such a feat. "I based it on the blueprint they gave to the five couples in the Quinary Mission."

Addy remembered the day his mother showed him not only the gems in their boxes, but the blueprint for making the amplifiers. His photographic memory had captured it without effort, knowing the image would come in handy one day.

"In what way is it an upgrade?" Addy asked, incredulous.

"It's complicated. I'll download the recipe into your mind. Suffice it to say, this one still enhances your abilities and masks your frequency---but also prepares our people for what's coming."

"Prepares our people?" Addy asked.

"Ah, huh. Embedded within it is the beta version of a new operating system---one that will activate our consortium for ascension."

Addy was about to speak when Hadden held up a finger.

"We need to switch to Matrix now before I say anything else. So go ahead, put it on. We should be safe---for the time being. Place it in the same spot as your last one, next to your upper left earlobe. Remember how to do it?"

Addy shook his head.

"Balance it on your index finger, then hover it over that area. It will magnetise to the correct part of your skull."

After placing it behind his left ear, a buzzing roared through Addy's brain. Closing his eyes, he waited as a faint protective shield emerged around him, close to the skin, and the pressure eased. Soon after, the words rushed back to his consciousness like water breaking through a dam. "It's working!"

"Good. Keep that on, no matter what," the old man warned in Matrix.

"Addy..." he said, as a smile touched his face. "I haven't heard that nickname since I was a kid."

"I thought I'd better refer to myself that way instead of Hadden. I wasn't sure who answered the door," Addy replied in Matrix, the words flowing easily off his tongue. "You sent that image of the bathhouse sign on Alki Beach. It's where I engraved my name as a kid, only in Matrix. I recognised the symbol for 'Addy.' That's how I knew it was you."

Hadden nodded approvingly. "Very good."

Addy closed his eyes and sat in silence for a few moments, adjusting to the new frequencies running through his system. The Matrix language carried much more than words---patterns of feeling and meaning that penetrated consciousness directly, each exchange flavoured by the person's unique personality.

"I feel so much more like my old self now. Thank you." Addy hummed.

"You're welcome. All your childhood training coming back online?"

"Yes!" Addy smiled gratefully. "Every photographic memory seems back in place.

"Excellent."

"It's so amazing to be here. You know, my plane fell apart as it went through the anomaly. I had to eject. I barely made it."

"I was worried about you. Thank you for your courage," Hadden's eyes filled with gratitude.

It was truly a miracle that Addy figured out how to time-travel fifty years based on vague dreams and his father's stories. He was still in shock about the entire experience.

A mischievous smile touched the old man's lips. "But I knew you couldn't resist an otherworldly adventure."

They laughed the same baritone chuckle. Some things never change, Addy mused.

"I didn't know whether you'd interpret my message correctly." Old Hadden patted his forearm. "But you did."

Addy straightened his posture and changed the subject. "So, what's that tower with the spaceship on top---the one in the downtown core? That isn't there in 1960."

"The Space Needle. It's now a landmark of Seattle. They built it for the World's Fair in 1962. But SIM agents use it to extract aether for themselves and sell the energy back to humanity at a hefty price."

Addy frowned and took a sip of cocoa. "So, fifty years in the future, the SIM inverted timeline is still in place?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Nothing that the Quinary Mission members did made any difference?"

"Perhaps on some level." Hadden shrugged. "But I've been so isolated---cut off from everything." He shifted his girth in the sagging chair.

Addy examined his future self in more detail. "So how do I end up looking like Santa Claus?" he chuckled, trying to make light of the situation.

"Yes, like Santa Claus," he patted his stomach. "Except a hundred pounds heavier."

Addy wrinkled his brow and looked down at his own athletic body, comparing it to what he witnessed across from him. "So, what in heaven's name happened, sir?"

"I like food?" Hadden offered as he smiled for a moment, then the corners of his mouth turned down again. "What can I say? It's been a hard life, and food has been my solace."

"But you obviously had a family, and you're wealthy..."

"All at a great cost." A look of pain filled his swollen face. "SIM agents forced me to build an investment firm to fund their black projects. I'm the frontman, but Leo Burres and his family control everything."

"The Burres family controls you?" Addy asked, clenching his fists.

"I'm afraid so."

"How in the blazes did they manage that?" he growled.

Hadden grunted. "I've been a slave to SIM since I was your age, at least up until about thirteen years ago, in my timeline. As you can see, it's taken its toll. That's what CM does to you---the Cognitive Modification."

A strangling sensation engulfed Addy's neck, and he pulled at his collar. "So that's why you summoned me here... to change the timeline?"

Tears filled the old man's crinkled eyes. "Yes... I'm sorry, Addy. You're the only one I could call on. Listen, you must pay attention, okay? I'm not going to last long. I've protected Tia her whole life, but my strength is weakening. Once I'm gone, SIM will take her and try to weaponise her powers, as they did with me. Or worse, kill her in one of their sick rituals."

"But I've got protection against SIM---like everyone in the Quinary Mission," Addy said.

Hadden offered a bittersweet smile. "They outwitted the QM years ago. So, when you go back, you need to protect yourself and everyone else from their agenda."

Addy scoffed, unable to believe his words.

"You don't believe me?" He stared at Addy. "Soon, they will take you at night, and the deeper CM will start." The trauma in those hooded eyes filled his heart with dread.

Addy's cup rattled against the saucer as he set it down too hard. "Take me? What do you mean?"

"They'll drug you and take you to their underground medical facility. Once there, they'll split your personality into two---the light and dark side. One won't know that the other exists."

The room seemed to tilt. Addy gripped the arm of his chair, knuckles white. "That's... that's not possible."

Old Hadden's eyes were merciless. "Then they'll wipe your memory to convince you that you're this regular good guy. But from time to time, you'll wake up with terrible nightmares and strange bruises all over your body, wondering what nefarious things they made you do last night."

Addy shot to his feet, pacing to the window. His reflection stared back---young, whole, unscarred. "Good Lord, that's... torture, plain and simple."

The old man nodded but said nothing at first, watching his reaction. Addy vowed to do whatever it took to avoid that fate.