

Excerpt from
The Zepherous Chronicles Episode I: Rebirth



The day felt... *fine*. Too fine. Like someone had run it through a soft-focus filter, scrubbing away all the interesting edges.

At school, everything clicked into its designated slot with unnerving precision. Morning bell. Homeroom. Zeph and Delilah claimed their usual seats by the window, overlooking the parking lot and the freedom beyond.

The class hamster, Mr. Nibbles, was miraculously still alive. The announcements were still a droning symphony of fundraisers and detention slips. The teacher, Mrs. Periwinkle, still spoke in a voice that suggested she was perpetually auditioning for the role of *Sleeping Beauty*.

But by second period, a strange unease began to prick at the back of Zeph's mind. A tickle behind her thoughts. It felt like the day was skipping a groove, like a scratched CD.

It started with the clock.

She glanced at it—10:01—a casual reflex, like checking to see if the universe was still, you know, universe-ing. A few more minutes of Mrs. Periwinkle's slow-motion lecture oozed by. Or maybe they didn't. She looked again.

Still 10:01.

It wasn't just weird. It felt fundamentally *wrong*.

Like on *The Secret World of Alex Mack*, when Alex would suddenly freeze and turn into a puddle of shimmering silver goo—except Zeph wasn't transforming into anything remotely cool or metallic. She was just... stuck.

Something was off-kilter, as if the school had somehow decoupled from the space-time continuum and no one had noticed but her. Time felt like it was holding its breath, waiting for her to either catch up or fall irretrievably behind. She had no clue which one it wanted.

She leaned towards Delilah, whispering urgently. "Hey, Dee... what time is it?"

Delilah glanced at her wrist, where a purple digital watch was strapped. "Ten oh one."

She held it up, displaying the blinking numbers.

Zeph stared at it. Mostly in disbelief, but thought Dee was yet again just poking fun at her expense.

"It says 10:04," she said slightly annoyed.

"I know... that's what I just said," Dee bemoaned very slowly, as if Zeph were losing her mind.

"You said 10:01."

"No, I didn't," Delilah said, half laughing a bit too seriously. "Stop trying to confuse me 'Oh Glitchy One'."

Zeph's frown deepened, but she pressed further. "Has it been 10:01 for a while?" she asked, though a knot of unease had already begun to tighten in her stomach.

Delilah shrugged and half laughed again with a careless ripple of her shoulders. "I guess? I don't know. It just turned the minute over."

Zeph didn't buy it. Not even a little. The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, casting that jaundiced glow that made everything look like it had been dipped in dishwater. But she hardly noticed. Something was wrong. Off in that buzzing-under-your-skin kind of way that made her stomach twist. She would've bet her entire *Animorphs* collection—dog-eared spines and all—that the weirdness didn't

just start when she looked at the clock. It had been there all morning. Quiet. Subtle. Creeping in around the edges like static building before a storm.

And then came the flicker.

Not in the buzzing, overhead lights, not exactly. In the air itself. Like the hallway had exhaled a shimmering secret—a subtle, quivering ripple that danced for less than a second. Like heat rising off asphalt on a summer day, or that weird, anticipatory pause right before a sneeze. Like reality itself had momentarily blinked, but definitely not Zeph *herself*.

Zeph's eyes darted around the room, scanning for confirmation. A collective gasp? A shared murmur of confusion? Nothing. No one else flinched.

Mrs. Periwinkle, bless her heart, droned on about the nuances of rocks no one cared about, her voice soft and meandering, the kind of elevator music no one actually listened to. Delilah, head

propped on her hand, continued to gnaw on the end of her pencil, radiating boredom like a nuclear reactor at Chernobyl.

Zeph squinted at the air again, willing it to repeat its performance. Nothing. But her skin prickled, a phantom sensation like it remembered something her brain hadn't quite caught up to yet.

Maybe it had been a trick of the light, a stray reflection bouncing off the overly waxed floors. Or maybe it was like that episode of *Are You Afraid of the Dark?*, where the kid gets trapped in the mirror and no one even realizes he's gone, replaced by some glassy-eyed doppelgänger.

She didn't feel gone. But she definitely didn't feel quite *here* either.



At lunch, Dee launched into a breathless monologue about a boy who had apparently worn the same band t-shirt three days in a row, insisting it *had* to mean he liked someone at their table. Zeph just didn't get it. Boys were weird, and so was Dee's apparent understanding of them.

"How does that even track?" Zeph asked, skepticism lacing her voice as she chewed on a bite of peanut butter crackers.

"Because," Dee said, like she was explaining quantum physics to a toddler, "he wore it again *today*, and he kept glancing over here knowing full well it is one of my favorite bands. You don't just do that by accident."

Zeph raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Or maybe he just forgot to do laundry. You know, because he's a *boy*." She paused a moment to create her own jab back at Dee. "And that shirt is terrible anyways; it is literally a shameless *Fall Out Boy* advertisement."

Delilah rolled her eyes with dramatic flair.

"Wow. Romance is *dead* in your world, Queen Zeph.

And so is good taste in music."

Zeph offered a small, noncommittal smile, but her eyes wandered, drawn by an invisible thread. Something in the cafeteria felt... off-kilter. The cacophony of chatter was loud, a roaring wave of pre-teen angst and gossip, but it didn't seem to touch her, like she was listening to a TV through a wall of cotton.

Her gaze drifted to the far side of the lunchroom, lingering on the periphery, to a girl sitting alone at a staff table near the emergency exit.

She didn't recognize her.

The girl looked older, maybe seventeen or eighteen, but not in the awkward, trying-too-hard way some of the older students did. She was wearing a worn, dark denim jacket with some kind of patch on the sleeve—something vaguely military

—and had her dark hair in a messy braid that hung over one shoulder.

What snagged Zeph's attention, stealing the air from her lungs, was the flash of *blue* highlights running through the length of her hair and ends of the braid—the exact shade of deep-electric blue Zeph had painstakingly dyed into her own hair just a month ago, a rebellious splash of color in a world of beige conformity.

But there was also something about the way the light caught her wrist... like something was blinking in and out of existence. Broken and trying to work.

Zeph elbowed Delilah, nearly sending a spoonful of suspiciously pink pudding flying. “Dee.. Who is that?”

She followed Zeph’s stare and shrugged, totally unbothered. “Probably just the new resource officer. Or one of those interns they’re letting loose these days. Maybe she's here to bust us for excessive glitter

glue usage in the art room. Or honestly to probably cite you for one-too-many pop culture references used in daily life.”

Zeph’s eyes widened, a slow burn of disbelief creeping in. “Look... she’s rocking my highlights. The *exact* same electric blue streaks I’m sporting right now.”

Dee squinted, her brow furrowing in that way that meant she was actually paying attention. “Okay, that’s... definitely a level of weird we haven’t hit this week. Maybe she just has impeccable taste. Or maybe she’s a time traveler from a future where blue hair highlights are mandatory.”

Zeph didn’t answer, but then looked back to continue her staring assessment of the mystery woman.

But when her eyes returned to the table she was seated at, she was... gone.

Gone.

Not strolling away, not making a beeline for the door, not even subtly slinking into the shadows.

Just... *vanished*. The chair where she'd been sitting just moments ago—Zeph would swear on a stack of *Harry Potter* books—was now primly pushed in, neat as if a cleaning fairy had waved her magic wand.

Completely... *gone*.

Zeph blinked, hard, like she was trying to reboot her eyeballs. She leaned forward, craning her neck, trying to pierce through the chattering wall of students. It was like trying to find Waldo in a sea of red-and-white stripes.

Nothing. Nada. Zilch.

She rubbed her eyes, then tried again, slower this time, methodically scanning the table, the exit, even the hallway beyond, half expecting to see the girl moonwalking away.

Still nothing.

A cold, prickly sensation, like tiny ice spiders, skittered up her spine. “She was just *there*,” Zeph whispered, the words escaping before she could lasso them back.

Dee glanced up from her pudding, a delicate pink mustache clinging to her upper lip. “Who?”

“The girl. With the blue—” Zeph hesitated, suddenly feeling like her life had suddenly turned into one of those weird dream levels in *Super Mario Galaxy*. “With my hair. The same blue streaks. She was sitting right there. At that table.”

Dee gave her a slow, sideways look, the kind usually reserved for people who claimed to have seen Bigfoot riding a unicorn stopping for fuel at the local 7-Eleven. “Zeph... honey, no one’s sitting there. Never was.”

“I *know*, but—” Zeph cut herself off. Her heart was doing a frantic drum solo against her ribs. “I saw her. I swear. And so did you... but you didn’t, did you?”

Dee’s usual teasing grin softened, morphing into something gentler, almost... concerned. “Maybe your brain’s short-circuiting. My cousin swore he saw a ghost in the gym once. Turned out it was just the janitor with a mop and a serious caffeine addiction.”

Zeph didn’t laugh. Because this didn’t feel like a ghost story. It didn’t feel like a *Scooby Doo* episode.

It felt like a warning. A glitch in *The Matrix*.

Zeph nodded slowly, trying to appear reasonable, but the gnawing feeling had taken root and was sending tendrils of unease through her.

Time wasn’t moving right. Or maybe it *was*, and she was the one stuck in slow-motion. It felt like *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* when everything around

Sabrina froze and she had to figure out how to unfreeze it before Libby Chessler stole her boyfriend. Only this was way less about teenage romance and way more about... something else. Something darker.



After lunch, something in the air shifted. The hallway still looked the same—same lockers, same chipped tile—but it *felt* different. Not the usual post-lunch buzz of half-asleep students dragging themselves to class, but something quieter. Heavier. The fluorescent lights still hummed above, but underneath that familiar drone was something else—faint, electric, like the low static that plays right before something explodes on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

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