

To my wife, Mounika
Without your support
This would not be possible
I love you

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Prologue

Night fell upon the Kingdom of Morander; threatening clouds blocked out the light the moon tried in vain to shine. The castle town buzzed with movement, its steep mountainous walls reflecting the lights of the many torches carried by numerous messengers. The castle city was chiseled into the mountain, a testament to the country's might. Its many stone ramparts, carved from the mountain, with bricks from area quarries to supplement what couldn't be etched from the existing stone. The storm clouds that hung over the city flashed thunderless lightning, warning of the storm that was to come.

The great nation's citizens chattered with apprehension in its many pubs and homes, awaiting their great king's rumored announcement. They whispered in hushed tones, afraid the magic-using monsters that populated the mountains to the north might harken their worried words.

A woman left the castle, wrapping herself in a brown cloak as she mounted a horse. She pushed the steed into a gallop, blowing past the guards at the gate, leaving the castle behind her. The lady pushed her steed to its maximum speed, forcing it to keep ahead of the riders that would be in pursuit. The woman continuously glanced behind her but saw no one in the distance. Even though she saw nothing, it did not stop her from pushing her horse to its limits.

The woman traveled north into what used to be the Kingdom of the Ginta. She followed the mountain range the castle was nestled in until the new elevation caused her ears to pop. This mountain range looked like any other, carved

from millions of years of erosion. The closer the woman rode to the mountain, the less dense the forest was and the rockier the terrain became, making it difficult for the horse to keep up its current speed. The woman showed no mercy on the animal and pushed it harder.

She leaped from her mount when she reached a small cottage at the base of one of the mountains. It was a simple hut built with only materials on hand. She burst through the door.

Before the woman exhaled another breath, cold steel graced her neck.

“Who are you, and what are you doing in our home?” the sword wielder hissed softly.

“Karan, it is me, Jalnis!” the intruder exclaimed in a hush.

“Jalnis?” Karan replied, pulling her sword from the woman’s neck. “What are you doing here?”

Jalnis stepped into the doorway and shut the door behind her, sealing the room in darkness. Karan’s trained eyes could still see Jalnis in perfect detail with the small amount of available light. Under her cloak was the elaborate dress of a lady of the court, tailored in shades of light blue and trimmed with gold. Her hair was lavishly decorated and styled with gold butterfly pins, most of which are now clung to her hair by a strand or two, with her hair twisting around others, creating a sandy-blond and golden mess.

Karan gazed into Jalnis’ emerald eyes, and it was plain to see that the years were catching up with her. Her face started showing the wrinkles the highborn fought so

hard to hide. Jalnis' chest heaved from the ride, and it almost seemed she would fall over on the spot.

“It's Karagan; he's on his way here. He plans to kill you, your children, and your husband. King Gregor has proclaimed that all magic has been banned and that the Kar'kel and Tala'har who use it will be destroyed. “

“So, our leader will execute the king's will?” Karan growled. “He is Tala'har! This makes little sense.”

“It does not have to. Get your young ones and husband and go. It will be best if I am not here when my husband arrives.”

“I will pray for you, Jalnis; thank you,” Karan replied.

“I'm off to warn the other Kar'kel and Tala'har,” she declared as she left the small hut.

“Hey, honey,” a sleepy male voice muttered from the darkness. “What is going on?”

“It is time, Karan,” another voice spoke, resonating from Karan's mind.

“Trebor, we need to leave.”

In a few moments, in a flurry of action, the small family, a man, a woman, and two girls, were on the road, carrying almost nothing from their small hut. Karan held the hand of her oldest daughter, who held the hand of the youngest. The husband of the family, dressed in a long, simple robe, lagged. He stumbled his way through the paths, tripping on almost every root and stick.

“Where are we escaping to?” the Trebor asked.

“I do not know, but I can show us the way if that makes any sense,” Karan said.

“Lead the way, love. If anyone can lead us to safety, it is you.”

The wood surrounding them was quiet, a sure sign that something was wrong in Karan’s mind. She felt as if there was someone, or something, waiting for her and her family. She looked back at her two children. One was almost a woman, while the other was just finding the world. She hated the idea of pulling them from the only home they ever knew, but it was better than dying at the hands of a man they called ‘uncle.’”

After hours of running, avoiding town after town, they entered a dark, deep, thick forest. The lack of light from the moon made the dense woodland feel like an impenetrable wall of foliage. A quiet breeze floated through the air and guided unseen branches back and forth; only their creaking signified their presence.

“Mom, we must turn back,” the older daughter warned. “This is Elven Territory. They will kill us on sight... and that’s if we’re lucky.”

“The elves won’t bother us on this night, Gwyneth,” Karan replied and turned to keep moving.

“Love, before we go any further, we’ve got to rest,” the father said. “The girls aren’t going to say it, but I can see it in their eyes. They are exhausted. We need to stop.”

Karan turned to her children. Her eldest stood tall, barely showing any signs of fatigue. The girl wore a massive pack containing most of the essentials the family brought along, and her sword hung at her side. The youngest child's

chest heaved, and her pale skin shone with the sweat that soaked her brow and dark hair.

“Karri, can you go on?” Karan asked the child.

Karri opened her mouth but never received the chance to speak.

“Mom, you know as well as I do she could be dying, and she’d never admit to it,” the oldest cut off the young one.

“You have time to stop and rest,” the same feminine voice as before echoed into Karan’s mind.

“I suppose you are right. We stop and rest,” Karan resigned

“Mom, I’m fine,” the little one protested.

“No, your sister and father are right; we stop here. The heat is already hard enough on you, let alone the fast pace we’ve been keeping.”

“Mother! How am I ever going to be a good Tala’har if you baby me,” she whined.

“You’ll be stronger in the future, Karri, I promise,” her father comforted.

The family ventured off the path and found a small cave to take refuge. Karan stepped out of the cave as her family settled in, walked toward the path, climbed a tree, and waited. Just as she reached a perch, water began to pour from the night sky.

The father put his hand toward his wife, grabbed at the air, and slowly moved his hand back toward his chest. Karan floated out of the tree and back into the cave. As she found herself back in the cave, she was hanging upside-

down, long brown hair dangling from her head like a waterfall. The girls couldn't help but giggle.

"What are you doing, Trebor?" she growled.

"Keeping you safe," he grinned.

"That's my job," she hissed.

"Yes, but you can't do your job if you get soaked and catch your death of cold. Besides, the rain affords us needed rest. If my brother is coming after us, he wouldn't be foolish enough to ride in this heavy rain. He'd kill himself and his horses."

"Fine, I'll stay in the cave," she spat as she crossed her arms.

Trebor stared at her momentarily as Karri and Gwyneth continued to laugh.

"You can put me down now," Karan sneered.

"Oh, I'm sorry, love. I enjoy peering at you upside-down. I'd say more, but the children are here."

Karan rolled her eyes as Gwyneth put a finger down her throat and mockingly gagged. Karan was gently turned right-side up and placed on her feet with the simple movement of her husband's hand.

The family waited out the rain in the small cave. Karan would occasionally peer out to see if she could see anything at all, but little was visible through the downpour. She turned back to check on her family. Trebor was seated on the left side of the cave, with his back up against the wall and head pointed to the ceiling. Gwyneth and Karri were on the other side of the cave, Karri tucked under her big sister's arm, fast asleep.

Morning came and went, with the rain still echoing throughout the small cave. Trebor pulled some jerky from his pack and shared it with the girls. When he offered it to Karan, she waved it away with a stroke of her hand.

“You seem rather unshaken for someone who just found out their brother wants to kill him,” Karan commented.

“It doesn’t surprise me,” Trebor sighed. “Ever since he lost his charge, he has been different. I knew something such as this would happen one day.”

“I thought the prince was Uncle Karagan’s charge, and he’s not dead,” Gwyneth interjected.

“The prince is his second charge,” Karan spat.

“I thought Tala’har only get one charge. Why does Uncle Karagan get two,” Karri asked.

“That’s right, we do get just one charge. And only one,” Karan explained. “Yet, when they discovered the young prince had magic, your uncle insisted on protecting the prince as if he was a Kar’kel, like your father. He claimed it would make Moranderians and their king more tolerant of those with magic.”

“Doesn’t seem to turn out that way,” Trebor sighed. “It seems that all he has managed to do is expose our existence and place a target on our heads.”

“Should we really run?” Gwyneth questioned. “Aren’t we turning our backs on our own?”

“Jalnis made it out like he was specifically targeting us. Also—” Karan drew in a deep breath before releasing her following few words in an exasperated sigh. “I knew it would come to this one day.”

“You knew something about this?” Trebor's eyes looked as if they were to pop from his head.

“This is a day I have been waiting for ever since I received the Dharg'syth,” she said while gesturing to the large, folded scythe that hung on her back. “It is only given to the Tala'har who has the most important and difficult duty. I would one day take my family to another world. Please do not ask where I received this information; trust me, it is true. You girls are the future. If we stay to fight and lose even one of you, all might be lost.”

“So, is that why I don't have a charge?” Gwyneth demanded.

“I'm afraid so,” Karan said.

“Where did you—” Gwyneth began.

“Your mother asked for our trust, and I will give it to her. I expect the same from you, Gwyneth. This leads me to believe that you girls will protect someone special.”

“Yes... a Dalan'tari, as they say in the old tongue or we say now, Balanced One,” Karan revealed with an expulsion of air.

Trebor stared at her, mouth agape. Gwyneth huffed and crossed her arms.

“Do they even exist? I thought they were an old wives' tale spun by Kar'kel and Tala'har mothers to scare their children into not abusing their magic,” Gwyneth rolled her eyes.

“I believe you, Momma,” Karri added excitedly.

“It's not that I don't, Mother. It just sounds a little—grand. Aren't Balanced Ones supposed to be protectors of

creation, who even police the gods?” Gwyneth struggled. “How could we even be worthy protectors of even the earthly incarnate of something so powerful?”

“I cannot answer that, Gwyneth, but I have the utmost faith in my daughters,” Karan said. “And what you say about them is true, and the stories your father told you about them, even the ones I told you were total hogwash, are also true.”

“Karan, you’ve never led me wrong. There have been times when I couldn’t fathom how you were aware of the things you knew, and I understand you don’t want to talk about that. That is fine. If that is our destiny, we should meet it head-on,” Trebor stood and took his wife’s hands.

“Thank you; I do need all of your trust.”

“You have mine, Momma,” Gwyneth nodded.

“Don’t forget mine!” Karri exclaimed.

The rain stopped just after Karri’s declaration. The sun peaked out of the clouds and caused a blinding light show on the forest foliage. Light bounced from leaf to leaf, making the light almost intolerable. The beauty of the scene masked the severe nature of the circumstances.

“Let’s go. If they are chasing us, they are most likely on horseback, and it won’t take them long to catch up,” Karan said.

As the family stepped out of the cave, a vast shadow obscured the light in the forest. Karan pushed her family back into the cave as her eyes were drawn upward, catching

a brief glimpse of a large, ashen-colored creature that flew above.

“What was that?” Gwyneth whispered. “Mom, was that a feral dragon?”

“I’ve never seen one that big... or of that color,” Karan whispered in return.

“I’m not scared of no dragon!” Karri declared.

“I’ve heard stories of ancient, mythical dragons,” Trebor explained. “They were larger and far more powerful than the current feral or Hinacar Dragons breeds. These dragons could assume human form, or whatever form they chose, for that matter. Many of them were avatars of specific elements.”

“You are just going to scare the children,” Karan sighed. “I wouldn’t jump to those sorts of conclusions, Trebor. Let us continue to move and watch the skies.”

“I’m still not afraid of no dragon,” Karri mumbled.

The family passed through the dense forests of the Elven Territories without seeing a single elf. The dragon that passed above had not been seen again. The family followed Karan as she navigated small paths through dense foliage that no horse could travel through without serious injury. As they traversed the Elven Territories, night began to fall. The forest around them again became unnaturally quiet. The family traveled for hours, seeing no one on the paths they took, but they could smell the residuals of human encampments in the forest, signaling their passage of the Elven Lands.

Karan stopped dead in her tracks and put her hand up for the others to do the same. Karan's sharp ears picked up almost deaf footsteps gracing the tree branches behind them. She knew something or someone was striding near-silently from branch to branch.

"Run," she yelled, clutching Gwyneth's hand and sprinting. Gwyneth tightened her grip on Karri and dragged her along at a breakneck speed the child's tiny legs could barely keep up with. Trebor also ran, trying not to let his long robe trip him.

As they fled, beams of light sizzled by as Karan felt one graze her cheek, leaving a bright scarlet streak behind. She sensed another blast coming. She used her free arm to push Gwyneth out of the way, and it harmlessly hit the scythe on Karan's back.

Karan took a moment to glance back and saw a dark blur approaching from the rear. It was moving far faster than she could force her family to move. She looked ahead and saw their destination: another cave in the woods. She realized that whoever or whatever was chasing them would catch them long before they reached the cave.

Karan slid and spun around, coming to a halt, which allowed her family to pass. She brought her scythe off her back and met the pursuer head-on. As her foe approached her, she realized it was a man in dark armor. The armor perplexed her. She had never seen such a suit.

Karan felt her scythe connect with the stranger's hidden hand blades, which shot out of the tops of his armored gloves. She reeled back from the force of the collision, sliding to a stop with her right knee to the ground. She prepared to meet the attacker's next charge with her weapon held in front of her.

“Karan, go!” her husband hollered as she slid to a halt.

“But, I can't...” she muttered. “I'm your Tala'har.”

“Go! The future and destiny of our children are far more important than my life. Only you can teach them what they need to know to meet their destiny. I love you all, don't forget that.”

More light beams rained down on them. Trebor shot a hand toward his children, creating a shield that deflected numerous close blasts.

“Go, my dear,” the voice in Karan's head rang again. “This is how things must be. I am sorry. His death will not be in vain. Go through the portal in the cave; there is safety and a friend on the other side.”

Karan turned away from the stranger as tears fell from her eyes. She snatched Gwyneth's hand, which was still latched on to Karri. She dragged them into the unnaturally dark cave.

What remained of the family stumbled through unnatural darkness until the twilight light almost blinded them. They staggered out of a similar cave opening in a strange setting.

The area around them was a series of grassy knolls. To their left was a strange conglomeration of metal bars built into a dome-like structure over a sandy lot. In another sandy area, swings hung by strong, metal chains on a structure of long metal tubes.

A figure appeared from the shadow of a nearby tree. She was a short, semi-stout woman dressed in a lavender

skirt and light purple blouse. Her hair was dark brown and tied neatly behind her head. She smiled gently at the family.

Karri dropped to her knees and began to bawl; Gwyneth sunk to her knees and drew the child close as tears fell from her eyes as well.

“The Tara’vir family, I presume?” the portly woman said.

“Yes,” Karan’s eyes darted around, still adjusting to the light, searching for threats.

Karan could feel the air crackle around this new stranger in the odd clothing.

“You need not fear; I’ve been sent to aid you,” the woman said. “I’m sure you have plenty of questions that will be answered in time. We should get you out of this public place and into less conspicuous clothing. For now, welcome to Earth.”

Chapter 1

I felt like I was slowly falling from that muggy night sky that watched over the park and landed gently back into my bed.

“Carrie! Wake up! You’re going to be late for school!”

My mother’s caw yanked my consciousness back into this reality. I sat up in my bed, disoriented. I would have said what I had seen was a recollection of my past, but it was more than that. I was watching it from afar, only able to observe the unfolding events. Some of them were events I was previously not privy to. It dawned on me how strange it was to see my younger self from the outside. It felt like I was watching a movie. I relived the scene of my father’s death a dozen times in my dreams before, but never like this. I shook off the gloom and slid my feet out of bed to start the day.

Chapter 2

I watched the world speed by as if I were a bullet capable of shattering the existence of some poor soul. I observed the landscape through the glass of my mother's car side window. I put my hand over my eyes, trying to block the Miami sun. The areas we drove through did not look much different from any neighborhood I had seen since I arrived in this strange world. The only real difference was the occasional palm tree planted alongside the road. Many of the houses we drove by were nearly identical, a reminder of rapid development in this suburb outside of a metropolis of frolicking and excess. It was enough to make me gag.

"Dear, did you put on that new sunblock I bought you?" my mother's lyrical yet nagging voice vibrated from the driver's seat.

"Yeah, Mom, I put it on," I replied.

"Good. I don't want you coming home looking like you just escaped from the kitchen of some seafood restaurant," she said.

"Don't worry about it, Mom; I'll be fine," I yawned.

"That skin of yours is very fair, and Miami is much different from Seattle," she reminded.

"Yeah, Mom, I know."

"You have that form you're supposed to bring with you, right?"

"Yeah, it's right here," I dug the paper out of my bag. I took a close look at it.

“You spelled your name with two ‘a’s again. You’re not ‘Karan’ anymore, you’re Karen,” I sighed.

“Be a dear and correct it for me.”

I removed a pen from my bookbag and added the extra line that turned an ‘a’ into an ‘e’.

“Hey... do you feel that? I’m unsure what I’m sensing, but it’s huge. It’s tough to pinpoint its exact location,” I admitted.

“Yes, I’ve sensed it since we came into the area. Your charge is here, somewhere,” Mom answered.

“Do you know how old my charge is supposed to be?” I inquired.

“Yes, the person in question is supposed to be about your age, according to what I’ve been told,” Mom said as she turned the wheel, pulling into the sizeable U-shaped driveway in front of the school. Above the entryway covering, the name Marshall High School was displayed in white lettering.

“Could it be possible that the person is here? At school?” I asked.

“I suppose that wouldn’t be completely out of possibility. Keep your eyes open,” she said with her usual wide smile.

“I will, Mom. Thanks for the ride,” I said also with a big smile.

“No problem. Have a good first day at school,” she said, waving her hand forward, signaling me to get moving.

I stepped out of the car into my brand-new world. I grabbed my little black tote and closed the car door. My new environment was full of students of all races and colors. It was a variable human rainbow on the lawn of the school. The sky was blue and cloudless, with the occasional seabird screeching as it flew overhead. The building seemed to be getting old; it might have been built sometime in the early 1980's. It looked like every other institution I had been to here on Earth. I dreaded the sight of it.

The presence I felt in the car was even stronger here. Whoever my charge was, they were close by. The thought of meeting them gave me goosebumps. I pulled my phone from my pocket. It was a recently made smartphone designed as a flip phone. I never liked the idea of a bare, unprotected screen. I stared at the phone intently, feeling I should be calling someone, informing them of this new revelation. Yet, my mother already knew, and I had no idea how to contact my sister. I knew I wanted to call someone but couldn't place who.

I shrugged off the strange feeling of forgetfulness and walked up to the main doors. None of the many students who loitered on the staircase said a word to me. As I approached the door, a smallish, slightly rotund woman stood in the doorway. She wore a deep lavender pantsuit with a small rosary around her neck for garnish. She held her hands folded in front of her. Her cheeks nearly collided with her eyes as she flashed me a compact but friendly grin.

"Good morning, Carrie. I hope you have a wonderful day at school," she said, her grin beaming brighter than before.

"Morning? Ju...dy... I mean Principal Angler," I said.

“Here is the form you needed to be signed,” I said, handing her the document I had corrected.

“So, she managed to spell both of your names right this time,” Judy remarked.

“Nope, I had to fix hers,” I laughed.

“Well, ‘Karan’ will always be ‘Karan,’ at least in her head. Anywho, I hope you enjoy your stay at our school,” Judy said, bent closer to me. I hope your mother can keep her feet in one place long enough for you to graduate.”

I bent closer to her, “I don’t foresee that being a problem.”

“What do you mean?”

I looked around and realized that students were filtering into the school around us, “I’ll tell you later when we are alone.”

“Understood,” she said with a smile before returning to me to look further down the hallway.

“Your homeroom should be the last door, on the left. You better hurry; Mrs. Jenkins has a distaste for tardy students, even if they are new here. I swear sometimes, I should just put that old coot in retirement...”

Judy stopped mid-sentence, turned to face me, and said, “Well, I’ve said too much. Tootles!” She said nothing else as she turned and walked down the hall.

“Tootles...” I growled to myself. “I swear it’s like she knows I hate that fucking word. Oh well.”

I started my way down the crowded halls of the aging school, taking in each sight. I was hoping to find something, anything of interest.

“This place was as boring as a bunch of old coots playing shuffleboard,” I thought as I listened to the near-deafening and mind-numbing chatter of the barely sapient excuses for human beings that surrounded me.

The usual varieties of school-age archetypes were all here, even though they were from every race and color. Jocks were hanging out in a crowd on one end of the hall. On the other side, judging by the number of bottle-blondes, were a bunch of cheerleaders who were busy gawking at said jocks. I passed the cheerleaders and jocks, getting a few nasty looks from the cheerleaders, most likely because of my dark clothing and black lipstick. I then found a large four-way intersection that appeared to be everyone’s favorite hangout while not in class.

I glanced around before going any further. I analyzed the place and made mental notes of any security liabilities. It was an open area, meaning if anyone picked a fight, I would have a decent amount of room to maneuver, as long as it wasn’t as crowded as it is today. I wouldn’t say I liked even the idea of running from a fight, but it might be best with this many people congregating here, especially if I was facing many opponents. My sister and mother would probably think it would be best to run, no matter what, with this large crowd. That is the difference between us. I’m too aggressive to be a good Tala’har.

Scanning the crowd with my spiritual eye, I found little of note. All had relatively faint auras, and slight hints of color were like an overlay over what was physically there. As I strolled, nothing wasn’t anything unusual here, leaving me

uneasy. I caught the brief presence of a yellow aura with a darker one that appeared attached to it, but even those auras vanished as the student moved farther down the hall. As I moved down the hall, the massive presence I had felt since arriving in Miami was becoming even more noticeable.

A bright aura caught my attention as I continued to my left. To my left was a duo of natural blondes, whom I assumed were sisters because they looked similar. These two were nothing but curves, being extremely well-developed for high school students. Both had slightly fair skin with crystal-clear complexions. The one with a single ponytail wore nothing but a tube top and a short, black leather miniskirt. The other had shorter hair and was nearly a foot shorter; they wore a similar outfit except for a black leather jacket over the tube top. She had one hand behind her back, making a male masturbatory gesture, signaling to any who could see that she was pretty bored of the other blonde's incessant chatter. Her deep blue eyes gleamed as she sent a wink and a flirty smile my way as she caught me gawking at her. I smiled back.

Those two girls were different than the other students. The tall one lacked an aura entirely, which wasn't possible for a living being. I then remembered Judy's wasn't visible, and I had never really figured out a way to ask her why. The short one had an aura that was even more vibrant than what I had seen with my own family, who all had brighter auras than anyone I had seen in this world. Her aura's color was a vibrant pink, a color usually associated with someone who loved life and whose very purpose was to bring joy to others while having fun themselves. That was what my mother had told me of those with pink auras, at least. She seemed cool enough, not to mention being

amazingly attractive, and was obviously special in some way. I made a mental note to speak with her later.

The sound of students chanting “Fight, Fight, Fight” and a bunch of students rushing by broke me out of my admiration for the short girl. Not far from the sisters was a group of students in a circle. I stood on my toes to see what was going on. A red-haired, freckle-covered mammoth of a girl was fighting a tall blonde girl who didn’t look entirely different from the other two girls I had just seen. My eyes opened wide as I realized who I was staring at. As a punch connected with her jaw, she made no expression, only stared at the chubby girl with boredom and disinterest.

The girl who was punched had an aura that was the color of an inferno, and it drowned out the energy of anyone close by. There was no question she was the one...

I pushed through the crowd as fast as I could and caught the next punch in my hand. The red-haired girl glared at me, eyes wide open and teeth clenched.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” she said.

“Someone who’s not fond of little bullies picking on people who won’t fight back,” I said. I snuck a glance at her out of the corner of my eye. I was shocked at how beautiful she was. Crystalline blue eyes looked to the ground as a small amount of blood oozed onto smooth, fair skin. Her skin was not like mine, so extremely white to the point where half an hour in the sun would fry it to a nice crisp; but instead, she was a lively tone of fair skin, very much like the sisters down the hall. She stood almost a foot higher than me, and I am not short, either. She was nothing but muscle and curves hidden under baggy clothing and a slightly slouched posture. Her blonde hair was far longer than the other two blonde girls, going to the small of her back. It wasn’t messy, but it

looked like it was just allowed to grow, never really styled. This somehow added to her somewhat 'wild' beauty. This goddess of a girl was allowing the child of a bully to push her around.

"This is going to end... right now," I thought as I still held the girl's fist. I pushed the girl back with only a tiny amount of force. It was enough to send the little ginger stumbling back a few feet. Had a couple of other girls not stepped out of the way, this massive tub of lard would have smashed them.

"You are so going to pay for that," the fat little lard ass snorted.

"Bring it, bitch," I replied with a grin.

"I'm not worth defending," the tall girl mumbled from behind me.

"I'll be the judge of that," I said. It then occurred to me that I was being rather harsh to this bully, mostly in my head. It was a low blow even for me to make fun of someone's weight, yet I couldn't help myself. I felt ashamed and knew someone would be disappointed in me, but I couldn't fathom who. Again, I felt like I was forgetting something. Even if it was only in my head, this was not a part of me that I wanted this tall girl to see. It was a part of me I wanted to be buried in the past.

The little red-headed wrecking ball attempted to ram me. I stepped to the side, and the tall girl did the same. The bully was victim to her own momentum and slammed right into one of the jocks and almost fell on top of him as she tumbled to the ground.

She stood up and shook off the pain, ignoring the sneering guy she had smashed into. Her face was beat red and soaked in sweat, matching her moisture-dripping hair. She shook her head, unleashing the sweat from that disgusting rat's nest. She cocked her fist and came at me with a punch.

Just as the little brat's punch went into the air, it fell limp to the girl's side as Principal Angler pushed her way to the front of the crowd.

"There is absolutely nothing to see here; all of you better get to class, or every one of you will be in for detention!"

As the crowd dispersed, the principal turned her attention to the ginger and me, "Susie and Carrie, my office, right now!"

She turned to the tall girl. "Autumn, dear, I wish to see you too. You're not in any trouble."

The three of us followed the principal to her office. Between exchanging glares with the bully, I snuck another look at Autumn. The slouching posture she carried herself with was probably her attempt at not attracting attention. I couldn't fathom why someone who could clearly stand up for herself let this bully beat on her. I put that question on my mental checklist of questions to ask Judy.

The school halls were an institutional white that drove me up the wall. The place looked more like a hospital than a school, much like many other schools I had attended since I came to Earth. Everything in the school was immaculate, yet the clocks in the school were broken. They were flashing some error message or stuck on an incorrect time. There were tiles on the floor that were missing, and

some of the lockers were dented from years of abuse. This seemed like the kind of ship Judy would run, extremely clean but falling apart.

The halls were empty, except for a few stragglers still trying to sneak into class unnoticed. We approached the door with the word 'Principal' in bold, capital letters. Under the title, in smaller print, was the name 'Judy Lynn Angler.'"

"Autumn, you stay here while I have a word with these two young ladies," Judy said.

Autumn nodded in understanding as the three of us went into the office.

Judy's office was small but tidy. Bookshelves were in every bit of free space. On these shelves were books or small porcelain Hummel figurines of children and animals in scenes such as ice skating and snowball fights. I only knew what brand of figurine they were because Judy loved to drone on about them while we were staying with her. I could never understand why she kept them in her office. I couldn't figure out if I was in a gift shop or a principal's office.

Two chairs were placed in front of the desk.

"Sit!" the principal commanded.

Susie and I sat down. I glanced over to her and saw the chair's metal legs bending because of the weight her gigantic ass exerted on the chair. I had to stifle a laugh, and it was followed by shame once again. I turned my attention to Judy. Susie rolled her eyes while waiting for Judy to navigate the cramped space surrounding her desk. She finally took her seat and glared at us with eyes wide open.

"First and foremost, Susie, you should know better. You and I have extensively discussed picking on other

students, especially Miss Alexander. I don't know how to get it to you," the principal said.

Susie glanced over at me, "She started it."

"No, you started picking on Autumn. I know the scenario all too well. Miss Abbey thought it wasn't right you were doing such a thing and decided to stop you," Angler said as she continued to look wide-eyed at Susie, as she almost blindly worked with the computer sitting in front of her on the desk.

"But... but, how do you know that?!" Susie stuttered.

Principal Angler turned the computer's monitor toward us, playing a video of Susie punching Autumn in the jaw. The rest played out as the principal turned her monitor back toward her. It served the little cunt right to be caught in the act.

"No more excuses. Next time I catch you picking on Autumn, I'll let it continue. I only stop you for your safety," Judy said.

"What the hell do you mean by that?" Susie growled.

"Simple," the principal directed her gaze into Susie's eyes. "In eighth grade, a girl tried to punch Autumn Alexander like you did today. Instead of taking the punch like she does with you, she caught the girl's fist and broke her hand. Maybe I'll just let Autumn's tolerance of you wane so she does the same with you. It seems you'll only learn if Autumn beats you bloody!" Judy was now heaving heavily and standing from her chair, palms flat on her desk.

"But... but... but..." Susie stumbled.

“But nothing!” Judy exhaled at an even louder volume. She took a deep breath. “I’m going to let you go with a week of detention. Next time, if you pull something like this on any student, I’m suspending you, and I’ll send your mother a full recording of all your exploits. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Susie said as she gazed wide-eyed at the principal.

“Now, get out of my sight! You can take the rest of the day off to reflect on the changes you will have to make in your life!” Judy snarled.

Susie silently stood up and quickly stomped out of the office. I was looking at the principal with only one eye. I had never seen her so angry. I nervously played with the silver ring with a gryphon’s head on my left hand.

The office was quiet for a moment. I began to worry about Judy’s love of rules. Even when I was a child, she set down a strict set of rules while we stayed with her. She caught me snatching a cookie before dinner time. My mother was happy to let Judy deal out a bit of discipline. I was the one washing dishes for a week afterward. I had begun to worry that her natural adherence to rules would overtake my close ties to Judy. I couldn’t afford to get kicked out of this school. I needed to be close to Autumn as much as possible.

Judy took deep breaths, trying to calm herself. As I played with my ring, I decided to break the silence.

“Is all of what you said true? About Autumn breaking a girl’s hand?” I asked as I stopped fiddling with my ring and looked at Judy with both eyes.

Judy let out a deep breath, “Yes, it is. She felt the girl was a threat to her. She took the girl's hand when the punch was thrown and broke it in the palm of her own. Autumn is an experienced martial artist and is more than capable of defending herself.”

“Then why does she just let Susie do that to her?” I asked.

“That is how her parents taught her to deal with such situations after she broke that girl's hand. Autumn's parents knew it would be difficult to justify Autumn using force, so they just told her to accept what the other students do to her, at least that is what I assume.”

“She could at least evade the attacks,” I replied. “Anyone with that sort of skill obviously could.”

“That's what she did in the beginning. That infuriated the bullies more, and they continued to come after her. She must have decided to take whatever punishment comes at her because they eventually get bored of hitting her if she doesn't respond. Susie is one of those special cases. The more Autumn doesn't respond, the more it infuriates her.”

“Why do people pick on her?” I asked. “Have you looked at her? At any other school, she would be ‘Miss Popularity.’”

“Ah, that has to do with her cousin, Sophia. Sophia has always had something against her. She is the most popular girl in school and uses her status to spread rumors and to pick on Autumn verbally. Even she isn't stupid enough to directly try to harm Autumn. She knows better than Susie. I would watch my back if I were you. Susie holds grudges, and she will probably try to harm you next,” Judy warned.

“I’m not too worried about it,” I said as I crossed my legs and put my hands together. The room was quiet again. I began to worry Judy was coming up with a punishment for me.

“As for today’s encounter, I have no choice but to give you a detention. School policy calls for punishment, but you’ll be serving it with me, so you’ll be free to do what you wish in the confines of my office,” she declared.

“I understand,” I said, letting out a sigh of relief. Judy will be Judy, principal or not. I was just happy she didn’t go full force on me.

“I appreciate what you did for Autumn today,” the principal’s smile widened. “I just ask that next time, you try not to punch or hurt Susie in any way. This way, I can at least have a logical reason to avoid punishing you.”

“Do what you have to,” I smiled. “I cannot stop defending her anytime soon.”

“Really? What makes you so committed so quickly?” Judy said with eyes wide open again, mouth halfway ajar.

“Because it’s my duty,” I answered.

“I know she’s one of us, Carrie, but that doesn’t mean it’s your duty to defend her,” the principal’s ajar expression turned to a smile once again.

“Oh, that’s not why it’s my duty. I’m pretty sure she’s the one my mom, sister, and I have been searching for,” I said. I mentally froze for a moment... one of us? That was the biggest shock of all.

“You mean she’s a...” the principal started me out of deep contemplation.

“Don’t say it!” I cut her off in a whisper. “We can’t guarantee we’re not being listened to. And I’m unsure if Autumn can hear us since she’s outside the door. It’s not my job to tell her what she is. Her parents must do that. We can’t be certain she knows yet. I will see if Autumn will be willing to come by my house so that I can introduce her to my mother. I need her to make sure for me, but I’m almost certain she is the one we’ve been looking for.”

“Oh, dear. I completely forgot she was there. I should have sent her to the nurse; Susie makes me so angry. And I understand. I will try harder not to punish you for doing your duty,” Judy’s eyes narrowed, and her voice softened. “If this is true, I pity the poor girl. Being one of her power is a heavy destiny, and I wouldn’t take it on for the world.”

“I know how you feel, but it is my destiny and duty to meet whatever she has to face head-on alongside her,” I said. I wanted to burst inside but knew now was not the time.

Chapter 3

Judy requested that I open the office door. I stretched over to the knob, turned it, and pushed it ajar.

“Autumn, dear, please come in here,” Judy called.

Autumn stepped into the room. Her eyes were firmly planted to the floor as she said, “Yes, Principal Angler?”

“Please, Autumn, sit down.”

Autumn sat down where Susie had been seated. Being so close to her gave me goosebumps.

“There is a favor I must ask of you if you are up to it. Susie didn’t hurt you too much, did she?”

“No, ma’am, I’m fine,” Autumn said, eyes still looking down as she sat beside me. Her face was still stained with the blood from her lip, which had stopped bleeding.

“Oh dear, how careless of me! I should’ve sent you to the nurse while I spoke to Susie. Would you like to go get cleaned up first?”

“I’m fine,” she rebuked. “It looks worse than it is. It doesn’t hurt. Nothing she ever does really hurts me.”

I’ve punched my share of people and taken my share of hits. She was hit fairly hard. Something felt off about her claiming it didn’t hurt. I figured she was putting on a brave face.

“Well, that’s good,” Judy said. “Autumn Alexander, this is Carrie Abbey. She’s new to our school, and I would appreciate it if you showed her around the school.”

“With all due respect, ma’am,” Autumn finally looked up, “aren’t I the wrong person to show her around due to my... reputation? It’s bad enough she stuck up for me, but to be seen in public with me...”

She looked like a beaten puppy, and this twisted school was her abusive master. The puppy and the master would learn a lesson if I had any say. I didn't leave my home world, being chased by dragons and men in strange armor, to watch my charge go through hell in her daily life.

“I don’t care what people think of me, so it’s cool. If they have something to say, I’ll...” I growled.

“Oh, Miss Abbey, I don’t think it’s necessary to go into what you ‘will’ do, now?” Judy cut me off.

“I suppose not,” I said. “But really, I don’t care what these people think of me. I’ll do what I please; no one will tell me otherwise.”

Autumn sighed and shrugged, “Well, if it’s what you want.”

“Yes, yes it is,” I said, looking her in the eyes for the first time. I pulled myself back from the gaze almost as soon as it started. My heart began to pound.

“Autumn, get cleaned up, and then you and Carrie can go to homeroom. If I'm not mistaken, you are both in the same homeroom. Oh, and make sure to return here and pick up your pass; I don’t want that old coot sending you back to me,” Judy said.

Autumn nodded, and we both left the principal’s office. Autumn began leading us to the bathroom, eyes still planted downward. She slumped even further, hunching her shoulders forward as she walked.

A moment of silence passed. I had no notion of what to say to her. It was the most extended moment of my life. I wanted to explode with exhilaration. I had been waiting all my life to meet her, and when the time came, I was flabbergasted. There was so much I wanted to tell her but couldn't. I had no idea how much she knew. It was not my job to tell her what she was. It was my job to protect her.

"Why did you do that? You know, fight Susie? You don't even know me; why would you stick up for me?" Autumn questioned with eyes still planted on the floor.

"I already said why. I don't like watching people pick on people who won't fight back," I answered.

"I just feel bad about it," Autumn said.

"Oh, the detention, don't worry about that. Judy and I go way back; it'll be fun," I laughed.

"No, not that. Well, that too, but thanks to me, you have zero chance of making any friends at this school," Autumn sighed.

"So, you won't be my friend?" I turned to her and put my hands on my hips. I couldn't help but snicker.

"No... that's not what I mean... of course... I would... I was talking about..." Autumn said.

I stepped before her and put my hand on her shoulder, "Sweetheart, chill. I was kidding; I know what you meant. I don't give a rat's ass. If people want to be my friend, they'll be my friend. If they don't, who gives a shit, it's their loss."

"I guess you could see it that way," Autumn said as she removed her eyes from direct contact.

“Let’s hurry and get you cleaned up. I hear our homeroom teacher gets crabby when people are late,” I said.

“You don’t know the half of it. One time, she spent the whole class lecturing my cousin, Cristy, about being on time. While Mrs. Jenkins’ back was turned, she kept making these obscene hand gestures.”

“You mean the short one?” I said.

“Yeah, how did you know?” Autumn said.

“I saw her and your other cousin talking. At least I assumed they were your family because you guys look so much alike,” I said. “She made those gestures as your other cousin rambled on about something stupid.”

“I don’t look like them...” Autumn closed her eyes.

“Have you looked in the mirror lately?” I replied.

“Yeah, but they are...” she stuttered again.

“Let’s not worry about that right now,” I said. “You need to get that blood off your face. I should do some freshening up, too.”

“Oh...” Autumn looked up finally and realized we were standing in front of the women’s restroom.

We stepped into the restroom and found it deserted. I turned to the mirror, pulled out my black lipstick, and touched up the small places where the pink shone through. I turned to Autumn, who was washing her face.

“Want to try some?” I asked, holding the lipstick vertically in my hand.

“No, thank you,” Autumn said as she dried her face.

“Yeah, I guess you're right; we would need to dye your hair for it to work. Then we would probably look like goth sisters,” I grinned.

Autumn smiled slightly as she threw the towel away.

“We better get going,” she said.

“Yeah, but before the end of this year, I’m going to get this lipstick on your lips one way or another,” I said. I then fathomed the other possible interpretations of what I said and blushed for probably the first time in my life.

Autumn shrugged her shoulders, “We’ll see. I’ve never really been much for makeup.”

A mental sigh of relief ran through my mind. I was glad she did not pick up on the other possible connotations of that ‘innocent’ comment. I knew at that point I needed to get my mind out of the gutter.

Autumn and I walked down the hallway back the way we came. I was still completely unaware of where I was going. A blizzard of thoughts ran through my mind. I wiped my brow and found sweat on my hand. The halls were cool enough, but was the bathroom? I wasn’t sure. I walked as I thought I was following Autumn, but then I felt a tug on my sleeve. I had almost walked into a closed door.

“Oops,” I said as I corrected my path and went around to the open door in the set of double doors. I began to worry that the heat of this place was affecting my ability to function. It reminded me of when we were escaping to Earth. On the way, we had to stop for the night because I couldn’t continue, partly due to the heat. I felt ashamed for a moment but then remembered the rain would have stopped us if my failure hadn’t.

“Are you okay?” Autumn said.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’m just adjusting. I’m sure I’ll be able to navigate this school blindfolded soon.”

“That’s not really what I meant, but I’m okay,” she put on a fake smile. I could see the worry in her eyes. I couldn’t imagine why she should be worried about someone she just met, but I shrugged it off as a good thing.

Soon enough, we saw Judy waiting outside her office with a few papers. She moved forward to greet us.

“Autumn, this is for you, and Carrie, these are for you. You two better hurry; I can hear that old bitty complaining already,” Judy said.

We were both given a late excuse, but I was also handed a note for the teacher and a detention. Nothing was said as we strolled down the hallway. I had no inclination where I was going, so I was stuck following Autumn, which I was not comfortable with. It was a Tala’har’s job to lead the way, not to trail their charge. That way, we could confront a threat if one appeared in our path.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, trying to see what I could see with my third eye. The problematic part was I saw nothing but Autumn’s fiery, almost blinding aura. I wondered if its sheer magnitude prevented me from seeing anything else when I was this close to her. That would not make matters easy when it came to identifying threats.

We finally found our way to the door of the class. Autumn opened the door and stepped into the room, ducking to avoid blocking the students’ view of the board and the teacher. I found an empty seat next to Autumn, which wasn’t difficult because Autumn sat in the front row, where all the

seats around her were vacant. I did not enjoy being in the front of the class, but this was no longer about me; it was about her. If danger appeared and I was unable to reach her in time, I would never forgive myself.

I looked up and spied the teacher, apparently named Mrs. Jenkins, glaring at me. I handed her the late excuse paper and the note, which she silently took a moment to read. When Judy said she was an old bitty, she wasn't kidding. This old crow looked like she was just a step or two away from the grave. She wore a simple light blue dress that came down to her ankles and covered her frail, thin arms. Her ankles alone looked so weak that they appeared as if they could snap at any time, sending the old scarecrow crashing down. Her face was amassed with wrinkles, and her massive glasses did nothing but magnify them. Her hazel eyes glowered at me, and she likely judged me based on my appearance, like many other people her age seemed to do. She could see the detention in my hand, and I was certain she had it in her head that I was a troublemaker that would need to be put in check.

"It seems we have a new student," the crow finally squawked. "Class, this is Carrie Abbey. Please treat her with the same respect you treat the other students."

I took this moment to glance back and found Autumn's cousin Cristy. As expected, she was sitting in the back of the class with crossed legs propped up the desk as she loudly chewed and smacked gum.

Mrs. Jenkins turned to Cristy the way an overworked parent stares daggers at their child, "Miss Cristy Alexander, how many times must I reprimand you about putting your legs up on your desk? I have already given up trying to keep you from chewing gum in my classroom, but I will not

tolerate your feet on the desk. Would you behave this way in your own home?"

"Pretty much," Cristy answered, not moving an inch.

Mrs. Jenkins shook her head and mumbled, "Ask a stupid question and get a stupid answer."

I had to stifle a laugh. It was apparent that the rest of the class hadn't caught what the teacher said, or they would have laughed, too.

The old teacher turned her attention to me, "Carrie, please see me after class to get a textbook."

"Not a problem," I replied.

After what seemed like three hours, the class was finally over. Autumn was about to walk out of class by herself, so I snatched her arm.

"Remember? The principal said to show me around," I said while attempting to make the smirk on my face extremely evident.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry, force of habit," Autumn said. "Not used to having to wait for anyone."

"It's cool; I'll be right there," I said as I approached the teacher. Autumn went over to the door and stood slightly outside it.

"Hi, Mrs. Jenkins. Can I get my textbook now?" I said, playing the good student.

"Miss Abbey, let us get a few things straight. I won't tolerate tardiness. I don't care if that soft principal excuses you. I cannot give you a detention, but you will get extra homework if you are late for my class again. I would be

having this talk with Miss Alexander over there, too, but I suspect you were why she was late. She's never late, you see."

"I understand, Mrs. Jenkins," I affirmed, screaming internally to verbally rip this bitch apart.

"You better," she croaked. "I also noticed your detention. That's exceedingly rare on a young lady's first day at a new school. Care to explain?"

I sighed. I wasn't expecting to get reamed out about something that wasn't even this bitch's business, but I decided to humor her. Usually, I would have torn her a new one for treating me this way, but the last thing I needed was to get kicked out of this school. I needed to be as close to Autumn as possible. No place was safe for someone such as her.

"I caught Susie picking on Autumn, so I stepped in," I said.

"Oh," the old woman folded her hands and put them under her chin. "Why would you do such a thing?"

"I felt like it, no particular reason. I didn't think it was right," I replied.

"Did you know Miss Alexander beforehand?" she looked at me with half-open eyes, hands still under her chin.

"No, ma'am, I've never seen her before today," I said.

"I understand. You see, Miss Abbey, Miss Alexander has no friends at this school. My eyesight may be failing, but a blind man could see that. Your standing up for her is a testament to your character. On first impression, I misjudged

you. I thought your detention was for picking on her, being that is what everyone else seems to do.”

“I’ve noticed,” I said.

“And when you stepped in, did Susan get hurt?” she asked with eyebrows raised.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

“Ah,” the old woman shook her head. She leaned in on her desk, getting closer to me.

“Just between you and me, the little brat deserved anything you gave her. If I were her mother, I would’ve beaten the bullying out of her years ago, but alas, spare the rod, spoil the child, especially that child.”

I was speechless. In the prior moment, she reprimanded me. Now, she was confiding in me, something that she probably wouldn’t say to anyone. It seemed everything about this school wasn’t what it appeared to be.

“I better get going; I don’t want to be late for my next class,” I said.

“Yes, of course. Have a good day,” the old woman said.

I met Autumn in the hall with my little black tote draping more heavily off my back. I tried to avoid looking at her in those crystalline blue eyes but not to look away to offend her. I was uncertain why she unnerved me, but I was sure I did the same to her. Friendship was a new thing to her.

“So, what’s next for you?” Autumn asked.

I pulled my schedule out of my pocket and examined it.

“Looks like I am going to Graphic Arts with Harper,” I said.

“Really?” Autumn said with eyes wide open, “That’s really funny because I have that class too.” Autumn peeked at my schedule. “Wow, how crazy. We were given the exact same schedule, right down to the lunch break and the study hall.”

“That’s weird,” I said. I wasn’t naive enough to think this was a coincidence.

The sun rose in the air as if to spite me. Yet, for once, I was glad I was out in the world, in the daytime, because if I weren’t, I wouldn’t have been there to meet Autumn. It was my destiny and not my place to argue with that, sun or no sun.

At exactly noon, the bell rang, signifying it was time for lunch. Autumn waited for me as I spoke with the third new teacher of the day and took my textbook. I exited the room, and Autumn led us onward. Where there was a slight bounce in her step before the last class, now, it was replaced with tiny footsteps and a gaze that was yet again anchored to the ground.

“Hey, is something wrong?” I inquired.

“No, not all,” she lied. “Why do you ask?”

“You just appear to be down,” I said.

Autumn took a deep breath, “I’m not exactly happy about going to lunch. I never am.”

I was about to ask why, but I already knew the answer.

“Hey, things will be different today; I’m here,” I reassured.

“Yeah, but I think this is where we should part,” Autumn said, not looking anywhere near me.

“Let me guess: it’s because you don’t want my reputation being damaged by most of the school seeing me sitting with you,” I said.

“You got it,” she admitted.

“Autumn, I told you before,” I said, expelling a sigh along with it; “I don’t care what people think of me. If you haven’t figured it out yet, I’m a bit of a black sheep myself. I’ve bounced from school to school, either getting kicked out or my mother getting bored of the surroundings and moves. I don’t give a damn what these people think of me. You are cool, and I want to sit with you, end of story.”

“You mean that?” she gasped while finally looking at me. For some inexplicable reason, it took every bit of resolve within me not to look away.

“What? That you’re cool? Of course, I don’t say things I don’t mean,” I forced myself to return her gaze with a smile.

“Alright, if this is really what you want,” she conceded, her gaze returning to the floor.

I stepped up, put my hand on her chin, and lifted her gaze.

“You have no reason to keep looking to the ground like that. Don’t worry about them,” I reassured.

She moved my hands and sighed, “Alright, I’ll try it your way.”