

EXCERPT FROM *THE OTHER SIDE OF VISIBLE*

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Much to Shin's displeasure, she and Dibs were entering the gates on the south side of the zoo, near the big cat habitats. She had planned to avoid Crazy Lady for a few days in hopes that her stupid idea about going out to breakfast together would be forgotten. But Dibs had nagged and pushed to meet the nosy old woman, and finally, his insistence won out. As nice as he'd been about letting her crash at his digs, she felt she had no choice.

But she detested begging as a twosome. It took much longer to get enough change for both people to eat. And it drew too much attention to the fact that they were both young and homeless. If the wrong person noticed, they could end up back in foster care to get chewed up, regurgitated, and spit out in worse condition than if they'd been left alone to fend for themselves.

Approaching the bench where the woman usually sat, Shin stuffed down annoyance about going against her better judgment. She glanced up at the figure sitting there and realized it wasn't a lady. It was an old man. Similar to Crazy Lady's daily habit, the man was feeding a flock of gray, fluttering pigeons.

Relieved, Shin came to a standstill.

"What's the matter?" Dibs pulled up next to her.

"It's not her. It's a man. Let's go." She turned and started back toward the zoo's entrance. This was her perfect excuse to split up and beg separately.

“Hold on, Shinny!” Dibs whispered loudly. “Maybe it’s her husband or somethin’. You ever seen him before?”

“Never.” Shin kept moving.

“C’mon!” He pulled on her sleeve. “We should at least walk by the bench and check him out. It can’t hurt to do that much.”

Shin huffed impatiently. “Oh, all right! We’ll walk by him, but that’s all. Nothing else.” Turning back, she blew by Dibs so fast, he had to trot to catch up to her.

As the earthlings hustled along the pathway, Ahnah and Urielle sped up to stay with them. Looking ahead, they were both pleasantly surprised to see one of their own kind hovering directly above where the older human being sat. The dazzle was almost a head higher than Ahnah, which meant he was quite a bit taller than Urielle.

“Eleah is my name.” He bowed in the usual greeting of honor between dazzles.

“I’m Urielle.” She bowed in return.

“And I’m Ahnah.” Also bowing, she nodded in the direction of the older earthling. “You’re with the ambassador.”

“Yes.”

It was quite easy for Ahnah to recognize the man sitting on the bench as a human ambassador of OtherSide. Since they spent so much time visiting with the Original Family, ambassadors radiated sizeable amounts of that realm’s light.

Their dazzles also reflected a deep golden glow of resilient strength, the very reason Eleah shone brightly from within.

Urielle placed a light-hand on her human’s head, leaned down, and smiled directly into his face. “I’m with this spunky young man. He’s a fun one to watch.”

Seeing her manner with the boy, Eleah's face lit up. "It seems to me you would find anyone fun to watch."

With one hand on a hip Urielle straightened up, stared into space reflectively, and then nodded in Eleah's direction. "You know, come to think of it, I can't recall one earthling I haven't thoroughly enjoyed watching. And I will say, I've watched a few uncommon ones."

Eleah laughed as though he'd experienced a few of his own uncommon assignments. "Thanks to the Original Family's artistry, no human being is common." He turned to Ahnah, who was quietly enjoying the conversation. "And I assume the earth girl is your watch."

She nodded. "I share this assignment with my compatriot Razzell, but at the moment he's assisting another dazzle."

Studying her thoughtfully for a few seconds, Eleah broke into a wide grin. "Isn't he the one who likes to scare drabs instead of skewering them?"

She smiled. "I see his renown is spreading. But be assured, he'll run them through as quickly as the rest of us."

The activity of a flock of flying birds drew the attention of the dazzles back toward Earth's realm. Their humans were about to interact. In unison, the trio turned and gave their focus to watching.

Pigeons rose and scattered as Shin and Dibs neared the bench. Once more, Dibs pulled hard on her sleeve to slow her down. Squaring off to face the bench-sitter, he said cheerfully, "Good morning, sir!"

Shin groused inwardly and stopped next to him. Dibs hadn't planned to just walk by the bench: he had every intention of begging from the man!

Looking up from his bag of pigeon feed, the elderly man's eyes grew wide with surprise. "Well, it's about time. I thought you weren't coming!"

Dibs glanced at Shin and raised his eyebrows, as if to ask whether she had any idea what the old guy meant.

She shrugged an irritated response that Dibs obviously didn't catch, since he immediately turned to the elderly gentleman, flashed him a grin, and answered convincingly, "Aw, well, we're here now."

"Come sit down, both of you!" The man was seated smack in the middle of the bench. Gesturing to either side of him, he invited them to join him.

Sitting down wasn't part of their plan, so Shin didn't budge an inch. She hoped Dibs would follow her lead and stay put.

"I'm safe, mind you. Couldn't hurt a flea. Come now, have a seat." He patted the bench several times.

She gave the old codger a furtive inspection. He looked real distinguished, like at one time he'd been an undertaker, or maybe a spy. He wore the kind of overcoat a secret agent would wear, with a flat sort of English snapped-to-the-brim cap to match. Underneath the cap he had a full head of neatly cropped white hair, complemented by a thick white mustache. He seemed to be about the same age as Crazy Lady. She wondered if he was her husband, like Dibs had suggested.

Still grinning, Dibs walked over and promptly perched himself on the bench to the man's right side.

"You too, young lady." The gentleman patted the bench on his left side.

Shin could've slugged stupid Dibs for giving into the old guy's request. But since he was already sitting down, she felt weird just walking away. She hesitated for a few seconds and tried to come up with another option. But in the end, she sat. Grudgingly. And at the far left end of the bench, in case she had to make a run for it.

She turned her eyes downward and focused on the patch of grass in front of her feet.

Immediately, the wizened gentleman introduced himself. "My name is Oscar and I'm sixty-nine years old."

Shin snickered under her breath. *He's a fossil!*

"You probably think that makes me a fossil, don't you?"

The man looked at Shin as she accidentally sucked spit into her esophagus and had to cough hard. She stared straight ahead to avoid his gaze. *He's doing it too! How in the world do they know what I'm thinking?* She started to ask, "Are you Crazy Lad—" but catching herself midsentence, she backpedaled. "I mean, are you the husband of the woman who was here yesterday?"

He laughed and shook his head. "Good heavens, no! You're thinking of Priscilla, the ambassador who was assigned to this territory until yesterday. I'm her replacement, and I knew her, mind you, but she was never married. My own dear wife Veronica passed through the veneer to OtherSide several years ago, after forty-seven years of courtship." He leaned over and nudged Dibs. "We liked to pretend our marriage was one long date."

While Dibs smiled politely at the man, Shin wondered what kind of mess he'd gotten them both into this time. This kooky old guy was talking complete nonsense.

“Now where were we? Oh yes! As I said, I’m Oscar. And you are the Light-Seekers I am to meet today.”

Shin jerked her head around and she and Dibs locked eyes. For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, a stranger had called them Light-Seekers!

“Yes, well, do you have any questions for me? I’ll be glad to answer every inquiry, no matter how curious.”

The old man winked at Dibs on his right. And then, though Shin was staring hard at a grass patch beneath her feet, she felt him smiling in her direction.

“Well, go ahead, ask me something.”

As she scraped the dirt under the bench with her worn sneakers, it occurred to Shin that even if they were quite old and definitely odd, Crazy Lady and this Oscar guy were sincere. There was nothing fake about them. Suddenly she wanted to ask what a Light-Seeker was, but it sounded too good for the likes of her. She sat quietly, not saying anything.

“What’s a Light-Seeker?”

Of course, Dibs was inquisitive enough to ask the question for both of them.

“Oh good question, my young man. You’re a bright one, I can see that.”

The old man patted Dibs’ knee with a sort of fatherly approval, and Dibs sat up taller. He was drinking in every word.

“A Light-Seeker is someone who has gotten tired of the way things are, and they want a better life. Light-Seekers know there’s more out there somewhere, but they don’t know how to get there, and they don’t know what it looks like.”

It seemed to Shin that Oscar might be a real spy who had listened in on their discussion at the warehouse the night before, and now he was repeating it back to them.

“And though at the present time you can’t see into the realm of OtherSide,” —and here, the man leaned over and tapped Dibs on the chest— “on the inside of both of you are star-eyes just waiting to be opened. And when they’re opened, you can visit the Light Prince, and your lives will change for the better!”

Oscar’s conversation with the earth children was quite enthralling to Eleah, Ahnah, and Urielle. Listening to an ambassador speak of OtherSide and of the Original Family was a true power surge. The light around the ambassador’s words energized them, and they swelled and beamed. But the reactions of the human children were much more down-to-earth.

Dibs was giggling, but Shin wasn’t at all amused by the foolish talk she was hearing. All sorts of uncomfortable emotions were bubbling up inside, things she hadn’t felt for a long time. She’d always wanted there to be more to life, but everything in her young experience told her that possibility was an outright lie. Why then, was there a big ache pushing against her chest and a lump in her throat that was making it hard to swallow?

Her head began swimming, her stomach reeled with nausea, and she thought she might hurl in front of everybody. She desperately needed to get away.

The elderly man’s smile disappeared into seriousness and his mustache turned downward. He reached out and touched her arm gently. “I’m sorry. I may have said too

much, too fast. Forgive me if I made you uncomfortable, dear one.”

Shin stood and withdrew her arm from the old man’s touch. *Dear one. Who ARE these weird people?* Her skin was clammy. It was hard to breathe. She had to leave pronto.