

*The*  
OTHER  
SIDE  
*Of*  
VISIBLE



JANET KELLER RICHARDS

# **The Other Side Of Visible**

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# CHAPTER ONE

Shin shot up out of a sound sleep. Her heart was pounding hard against her ribcage, her lungs were inhaling air so fast they were making her dizzy, and every hair on the top of her head was tingling from fright. Clamping a hand over her own mouth to silence her gasping, she listened through the darkness to locate the source of the crashing noise.

Nothing. Not one unordinary sound. Only the usual night shift machine racket coming from Cutter's Garage next door.

Petrified to reveal her presence in the alleyway, Shin leaned silently to her left and groped for the steel pipe she kept next to her sleeping bag. Her fingers found its cold metal. She pulled it toward her and tightened her grip around it until her wrist ached.

Sitting as still as the pavement underneath her, Shin waited. But after several minutes with no more unexpected noises, she laid the pipe down and mentally scolded herself for being such a sissified wimp. Exhaling hard to push away thoughts of danger, she wondered if it was possible to dream such an ear-splitting sound.

She glanced up at the sky and noticed the night was still solid, with no sign of morning's thinning. Porky, her calico cat, appeared through the darkness and pressed against her side as though he wanted to be seen as important. Giving him a couple of strokes,

she cleared her groggy throat. “It was nothing, Porky. Go back to sleep.”

Yanking her sleeping bag against her neck to squeeze out the cold night air, Shin grabbed the one possession she still carried from when she’d lived with her mom—her stuffed toy dog, Herbie. Pulling him against her chest, she nestled back down into the warmth of her makeshift street home.

But no sooner had she shut her eyes to drift off to sleep than a booming clang let loose nearby. Metal slammed loudly against metal, too close to be a car wreck out on the street. Something or someone was bumping and ramming the low-tech alarm system of junk she’d set up around her alleyway cave!

As quickly as it had begun the sound ended, but by that time Shin was already crouching with the pipe in her hand. She mentally scoured her street home for an escape route and much to her horror, realized there was none. With a brick wall at her back, she’d unknowingly penned herself in by her own metal maze. There was only one way out, and that was to head straight toward the noise.

The tin door of her cave shook thunderously. Quivers of fear shot down Shin’s spine and she panicked. Wildly flailing her pipe as a weapon, she barreled full steam ahead through the door and charged directly into a large body. Her pipe clubbed the shadowed figure hard enough that a gravelly male voice cursed loudly.

Kicking and shoving, she blindly tried to force her way past the intruder. But he was bigger and stronger, and her frenzied thrashing was no match for his hulking form. He wrenched the pipe from her hand, tossed it aside, and wrapped his arms around

her torso. His iron grip tightened until Shin felt her stomach squeezing against her spine.

“Ya’ little creep! You ain’t goin’ nowhere tonig—”

But just as the man started spitting out venomous threats, Shin leaned down and found his arm with her mouth. Landing a bite, she sank her teeth in fiercely, as though her future on planet Earth depended upon it. Her attacker’s voice bellowed and he loosened his hold.

In the few seconds he took to recoil from the pain she managed to break free. Taking off down the pathway her feet had tramped countless times, Shin instinctively navigated every turn and pothole and jutting chunk of metal. She rounded the corner at the end of the alley.

He was swearing and giving chase through the darkness. A wave of terror pursuing her, every muscle in Shin’s body throbbed with the force of escape. She ran wildly, refusing to be overtaken.

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While Shin darted as fast as her legs would carry her, surging all around her in the invisible realms there was a tremendous clash of claws, wings, laser-swords and otherworldly muscle. An unseen light-being called a dazzle pulled out his laser-sword and thrust it at a hideous charging drab. The vile creature instantly flew backward to avoid being pierced and then circled around to try and get at Shin from another direction.

The dazzle, whose name was Rahzell, called over to his partner. “Ahnah! The larger drab! It’s heading straight for the girl!”

Ahnah jerked her head around just in time to catch a glimpse of the drab's dark form flying fast in her direction. "Take this, you foul beast!" she said under her breath, and swung her light-sword violently in a wide arc behind her. Surprising her enemy, Ahnah landed a hefty blow directly on its left shoulder. It reeled away and crumpled to the surface, crying out in agony and grabbing the wound with its claw.

The injured drab lay writhing in pain. Ahnah could see fresh puss oozing out of its cut. She started toward it to unleash one more powerful, incapacitating stroke, but before she got close enough, somehow the thing managed to rouse itself. Flapping its wings madly, it limped away until it was able to take off in erratic flight and disappear into the black of night.

Normally, she would've chased after it and given it the kind of thrashing it would remember for epochs to come. But the child's protection was priority. She called back to Rahzell, "I'll stay with the girl," and flew off to catch up to their charge.

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Shin careened through the tangle of city streets, desperately trying to shake off the human assailant still hot on her trail.

Near the charging earthman flew a second unseen drab, flapping its wings alongside and giving the man an earful. "Gaw, the little monster bit you! Don't let her escape! Catch her and pay her back for—" and in a sickening way, the drab became strangely excited and started trembling and wriggling. Its voice grew raspy, and it salivated large drops of yellow liquid that dripped from its fangs.



“And pay her back for what she did. Get even! You deserve vengeance!”

Now, the running man couldn't actually hear the repulsive words the drab was spewing into his ear. Humans rarely comprehend directly what drabs or dazzles say. Naturally then, this earthling didn't audibly understand the suggestions being made by his malicious tag-along. Rather, the drab's vile talk registered inside the man as a sensation, like a thought, an emotion, an impression. And right away, his entire face twisted into the most disagreeable smile, as if he'd begun hatching up all the ways he was going to hurt the girl when he caught her. And his hateful mug started to resemble the detestable leer of the beastly thing floating invisibly by his side.

While the drab was engrossed in all its deplorable trash-talk, Razzell snuck up behind it and said to himself, “This is going to be fun.” Then, to catch the brute's attention he made one little sound. “Psst!” When the drab turned its beady eyes in his direction, he leaped forward and yelled, “BOO!”

The critter was so startled it accidentally released a cloud of putrid gas, shot straight up into the atmosphere, and quickly vanished from sight.

“Whooh, did you have to?” Razzell waved his wings to dispel the fetid odor, flew sideways to get some fresh air, and then promptly turned his attention to the earthman. Pulling alongside, the dazzle laid a light-hand on his shoulder and expressed words like they were medicine. “My friend, you don't want to harm this child. There are better ways to spend your time. She's noble after all, a young woman to be treated with dignity.”

The truth of Rahzell's words entered into the man's being as a healthy dose of guilt. He slowed his pace, yet stubbornly chose to continue chasing after Shin.

"Sir, you weren't created for this kind of violence. Remember your real color. Think of your true self."

Though with a little less conviction, in spite of Rahzell's counsel the mortal continued to run.

"All right, I will help you make a proper choice." And with that, the dazzle held his light-saber in front of the man's moving feet.

At that exact moment the runner's large form fell headlong onto the pavement. He smacked his face against the macadam and something in his nose crunched loudly.

"Ouaawch!"

"Oh." Rahzell grimaced. "That's going to hurt."

Stunned by the impact of his fall and tired from the chase, the man didn't move.

"But you'll be glad you stopped." Rahzell pulled closer and placed his unseen hand on top of the earthling's head. "I've spared you some future regrets, and if you'll sober up, eventually you'll understand what I'm saying is true."

Sitting up, the pained man groaned and quickly searched in his jacket for a handkerchief to stay the blood gushing from his nose.

Rahzell touched his nose and instantly the bleeding stopped. "I'd get to a hospital if I were you. That thing's going to swell like a new star." He smiled at the misguided man. "Farewell sir," he said, and lifted up and away to join his partner.

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Ahnah was keeping pace with Shin as she crossed streets, ran by an apartment building, a strip mall, a gas station, and finally circled around Everington Bank to cut through the opening in the fence at the back of the bank's parking lot.

Her lungs burned but Shin wouldn't stop. She raced to save her life, flying in and out of the neighborhood the way a bird flies in and out of shrubs. Before long she'd covered the whole distance to one of her secondary hiding places—a low archway between two storefronts, seven blocks away from her own alleyway cave.

By now the only sounds she was aware of were the slapping of her worn sneakers on the pavement and the inhaling and exhaling of her throbbing lungs. She slowed, and for the first time since exploding into a full throttle run, Shin came to a standstill and took a split second to glance behind her.

There was no sign of anyone nearby.

She ducked into the passageway and moved quickly toward its dark center. Hunkering down under the arch, she leaned against the old stones of the curved wall and sat on the cold cement floor.

*Not a sound, you jerk!* Shin silently commanded herself. Slowing her breathing, she locked her back, legs, and arms in place and sat completely, absolutely still. She didn't want to give that creep a clue as to her position, not by movement, nor by scent, not by one single, careless noise in the dark.

While she sat as motionless as the windless night, Ahnah hovered around her with all the vigilance of a trained Watcher. Like every other dazzle, she was composed of their realm's light, so it was normal for her to simultaneously share space with the physical

matter of the archway. Now, as she circled around her statue-like human, she passed invisibly through stone and mud and mortar.

At the moment a completely different group of drabs floated in a nervous huddle off to Ahnah's left. She kept her eye on their activity. They didn't seem interested in attacking and stayed at a distance, but by their movements she could tell her closeness to the child was agitating them infernally.

Having experienced countless run-ins with these atrocious creatures, she could sense what their twisted little minds were thinking. Since they had influenced her human's life for quite some time, it was obvious they felt the child belonged to them. They wanted her. The light of Ahnah's countenance flared brighter as she announced in lucid terms, "Hear me, savages, this child doesn't belong to you. Even if she has given some assent to your conniving words, you don't own her. She's a Light-Seeker, and it's only a matter of time before your influence in her life will be finished."

Upon hearing Ahnah's honest words the three lingering drabs got all stirred up. Their gnarled bodies shook with fury, their dark wings trembled, and they flew toward her in a rage.

Ahnah unfurled her light-sword and stood at the ready.

Seeing the light-sword, the angry cluster of drabs hissed and spit but came no closer. Backing off to regroup, they soon began arguing among themselves, as each member of the threesome commanded the other two drabs to attack the dazzle. And when no one moved they loudly accused one another of cowardice.

The disagreement quickly escalated into a skyward brawl, and they forgot their present focus on Shin. Flying erratically in a clump, they smacked and pulled and clawed and scratched each

other, their flurry of infighting continuing as they traveled upward. Finally, they flew so high that their whole lot disappeared from view.

Ahnah sheathed her saber. Thankfully, the pain and suffering that could be inflicted by a dazzle's light-sword posed a greater threat to the drabs than being separated from their earthling.

She shook her head in amazement at the absolute depravity of the beasts and turned her attention back to the earth child. For the first time in more than ten earth minutes, the girl was stirring.

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Now that Shin was no longer in immediate danger, she allowed herself to feel. Waves of relief and anger rippled through her body in a latent adrenaline rush, and she collapsed onto the pavement under the archway. Shivering violently, not so much from cold but from shock, her muscles wobbled and shook until her physical reactions ran their course and her trembling gradually subsided.

She sat up in the empty silence under the span of the archway. During three years of living on the streets she'd never once been attacked with that kind of violence. Even when people stole stuff, they hadn't been vicious or savage. *Whoever that guy was*, she thought, *I don't EVER wanna' meet him again!*

Shin glanced toward the arch's entrance and pulled her coat tighter around her waist. Wearing only a thin hoodie sweatshirt and jeans, she was starting to feel the chilly night temperatures in her bones. The fact that the stones around her dripped and oozed dampness made the cold even worse. Why had she thought this stupid place would work for hiding?

Pressing her hand on the pavement to shift her weight, Shin squished a pile of wet muck. *Ewww, gross!* Making a face, she held her hand to her nose and took a hesitant whiff. Fortunately, it was only mud.

Scraping as much of it as she could from her hand onto the wall to her right, Shin sighed miserably. Even if the place weren't a five-star hotel, she would stay put. The city after dark was way too risky for wandering around, especially in the projects where she'd set up camp. During the night hours her scruffy hoodie was enough to make her a target for roaming thieves. That lesson had been learned the hard way, by once losing a pair of good sneakers to some louse of a guy. She would just have to endure until morning.

Leaning back against the wall, Shin tried to push the attack out of her mind, but it kept creeping back as if it had squatter's rights. *Was that guy looking for food, or goods, or was it ME he was after?*

She closed her eyes and mentally retraced her steps to every place she'd gone that day: the zoo, the library, Fourth Street, Penn Avenue, Orange Street, and Southside park. *Did I do something that could have gotten somebody mad at me? Did I look anybody in the eye?* Always careful to scan her surroundings, she couldn't recall anyone studying her.

In the end, Shin made a decision to work much harder at staying unnoticed whenever she went out in public.

Ahnah sensed the girl's unsettledness and gently stroked her head with a light-hand. "There, there, child. Rest yourself. You're safe. The drabs have been dealt with. Those un-creatures won't bother you anymore tonight."

When Ahnah placed an invisible hand on her head, Shin experienced an immediate sense of being out of harm's way. Though she didn't physically feel the dazzle's touch, her whole body relaxed at once. And feeling tremendously tired, she lay down on the pavement to get some sleep.