

The
O T H E R
S I D E
Of
V I S I B L E



JANET KELLER RICHARDS

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Chapter One

Shin shot up out of a sound sleep. Her heart was pounding 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 hard in 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 leaned hard 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.



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 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. The drab 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.



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. It was 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. So naturally, 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. Right away, he began thinking of 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 Rahzell snuck up behind it. "This is going be fun," he said to himself. Then, to catch the brute's attention he made one little sound. "Pssst!" 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 in a few seconds, vanished from sight.

"Whooh, did you have to?" Rahzell 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.



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 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 she could tell by their movements that her closeness to the child was agitating them infernally.

She could sense what their twisted little minds were thinking. "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.

It was true, since these drabs had influenced the child's life for quite some time, they felt she belonged to them. They wanted this human. But the pain and suffering that could be inflicted by a dazzle's light-sword posed a greater threat than being separated from their earthling.

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, their whole lot disappeared from view.

Ahnah shook her head and sheathed her light-sword. Even after countless encounters with drabs, she never failed to be amazed at their absolute depravity.

Turning her attention back to the earth child, she noticed that for the first time in more than ten earth minutes the girl was stirring.



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. 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 four 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, though Shin didn't physically feel the dazzle's touch, she experienced a warm sense of being out of harm's way. Her whole body relaxed at once, and she felt tremendously tired and lay down on the pavement to get some sleep.

Chapter Two

Being invisible was the one thing in life Shin thought she did well. She could slink around with her eyes lowered, avoiding all bodily contact, and pretty much manage to be ignored by the whole world. On crowded city streets, in grocery stores, at the zoo or the library, most people didn't even know she was alive.

She called it being *cloaked*. And ninety percent of the time it worked, which was exactly what she wanted. There was no way she was going to let herself be caught and hauled back into that dreadful foster care system. One of the main reasons she'd worked so hard to master the art of cloaking was to stay out of sight from truant officers and other official snoops who could sabotage her quiet little life on the streets.

Of course, Shin had no idea how thoroughly and utterly visible she was, or that all her daily routines were under twenty-four hour surveillance. She knew nothing of the dazzles who followed her wherever she went, all around her alleyway, all around her daily begging territory, all around the city.

She was convinced she was invisible.

So when she crawled out of the small archway next to Lou's Wash N' Dry Laundromat looking like she desperately needed Lou's professional help, Shin was unaware of the two watcher dazzles hovering by her

side. She was also unaware that for the moment, there were no drabs in the vicinity.

Yawning, she stretched to un-kink cramped muscles that for too many hours had been contorted into the warmest possible sleeping positions. Under normal circumstances Shin wasn't a morning person, but on this day she couldn't have been happier to see dawn rising above the city rooftops.

She moved closer to the entrance of the laundromat and peered inside. No one was washing clothes at the moment. Quietly opening the door, Shin sneaked inside and disappeared into the ladies' room.

Thanks to Lou's unknowing generosity, five minutes later she stepped outside, a little more awake, with the remains of the archway's mud washed away. While considering what to do next, images of Herbie and Porky walked across her mind and stopped her in her tracks. *Blast! What if that creep took them?*

As her first pet, Porky was great company. He was a safe friend who purred whenever she fed him and then roamed and reappeared as a homeless wanderer. They understood each other perfectly.

And as for Herbie, it didn't matter that she was twelve years old. Shin needed that stuffed dog. He was her only tie to the days before foster care, when she still lived with her own family. That is, if a drunk mom and her live-in boyfriends could be called family.

Herbie saw all the craziness then, as well as later, in each foster home. That was why, without ever saying a word, he could comfort her as good as a mama cat wrapping itself around its kittens. He was older now but every bit as supportive, even if too much

squashing had caused his Fox Terrier ears to fray, thinned his plaid dog suit, and put some bald spots in his fur. And somewhere along the line his right eye decided to look around the neighborhood all by itself.

But Shin didn't mind Herbie's abnormalities. They made him fit right in with her odd little family of three. She and Porky and Herbie got along just fine together.

Until that cruel thug turned their lives upside down. *Ugh! What a stupid beast of a man!* As a second unnerving thought shot through her brain, she smacked her thighs in disgust. *Oh no! What if he tries to take over MY alleyway?*

Losing Herbie and Porky was unthinkable. But equally as terrible was the idea that she could lose her home. She'd managed to camp tucked away in that alley for six whole months, her longest time in a hideaway since taking to the streets four years earlier.

And now if that guy had a mind to, he could decide to stake a claim to her territory.

"You have no right to MY stuff or MY place!" she said out loud at the man, giving the pavement an exasperated stomp. But she wasn't stupid. A skinny girl was no match for the kind of muscle that had attacked her. She could get as hot as a summer sidewalk about what he'd done, but in reality that thug could help himself to whatever he wanted. He could get away with the whole shebang.

"Ugh!" Shin punched the brick wall of the laundromat with her fist and then leaned against the building and rubbed her stinging hand. *Now what do I do?* Closing her eyes, she tried to come up with a plan.

But the injustice of it all kept pulling her brain sideways into a rut of irritation and worry.

Being so preoccupied, Shin forgot all about scanning her surroundings. Chalk it up to not sleeping very well, or to worrying about Porky and Herbie, or to the fear of losing her alleyway. But whatever the cause, less than eight hours after resolving to be more careful, she mistakenly allowed herself to be uncloaked. To be *un*-invisible. And in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

Ahnah and Rahzell both noticed the slew of drabs swarming around a group of approaching humans. They pulled closer to the girl.

“Company’s paying a visit.” Rahzell shook his head and added, “Man, there sure is a whole lot of ugly in that crowd!”

Being a leader and a warrior, Ahnah was by nature the more serious of the two dazzles. Even so, she couldn’t help grinning at Rahzell’s choice of words. He loved playing around with human expressions. She agreed with his assessment though: the drabs circulating around the earthlings were their usual hideous selves.

Both dazzles drew their weapons.

“Let’s stand back-to-back and cover the girl with our wings,” Ahnah said.

“Done.” Rahzell took his place on one side of the girl and faced outward. Ahnah did the same on the other side. Then they both unfurled their large wings and enclosed their human in light.

At the exact moment the dazzles’ invisible wings covered her, Shin heard the sound of voices. Opening

her eyes, she saw a group of male teenagers heading in her direction. They looked as if they were begging for trouble the way she begged for money. She lowered her head, shrank into her jacket, and turned away to slip into the laundromat before they took notice of her.

But it was too late.

“Hey chickenhead, where you goin’?”

Shin heard the teen’s question and shot a glance up and down the street to look for other people. No one was in sight—a bad omen for her immediate future. *If I go inside they might follow me. Better to stay outside if there’s trouble.*

The teenage bullies pulled around her in a semi-circle, each wearing an attitude. With their baseball caps on backward and their oversized pants drooping toward their kneecaps, the peach fuzz on their faces revealed they weren’t quite men, but neither were they boys. Some were white-skinned and some were ebony, and all were heady to strut their power.

Pinned against the bricks in the middle of their gang, Shin reminded herself, *Don’t look them in the eye and don’t let them see you’re afraid.* Her hands in fists and her muscles taut, she lowered her head.

“Hey, check out the grubbies. She be homeless,” one of them said.

Shin considered trying to break through their ranks to make a dash for it, but they were six and she was one. Instead, she decided it was the perfect time to disappear and go somewhere safe. *Anywhere but in this circle.*

Closing her eyes, she imagined Africa, one of the many lands she’d read about in her library books. In

her mind she was soon on safari, watching a pride of lions off in the distance. The adult lions were stretched out for sleep as their cubs playfully tumbled over one another in the tall Serengeti grass.

While Shin pretended to be far away from city streets and impending trouble, eight drabs buzzed angrily above the teenage hoodlums. The girl child, the object of this particular strike, was hidden from their view under the wings of two dazzles. That agitated the drabs to no end, but none of them was foolish enough to move in any closer. They would stay well clear of their foes and focus their energies on inciting their male earthlings.

One drab flew straight into a teen and shrieked, “Don’t just stand there, you mama’s boy! Prove you’re a man! Prove you’ve got guts, and go after her!”

Like Rahzell, drabs also copied human language. But unlike the dazzle’s fun loving nature, they only imitated for the purposes of taunting, provoking, and tormenting earthlings.

The teen lunged and grabbed Shin’s shirt, twisted it into his fist, and pulled her close. “Yo, Shorty, what’s the verdict?” Inches from her own body, he sneered into her face, until a whiff of stench filled his nostrils. “Oh, *man!* She stanky!” Releasing his grip on her shirt, he backed off in disgust.

Another voice spoke from across the circle. “Yeah, well, I ain’t interested. She spoiled goods, you know whut I’m sayin’?”

As the drabs throbbed back and forth, Ahnah motioned to Rahzell to surround the girl with his own

wings and then promptly flew off through the wall of the laundromat.

Rahzell repositioned himself in front of the child and wrapped his wings around her human body.

A large drab flew over several of the kids and shouted at them. “Come, on, you namby-pamby cowards! Don’t be such weaklings!”

A different drab landed on the head of the tallest teen and sank a claw into one of his shoulders. “She’s an easy target! At least rough her up, you weasel!”

Shin was in and out of the circle, traveling back and forth in her imagination between the brick and cement of the city and the plains of Kenya. In Africa, evening was falling and the winds were blowing, and the lion pride was standing to move on from the shade of a large tree.

The sound of mucus being coaxed into a throat drew her back to the city sidewalk. A second later spit sprayed across Shin’s face in tiny droplets. Another throat cleared. Wetness struck again, but this time a large, single glob landed squarely on her nose and dribbled down into her mouth.

Her body stood still.

The rain had come to the African plains and the lions were lying down to wait it out. It was a strong rain, a monsoon rain.

Soon, with laughter and husky self-congratulating remarks, saliva was flying at Shin from all the around the half circle. Her face was the main target, but also her hair. Shirt. Jacket. Jeans. Shoes.

But just like when she'd been a young child and the sounds of flying fists and angry voices filled the air—Shin had vanished. She was elsewhere.

“Hey! You kids! What are you doing?”

Ahnah flew beside a man who had exited the laundromat and was walking toward the circle of teens.

Rahzell saw her next to the approaching human and put two and two together. “Way to go, Ahnah! Good move.”

“Thank you, my friend. I thought so too.” Ahnah smiled and rejoined Rahzell in covering the girl.

In response to the voice hollering from beyond their circle, the teens stopped spitting momentarily.

The man shouted again, “You get out of here, you hear me? Go on, get to school and leave that girl alone!”

As the circle opened up and the teens reluctantly spread out, another wad of spittle hit Shin's neck.

“Sleazebag,” one kid slurred her way.

“Cow,” another said as he swaggered off in his hundred dollar sneakers.

The last one to pass by Shin lobbed a final loogie in her direction. But it missed and landed on the cement.

“NOW!” the commanding voice yelled.

The air became quiet.

“You okay?”

Her rescuer was beside her. From her downward view of the sidewalk she could see a pair of shiny black shoes. They were tramping on two wet circles of spit.

“Good thing I came outside for some fresh air.”

His voice sounded nice, even kind, but Shin kept her head lowered. She didn't want him to see what a sleazebag cow looked like. Especially one that had hot tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Here. You can use this." The gentle voice offered her a small towel. "And if you want to, there's a bathroom in my laundromat where you can wash up."

Shin released her fists enough to take it from his extended hand.

"Sorry about those bullies. Have they caused you trouble before today?"

She shook her head and with the towel, slowly pushed at the slime on her face. It slid around and didn't come off so easily. But at least it camouflaged her crying.

"Are you Lou?" She was breaking her own rule of invisibility by speaking to him, but she wanted to move the conversation away from herself.

"Huh?"

"Lou of the laundromat."

"Oh. Roland. Lou was my grandfather. We never changed the name."

Shin wiped her face and neck. The shaking inside of her settled slightly.

"Listen, I have to get back to work. Before you head to school, if you want to use our bathroom to clean up, you feel free, okay kid?"

He patted her on the back. As he walked away, Shin raised her eyes enough to catch a quick glimpse of Roland, grandson of Lou. Dark hair, medium build, looked harmless. He thought she was *normal*: not spoiled goods, but a kid that went to school.

“Thank you,” she called after him too quietly to be heard.

He disappeared into the wash n’ dry and Shin finished wiping everything that was covered in spit. Still sticky, she decided, this time with the owner’s full permission, to go inside and get rid of the remaining saliva. And while she was at it she would try to lessen her body odor. And maybe scrub off the mortification of being...of being...well, just of *being*.

A little while later, Shin emerged cleaner than she’d been in days, at least on the outside. She didn’t know how to get rid of the awful stain on the inside.

Rahzell and Ahnah waited to put away their swords until the crowd of drabs had tagged along after their human posse and were long gone.

When their young earthling exited the laundromat they floated along at her side and talked about the good things that were coming, about times when the child’s present struggles would hold no more pain. At some point, they surmised she would discover the realm of OtherSide, a future prospective for which they were both particularly and immortally thankful.

Chapter Three

A block away from Lou's Laundromat, Shin's stomach grumbled a desperate plea for coffee. Ever since someone had offered her a sugary swig at the age of ten, a cup of java in the morning was a daily essential. She *needed* coffee. Coffee would jumpstart her brain so she could figure out what to do about Herbie and Porky and her alleyway. Coffee would make her normal; less like homeless trash and more like all the city people who drink it on their way to work.

She would go to the zoo.

One of her favorite places to hang out, the zoo took her far away from the city, to places she'd read about in books. Around the wild animals Shin could pretend she was in other lands—where monkeys or zebras or kangaroos lived—and imagine other, happier existences.

The best animals were the big cats. She often sat on the benches in front of the tigers or lions or leopards or cheetahs and watched them glide in and out of the trees on their large, padded feet. In their spotted or striped coats or their impressive manes, they were regal as kings. It was as if they knew they were important, and no one could tell them otherwise.

She envied their self-confidence.

And thanks to some big honcho donor there was no admission charge for kids twelve years old and under, which meant she could come and go as often as she wished.

The zoo also happened to be her preferred begging area. In the morning before the sun got too hot, little old men and women sat on benches along its tree-lined pathways, wasting hours together as if their lives would go on forever.

Now as she rounded the corner at the entrance gate and walked up to the first bench, her empty stomach rumbled a second time. Holding out her hand toward two gray-topped, prune-like faces, she focused on her own fingers and avoided their eyes. "Please, may I have a dollar for breakfast?"

They shook their heads and she moved on.

For a second or two Shin considered staging a hunger strike. With all that had happened during the last twelve hours, begging for food felt about as pleasant as a splinter. But she *had* to get coffee in order to think more clearly about her present predicament.

Another plump zoogoer sat to her right feeding pigeons. This lady was one of the regulars at the zoo and could always be relied on for some coins. But she was far too talkative. Since Shin's goal was to be entirely cloaked, all that chatter was plain nerve-racking.

Under normal circumstances Shin only begged from her as a last resort. But today, the sooner she could get food money the better. For a quick buck

she'd tolerate the old biddy. *There's gotta' be a better way*, she thought honestly, and walked in her direction.

The woman was leaning forward and chatting in a singsongy voice to a pigeon darting back and forth on the ground. The bird flew away as Shin pulled up and faced the lady. Averting her eyes, she stared at the paisley design on the woman's skirt and forced a polite tone. "Good morning, could you spare some change, or maybe a dollar or two for coffee and a muffin?"

She could feel the elderly woman gazing at her, as if searching for something.

With a warbled voice that belied her age, the lady answered with all sincerity, "Thank you so much for coming again, dear one. I do appreciate your asking me!"

Shin's eyeballs bored a hole into the pattern on the woman's skirt. She shifted back and forth from one foot to the other. *Why is she thanking me for begging from her?*

There were loads of compartments in the lady's purse. She slowly fumbled through each one in search of some coins. But in the end she looked up at Shin apologetically. "Oh dear, I can't seem to find my change just now." At once, she sat up taller and clapped her hands together. "But I have a brilliant idea! Shall we go to breakfast together? It'll be my treat. You can have bacon and eggs, toast, or oatmeal; whatever your little tummy is hungry for. How does that sound to you?"

Blinking, Shin pulled her eyes over to the nearby bushes. She certainly was hungry enough for all that food, but this wasn't the usual interaction with this

woman. Her suspicious brain quickly turned the white-haired grandma into a foster agency spy whose all-too-eager smile was concealing a sinister plan to capture her and drag her straight back into the system. Glancing to her left, she searched the bushes for hidden accomplices. Even though she didn't see anyone, it didn't mean they weren't there. After all, spies were good at disguising themselves.

For fear of being lured into a trap, Shin justified passing up a huge breakfast. *I mean, who would wanna' sit with such an old geezer for a whole meal, anyway?* "No thanks," she answered minimally, and backed away from the bench to head toward the zoo's exit.

The woman called after her. "Well, dear one, I do understand. After all, who would want to sit with such an old geezer for a whole meal?"

Shin stopped and jerked her head around. *She just repeated my exact thought!* Quite by accident she caught sight of the woman's face, and for a few seconds their eyes met. Gazing back at her were two round, dark pupils that were swimming with kindness. She yanked her eyes away and fixed them on the arm of the bench.

Piping up with another suggestion, the woman said, "Well then, why don't I give you a bill so you can go eat breakfast? And when you're finished, just return the leftover change to me." The lady's wrinkled hand promptly reached into her purse, produced a one hundred dollar bill, and held it out for the taking.

Shin had never laid eyes on such a large bill, and having it waved in front of her face threw her

completely off balance. She pulled her eyes downward and honed in on the weeds under the bench. *This lady is bonkers! Totally crazy!*

Images of all the stuff one hundred smackers would buy flashed through her mind. She could get a new rain poncho, a flashlight, some jeans and shirts at the thrift store, and maybe even a coat. Plus, she could eat real meals for a couple of days!

“Okay, I can bring it back,” she answered with all the genuineness of a pack rat. Grabbing the bill out of the woman’s hand, Shin started off in the direction of The Hungry Appaloosa Diner.

The wobbly elderly voice called after her, “I’ll be here until ten o’clock this morning, dear one. Otherwise, you’ll have to give me the change tomorrow.”

“Uh, okay.” Waving a response, Shin kept walking as though the money would disintegrate if she didn’t use it real soon.



Priscilla, the woman Shin had pegged as “Bonkers,” happened to be intimately acquainted with OtherSide. She was also keenly aware that valiant dazzles and contemptible drabs flew just beyond the veneer that separated Earth’s realm from the invisible realms.

Her daily routine of going to the zoo had nothing to do with feeding pigeons or frittering away time. And though she did thoroughly enjoy watching the big cats, her true reason for sitting in front of their habitats each day was none other than to help recolor

the life of the young runaway who panhandled from her more or less regularly.