

The
OTHER
SIDE
of
VISIBLE



JANET KELLER RICHARDS

(Chapters 1-3 and a portion of chapter four of...)

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A Novel By

JANET KELLER RICHARDS

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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, tightening 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 crash.

She glanced up at the sky and noticed the night was still solid, with no sign of morning's thinning. Porky, her calico cat, showed up 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 only token she had left from when she'd lived with her mom—a stuffed toy dog named Herbie. Yeah, she was fourteen, but Herbie was her last link to her biological family. She pulled him against her chest and slunk 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 started 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 brick wall at her back, and junk all around her. She'd unintentionally

penned herself in with her own protective 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. Whacking the air with her pipe, she managed to club the shadowed figure hard enough that a gravelly male voice cursed loudly.

Kicking and shoving, she blindly tried to force her way past him. But he was bigger and stronger, and her manic thrashing was no match for his gigantic form. He yanked the pipe from her hand, tossed it aside, and wrapped his arms around her torso. His iron grip tightened until Shin felt her stomach practically squeezing against her spine.

"Ya' little creep! You ain't goin' nowhere tonig—"

But just as the man started spitting out his vicious threats, Shin leaned down and found his arm with her mouth. Landing a bite, she sank her teeth in fiercely, as if 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 pull back from the pain, she managed to free herself. Taking off down the pathway her feet had trampled countless times, Shin instinctively maneuvered every turn and pothole and jutting chunk of metal. Rounding the corner at the end of the alley, she broke into an all-out sprint.

She heard him swearing and giving chase through the darkness. A wave of terror pursuing her, every muscle in Shin's body throbbed with the instinct of escaping, and she ran wildly.

While their teenage human darted as fast as her legs would carry her, Ahnah and her partner Riven, Watchers from the world of OtherSide, kept pace invisibly above her.

Ahnah felt a sudden heat surge in the atmosphere and smelled the inky stench of a drab. She jerked her head around and scanned the area. "I don't see them."

"I don't either." Riven wrinkled his nose in disgust. "But their stink is near."

Chaotic movements rippled in the darkness off to their left. Ahnah pointed. "There they are!" Two hideous drabs were flying straight toward their teenager. She saw the closest one reach Riven first. He thrust his sword at the vile creature. It instantly reversed its flight to avoid being pierced and circled around to try and get at the girl from another direction.

"Ahnah! The larger drab! It's heading straight for her!"

A black form was charging toward their earthling. She said under her breath, “Take this, you foul beast!” and swung her light-sword violently in a wide arc behind her. Surprising her enemy, she 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 creature 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 their young human’s protection was priority. She turned to locate Riven. “I’ll go with the teen.” Lifting off the surface, she flew off to catch up with their charge, who was careening through the tangle of city streets below, desperately trying to shake off the large earthling still pursuing her.

Riven turned and flew back toward the girl’s assailant. He slowed, then stilled his wings, and watched silently as another drab pulled up next to the earth man. The critter started to give 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, it 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!”

Riven was aware the running man couldn’t hear the repulsive words the drab was spewing into his ear, since humans rarely comprehend drab or dazzle communications. The earthling didn’t audibly understand the suggestions being made by his malicious tag-along. But there was no question that the drab’s vile talk was registering inside the man as a sensation, a thought, an emotion, or an impression. Though humans couldn’t hear otherworldly words, Riven knew by past experiences they were always impacted by them.

Sure enough, as the drab’s malevolent suggestions filled his ear, the earth man’s face twisted into a most disagreeable smile. He looked as if he was hatching up all the ways he was going to hurt their human when he caught her, and his hateful mug took on a resemblance to the detestable leer of the beastly drab floating invisibly by his side.

While the drab was engrossed in all its deplorable trash-talk, Riven snuck up behind it and said to himself, “This is going 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 ugly fiend 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?” Riven waved his wings to dispel the fetid odor, flew sideways to get some fresh air, and then promptly turned his attention to the earth man. Pulling alongside him, 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 young lady. There are better ways to spend your time. She’s noble after all, a young woman to be treated with dignity.”

Riven watched as the man slowed his pace. By the earthling’s expression, he knew his words had struck an internal chord. Yet the human kept running, stubbornly choosing to continue his pursuit of the teenager.

“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 Riven’s counsel, the mortal continued his chase. “All right, I’ll 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.” Riven grimaced. “That’s going to hurt.”

Stunned by the impact of his fall, the man didn’t move.

“But you’ll be glad you stopped.” Riven 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.

Riven touched his nose and instantly the bleeding stopped. “I’d get to a hospital if I were you. That’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.

Shin ran by an apartment building and through the parking lot of the strip mall. She circled around Everington Bank and bolted toward an 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—an 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 that creep.

She ducked into the passageway and hurried toward its dark center. Hunkering down under the arch, she leaned against the old stones of its curved wall and sat down 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 bully a clue as to her position, not by movement, not by scent, not by one single, careless noise in the dark.

While their young human sat as motionless as the windless night, Ahnah hovered invisibly 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 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 teenager 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 earth teen belonged to them. They wanted her. The light of Ahnah's countenance flared brighter and she announced in lucid terms, "Hear me, savages, this human 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 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 loudly commanded the other two drabs to attack the dazzle. And when no one moved, they 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, thankful that the pain and suffering 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 her human. For the first time in more than ten earth minutes, the teen was stirring.

Shin decided she was no longer in urgent danger, so she allowed herself to move. Waves of relief and anger started shooting through her body. She collapsed onto the pavement under the archway, her legs shivering violently, her muscles wobbling like jelly. She figured she was probably in shock, but there was nothing she could do about it, so she made sure she stayed quiet and let her body ride it out. Finally, after a couple of minutes, she felt almost normal again.

Sitting up in the empty silence under the span of the archway, Shin's face filled with a huge frown made from a combination of disgust and worry. During all her years of living on the streets she'd never once been attacked with that kind of violence. Even when people stole from her, they hadn't been vicious or savage. *Whoever that guy was*, she thought, *I don't EVER want to 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 this place was as comfortable as sitting out in a rainstorm, 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 cope 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 pay attention to her surroundings, she couldn't remember anyone studying her. In the end, Shin decided she had to work much harder at staying undetected whenever she went out in public.

Hovering nearby, Ahnah could easily see the teen was feeling unsettled. She moved closer and gently stroked her earthling's head with a light-hand. "There, there, young one. 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 the head of the girl, the teen's whole body immediately relaxed. "That's right. You can rest. You're out of harm's way now." She watched with satisfaction as her human sighed deeply, lay down on the pavement, and closed her eyes to get some sleep.

Chapter Two

Being invisible was the one skill Shin felt 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 terrible 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.

She was convinced she was invisible.

Crawling out of the small archway next to Lou's Wash N' Dry Laundromat, Shin looked like she desperately needed Lou's professional help. She yawned and 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 there. 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 like a homeless wanderer. They understood each other perfectly.

And as for Herbie, it didn't matter that she was almost halfway through her teen years. He was her tie to the days before foster care, when she had 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 her pet cat and her only tie to family was unthinkable. But equally as dreadful was the idea that she could lose her home. She'd managed to camp tucked away in that alley for six and a half 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.

She gave the pavement an exasperated stomp and said out loud to that guy, "You have no right to MY goods or MY place!" 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 bully 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.

Hovering invisibly above Shin, Ahnah spied the slew of drabs swarming all around a group of approaching humans. She pulled closer to their earthling. "Company's paying a visit."

Riven had seen them too, because he immediately flew to protect the opposite side of the teen. "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 Riven'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.

On instinct, they both drew their weapons at the same time.

"Let's stand back-to-back and cover our young human with our wings."

“Done.” Riven took his place and faced outward.

Ahnah did the same on the other side, and they both unfurled their large wings, enclosing their earthling in light.

Shin heard the sound of human voices and opened her eyes. A gang of male teens was 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 young 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, she could see by the peach fuzz on their faces that they weren’t men, but they weren’t boys, either. Some of them were white-skinned and some were ebony. One thing was sure, though: they were all heady to strut their power.

Pinned against the bricks in the middle of them, Shin reminded herself, *Don’t look them in the eye and don’t let them see I’m 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 thought about trying to break through their circle to make a dash for it, but they were six and she was only one. Instead, she decided it was the perfect time to disappear and go somewhere safe. Anywhere but in that place.

Closing her eyes, she imagined Africa, one of lots of lands she’d read about in her library books. In her mind she was soon on a faraway safari, watching a pride of lions off in the distance. The adult lions were stretched out for sleep. Their cubs playfully tumbled over each other in the tall Serengeti grass.

Ahnah watched as eight unseen drabs buzzed angrily above the teenage earthlings that had gathered around their human. By the looks of the drabs’ frenetic flying, they were clearly agitated at the fact that they couldn’t get any nearer to their young earthling.

She looked at her partner and said quietly, “They’re too cowardly to come any closer. But watch them try to incite their humans and stir up trouble.”

Sure enough, as soon as the words were out of her mouth, a drab flew straight into one of the male teens 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!”

Ahnah was not amused, to say the least. She knew drabs were accustomed to copying human language, like Riven copied human language. But unlike her friend's fun-loving nature, their harsh imitations were filled with taunting, provoking, and tormenting.

She watched as the human teen lunged and grabbed the girl’s shirt, twisted it into his fist, and pulled her close.

“Yo, Shorty, what’s the verdict?” Inches from her body, the earthling sneered into her face. But then he pulled back suddenly.

“Oh, man! She stanky!” Releasing his grip on her shirt, the male teen backed off in disgust.

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

As the drabs throbbed back and forth above the gang of humans, Ahnah motioned to Riven, directing him to surround their human with his own wings. He nodded, and she promptly flew off through the wall of the laundromat.

Riven repositioned himself in front of the teenager and wrapped his wings around her body. He watched as 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 had arrived and the winds were blowing hard. The lion pride was standing, starting to move on from the shade of a large tree.

The sound of mucus being coaxed into a throat pulled 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 little kid and the sounds of angry voices and flying fists had filled the atmosphere of her home—Shin had gone away. She'd disappeared.

“Hey! You kids! What are you doing?”

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

Riven saw her next to the approaching man. A look of understanding crossed his face and he smiled. “Way to go, Ahnah! Good move.”

“Thank you, my friend. I thought so too.” Ahnah pulled up and rejoined Riven in covering their teenager.

The teens stopped spitting at Shin. She knew it was probably because of the voice hollering from beyond their circle.

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

She heard the circle open up and saw the feet of the teens reluctantly moving away. Another wad of spittle hit her 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 the towel 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 came out of the laundromat 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.

Ahnah and Riven waited to put away their swords until the crowd of drabs were long gone. When their young earthling exited the laundromat, they floated along at her side.

"She's a courageous one, our human."

Smiling at her partner, Ahnah nodded. "That she is. She stood her ground."

"It's one of the qualities I love about her heart."

"And when she discovers OtherSide..." Ahnah paused mid-sentence to visualize the teen's first encounter with their realm.

"...I will be immortally grateful!"

Ahnah laughed at Riven's completion of her sentence. "Yes, we'll both be immortally grateful. Though I was going to say, when she discovers OtherSide, all her true qualities will emerge."

“And she’ll be over-the-moon happy.”

Ahnah smiled and sighed softly. When that day came, they would all be flying high with every imaginable OtherSide celebration.

Chapter Three

A block away from Lou’s Laundromat, Shin’s stomach grumbled a desperate plea for coffee. Ever since someone offered her a sugary swig at the age of twelve, a cup of java in the morning had become 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 drank it on their way to work.

She would head 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 an existence that was better than the one she had now.

The best animals were the big cats. She often sat on the benches in front of the tigers or lions or leopards or cheetahs, watching them pad slowly in and out of the trees as if they had nothing to worry about at all. In their spotted or striped coats or their huge manes, they seemed as royal as kings. It was as if they knew they were important, and no one could convince them otherwise.

She envied their self-confidence.

And thanks to some big honcho donors there was no zoo admission charge for school-age kids or old people, 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 day warmed up, there were lots of little old men and women who 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 south 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 the woman was way too talkative. And 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 lady 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 her. Lowering her eyes, she stared at the paisley design on the old 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?"

The lady said nothing, but Shin could feel her gaze. Those aged eyes were searching her face, and they felt uncomfortable. She thought about walking away.

With a warbled voice that matched her age, the woman finally answered softly. "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?*

Glancing up, she saw the lady searching in her purse. There were loads of compartments in it, and she fumbled slowly through each one. Shin hoped she was looking for some coins.

But in the end, the woman shrugged 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. You can eat whatever you're hungry for. How does that sound to you?"

Blinking, Shin yanked her eyes over to the nearby bushes. She certainly was hungry enough for all that food, but this wasn't her usual interaction with the 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!* Totally by accident, she caught sight of the woman's face, and for a few seconds their eyes met. Looking back at her were two round, dark pupils that were swimming with kindness. She pulled her eyes away and focused 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 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 homed in on the weeds under the bench. *This lady is bonkers! Totally crazy!*

Images flashed across her mind of all the goods one hundred smackers would buy. 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. 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.

Ahnah and Riven watched from above as the older earthling held out her hand and unleashed an invisible *shining* toward their departing earth teen. Flaring out from the woman's palm, the powerful beam of OtherSide's light hit Shin squarely in the back, flowed through her body, and circled firmly around her heart.

"Ahhhh, that feels so good." Stilling herself, Ahnah smiled and closed her eyes to soak in the surplus light radiating outward from the shining.

“It sure does,” Riven said with his own smile.

And for a few seconds they both stood quietly while the swell of OtherSide luminescence infused their beings with new strength.

Riven cocked his head thoughtfully, and his countenance turned serious. “And every shining proves him wrong.”

Opening her eyes, Ahnah glanced over at him. “Proves who wrong?”

“The Light Stealer. He thinks his plan to eradicate light and color on Earth is succeeding. But every shining proves him wrong.” Gesturing toward their young human, he added, “Just wait until she discovers the world isn’t made up of grays and blacks!”

Ahnah gazed tenderly at their earthling. “When her star-eyes are opened.”

“Exactly. It’s just a matter of time...and shinings.”

Glancing at the increase of light all around them, Ahnah sighed contentedly and nodded in agreement. Noticing the teenager had come to a standstill, she slowed her wings to stay by the girl’s side. Riven also stopped and hovered, and they both watched and waited directly above their earthling.

Feeling confused, Shin stopped at the exit to the zoo. She’d started to feel terribly guilty for stealing the woman’s money. And then she remembered. *Wait. The lady GAVE me the money to use for breakfast.* She was allowed to treat herself before returning the rest of the money! A warm feeling spread through her chest and she kept moving, salivating at the thought of the lip-smacking meal she was about to inhale.

Chapter Four

On those rare occasions when begging brought in five or ten dollars, Shin usually took the cash and headed to her favorite diner, The Hungry Appaloosa. Always busier than a beehive, the restaurant had a seat-yourself policy and waitresses who never asked questions. Plus, the portions were large enough to feed a whole herd of elephants. It was the perfect place to stay cloaked while stuffing her face.

Sitting near the rear entrance with a one-hundred-dollar bill in her pocket, stuffing was exactly what she did. After three and a half gargantuan, trucker-sized flapjacks, a side of bacon, and two

cups of coffee, Shin was so full she could hardly move. She downed a last bite of pancake, wiped her mouth with a napkin, and gulped down the rest of the coffee in her mug.

Getting up slowly, she waddled to the cash register to pay for the meal. Handing over her diner bill and the money, she held onto the takeout bag that contained half a pancake for Porky's breakfast. She always saved some food for her cat and hoped she'd be able to find him later in the day.

"Hmmm." The register man scowled. "Young lady, this seems like a lot of money for you to be carrying." He held the bill up to the light to search for the Federal Mint's hidden identity stripe.

Shin hadn't seen this guy before and didn't think about the fact that someone could question a larger bill. Fixing her eyes intently on a goober-like stain in the middle of his tie, she said, "It was lent to me by a lady at the zoo. I'm gonna' take the rest of it back to her."

The man leaned down close to her face and waved his crooked finger. She was forced to shift her stare to the tip of his nose.

He squinted and his nose hardened to resemble the beak of a hawk. "You be sure to return all of it, you hear?" Straightening his stance, the man put the bill in his register and handed her the change.

"I will, I promise!" She locked her gaze on the money being put in her hand and tried to sound as convincing as possible.

Once outside, Shin shoved the cash into the pocket of her jeans and started walking down the sidewalk. Tossing the receipt on the ground, she also threw away her promise to the register guy.

During breakfast her mind had begun spinning with all the things the leftover money could buy. Before long she was pushing down guilt that poked at her insides. And by the time she took her last bite of pancake, she'd managed to justify spending the entire remaining wad.

Her fingers played with the crinkled bills in her pocket. Giddy at the idea of being able to buy clothing and gear, Shin considered her options. Her first stop would be new duds at the thrift store on Second Street. That way, at least for a while she could look just like everybody else. Living on the streets, clothing inevitably got dirty and smelly, but until her new purchases became soiled, she would appear normal.

As she pulled up to the corner and waited for the walk signal to cross the street, a realization burst into her mind. *Wait! If I don't return the old lady's change, I'll never be able to beg from her again!* Cheating the woman would mean finding a whole new place to panhandle, and that

was no small thing. The last time she'd tried to change begging areas, Shin had gone hungry for days. Besides, she liked the zoo too much to give up going there regularly.

Aw, man. A good begging connection is worth more than a hundred dollars! Well, ninety dollars, with breakfast and the tip. She tipped whenever she could, because if she were a waitress she'd want to be tipped. *But what if my gear is gone from my cave? I could sure use this cash!* Frowning, Shin's shopping mood fizzled and she knew what she had to do.

She turned back and headed toward the zoo, and before long she was approaching the woman. With her eyes trained on the money in her hand, she stopped in front of the lady's bench. "Brought your change."

Caught dozing, the flustered lady sat up quickly. "Oh, thank you! Perfect!"

"I gave a tip too, but the rest is all there. You can count it if you want to." Shin handed over the crinkled bills from her pocket and all the coins.

"Oh, that won't be necessary. I trust you, dear one." The woman put the money back in her purse, leaned in closer, and whispered as though revealing a secret. "I can see you're a Light-Seeker."

"Yeah, well, thanks a lot." Shin had no idea what the woman was talking about, and she wasn't about to ask. She turned to leave.

"Don't you want to know what a Light-Seeker is?"

Lady, I just wanna' get out of here, was what she thought. But she'd just scored a generous hit from the old coot. Even if she didn't want to stay, Shin knew it would be stupid to blow her off. Turning back, she shrugged reluctantly and stared down at the scuffs on her sneakers. "I guess so."

The woman glanced at her watch, clucked her tongue, and stood up. "Well I can't tell you today, dear one. I don't have enough time. Come back tomorrow and we'll have breakfast together. And then I'll tell you all about the Light-Seekers."

That's when the lady's whole plan became glaringly obvious. *THAT'S what she's up to! She's baiting me today so she can turn me over to the authorities tomorrow!*

"And I promise, I'm not baiting you and I have no intentions of turning you over to the authorities tomorrow. Or any other day, for that matter. That's as certain as the sky is blue, dear one!"

Shin gasped. This woman was either clairvoyant or certifiably nuts! Or both. Clairvoyant, because that was the second time she'd repeated her exact thought. Or nuts, because everybody on Earth knew the sky was a dull gray and not *blue*, whatever blue was supposed to be.

“Uh, I gotta’ go. Thanks again for breakfast.” Shin took off at a trot toward the zoo’s exit. She was in a hurry to get away from such a wacky encounter. And she wished the loony old woman would stop calling her *dear one*.

“See you tomorrow, dear one!” The older lady’s voice called after her.

Across the veneer, Ahnah and Riven watched as the older human stood up and quietly released another shining in Shin’s direction. OtherSide’s glow immediately surged around them.

Riven pumped his fist in the air. “Yes!”

Ahnah grinned. Her partner’s love of imitating all kinds of human mannerisms sure made things interesting. But this time he was right. A second shining from the older woman was something to get excited about. She was feeling wholly refreshed and invigorated. And though she and Riven couldn’t usually *see* the immediate effects of shinings on earthlings, she had no doubt whatsoever that their young Light-Seeker was being positively impacted.

Riven tilted his head toward Ahnah. “What do you think our Little Streak is up to now?”

Ahnah surfaced from her thoughts and looked at him quizzically. “Little Streak?”

“It’s my new name for our teenager. She doesn’t quite run with the speed of a dazzle, but for a human she can keep a good pace.”

Ahnah laughed out loud. Now he was copying human beings by creating nicknames. She played along. “Ah. I say she’ll want to check on her Earth home.”

“And I expect you’ll be right about that.”

Ahnah’s face grew more soft and she said honestly, “I hope her time is coming soon.”

“To meet them, you mean.”

“Yes. Nothing will thrill me more than to see the day when she meets our benevolent sovereigns.”

Riven’s gaze turned winsome as he met Ahnah’s eyes. “Nothing in the cosmos is sweeter than that.”