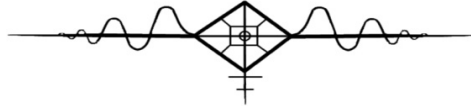


Chapter 1



Aren spun her lock as the hallway filled with jostling students, deafening and not just from sound. She closed her eyes, pushing away the noise of invasive memories, images, secrets, and sins not her own. Each body in the hall carried these around them like a cloud that Aren couldn't help but see. *Oh, how I hate crowds.*

Tracy, Aren's best friend, leaned against the locker to Aren's right and continued to drone on about the new kid, Kaden. Aren hadn't heard a word. She opened her eyes and spun the lock again.

A small fist slammed into the locker to her left, startling Aren. She glanced over at Steph who had been Aren's locker neighbor for two years. Steph hit the locker again and made a growling noise of frustration in the back of her throat. She looked like she'd been crying, her eyes puffy and pink. She caught Aren's look. "Sorry, Adam's being a jerk!"

Aren barely heard her. She'd already fallen into one of Steph's memories.

Aren found herself looking up through Steph's eyes as Adam's face came closer. They were in the auditorium, lights dimmed. Aren could feel Adam's warm breath roll across her face, Steph's face. She wanted to pull away, but this wasn't her memory. She had no control over it.

Soft lips touched hers, prickling with the thin mustache Adam had been trying to grow for months. Steph burst out laughing in the memory. "You really need to shave that thing."

Aren pushed her way free from the memory and turned away from Steph. "I'm sure he'll get over it, being a jerk. He always does."

Steph smiled. "You're right. He does. Doesn't he?"

Aren nodded and swallowed, managing to keep other memories at bay as she stared at her locker. Avoiding eye contact usually helped.

Steph slipped away and Tracy started tugging at Aren's sleeve.

"You listening?"

"Of course I am."

"Okay...where was I?"

"Kaden..."

“Right. I know you’re probably sick of hearing about him, but he’s tall. Not as tall as Brian, but still up there. He has dark hair, almost black, and green eyes. Sea green. At least I think they’re green, maybe hazel. And—”

Aren lost her place with her locker combination for the third time. “Tracy, that’s enough. Slow down a little.” She spun the lock again, letting the notched numbers slide beneath her fingertips. “You only met him this morning.”

Tracy would be talking just as excitedly about another boy in a day or two. *It’s such a waste of energy for both of us.*

“Just wait till you see him. He’s in our fifth period History class. I peeked at his schedule when he wasn’t looking.”

“Oh, I’m *so excited*,” Aren said.

“You could at least try to be for once instead of pretending you’re better than everyone!”

Tracy’s lips tightened, turning the skin white around them.

She only does that when she’s really angry. Aren looked up at Tracy’s wide, hurt filled eyes. The raging emotions of her friend made it harder for Aren to keep her guard up. She fell deeper into Tracy than she had with Steph. For a moment Aren ceased to exist. She was Tracy through and through. Then a memory surfaced.

Tracy rode a bike, Tracy’s dad holding the seat to stabilize her as she pedaled. Aren could feel Tracy’s laughter in her throat as if it were her own. The memory faded.

Tracy sat on the floor in her kitchen, peeking through the door to the living room. Tracy’s mom sat on the couch, crying. Two men sat stiffly across from her in crisp uniforms. Tracy started crying, not knowing what was wrong, but unable to stop. Aren could only watch, unable to comfort her friend.

Tracy huddled in the corner as her stepbrother swung the sock, Aren looking up at him through Tracy’s tear blurred eyes. The sock smacked against her stomach hard, knocking the air out her as the thick piece of soap inside did its damage. It fell again and again. Tracy would have bruises for months, but she would never tell.

Aren watched through Tracy’s eyes as she cracked the popsicle against the edge of the table and handed her stepbrother the other half. Tracy always forgave too easily. Anger boiled up in Aren, not part of the memory, but her own. It cleared her head and brought her back to herself. She’d seen those memories before, but her outrage never lessened.

Aren swallowed back the anger. *Don’t take it out on Tracy.* “I don’t think I’m better—”

“You do too!” Tracy interrupted. “Just because you don’t like anyone, doesn’t mean you can make fun of me when I do.” She gave Aren one last dirty look and stormed away.

Aren watched her friend’s back as it disappeared behind the mass of students walking the hall. *Better than everyone?* Aren wanted to deny it, but she often felt that way.

She sighed and turned back to the lock. It failed to open again. *Of course. My locker hates me. I give up.* She abandoned the locker and walked to class without her textbook, weaving her way through a group of boys who smelled of sweat and too much cologne. She kept her head down, not wanting to meet their eyes.



Aren wasn't surprised to find Tracy chatty and friendly when fifth period rolled around. Her ability to forgive rivaled her ability to talk.

"So Cindy totally dropped her books and punched him in the nose. Right there in the hall. She may get suspended. Did you see Steph this morning? Adam told her he couldn't go to the dance on Friday. Oh, don't worry. They're fine now. Turns out his uncle died and Adam has to fly to Denver. He's a pallbearer. He'd look good in a suit. Did you hear about Tim?"

Aren cracked a smile. "No. Tell me about Tim."

A tall, dark-haired boy walked in during the usual craziness before class. Kids talked over one another. A pushing match was taking place near the back. A greasy faced boy tried to discretely rub something into the already stained brown carpet.

Tracy grabbed Aren's arm with a hiss and pointed him out. He took an empty desk next to Tracy, pulled out a piece of paper, and started doodling.

Aren fought the urge to laugh as she took her seat behind Tracy. *Yeah, a winner this one, bored and drawing before class even starts. He is kinda cute though.* She kept her gift in check as she looked him over. *A little above average height, but not lanky. Thick dark hair falling into his eyes but cut short in the back. Athletic, but not a human ball of meat like some of the jocks.*

Aren's gaze tightened, triggering the full depth of her power, and she saw nothing. *What?* She looked again. Nothing. *That's new.*

Aren swallowed. She'd always seen something.

She looked again. This time she saw a wall, a mirrored wall that curved around Kaden and kept her from getting close. She pushed harder, staring at him now.

Someone off to her right noticed and giggled, whispering. "Looks like Aren digs the new kid."

"Huh? I've never seen her look at anyone for more than a few seconds."

"I know, right? Weird girl."

Aren ignored them. Her mind beat against the mirrored surface only to slide along the slippery wall surrounding him.

There really is something to this guy. And, it struck her, in that moment, that there was something to her as well. She saw it reflected back at her. She'd always known she was different, but she had no idea how unusual her gift was.

She saw into herself as she had always seen into others. Memories of her standing up to Tracy's stepbrother. *I'm childish at times, but strong and like to do the right thing.* Lance held her hand in the third grade. She pulled it away. *I push love away out of fear.* The harder she pushed at Kaden's shell, the deeper she saw into herself. She waded past memories into some part of herself locked away, hidden emotions and fears, Aren's soul.

Aren tried to look away, not wanting to see any more about herself, but was unable to escape the mirrors, her own stark grayish eyes staring back. She fought to be free of herself, but only fell deeper and deeper. *I have power and waste it on trivialities. I have a good heart. I complain that life lacks adventure, but avoid doing anything too difficult. I can be cruel to those who disappoint me...no, no, no. I don't want this.*

Tears blinded her and she pulled away. She stood, trying to flee from the visions inside herself, and collapsed to the floor. Her head hit hard and the edges of her vision blackened, spiraling in until she saw nothing at all.

A momentary panic set in as she realized that she was about to pass out in the middle of class. *How embarrassing.* She fought for a second, but unconsciousness won, flowing over her bruised mind like a warm blanket.

Smells like lavender.



Kaden let his nerves get the better of him his first day at the new high school. *My parents are crazy nomads.* He'd done this at least a dozen times. *Should be easier by now.* He pulled open his Egg, a glowing sphere only he could see. He threw a few images around the interior shell with his thought. His fears bled away as the golden glow comforted him, calmed his nerves.

A month now since the accident. A few bruised organs, a concussion, twenty stitches, and wormholes in my head. Nothing out of the usual.

His first trip to another world occurred the same day as his fall from the ladder. He'd woken in the ambulance, his mother rocking back and forth next to him repeating his name over and over, a blur

of movement and sound. A golden egg surrounded him, the shell rippling with light. He'd reached out to the glowing surface and then Kaden tumbled through darkness, landing naked in a world full of giant tigers and red fireflies.

He returned to the ambulance as a monstrous tiger, silver and black in the moonlight, loped toward him through the tall grass, scattering the sparks of red insects. Kaden had thought they were just drug induced hallucinations. But, his Egg remained even after he'd healed.

Kaden closed his eyes to see clearly. He sat in the middle of the golden sphere like an embryo as circular images flashed and rolled around the interior, a vortex of colored light.

Kaden reached out with his mind and willed one of the circular images forward, so it hovered before him. Kaden pulled it a fraction closer until he could make out the image, a dark blue sky with red nebulae spun above silvery forests as the leaves hissed with their own breath.

He waved it away and pulled another image forward. Mountains of crystal shimmered beneath three suns as giant insects tunneled through the shards like some insane ant farm. Kaden pulled another image around and saw fire rain down from a blood red sky as wispy shadows sped over the blackened ground, eating ash.

Languages and sounds filtered through with the images. Clicking of mandibles, songs of alien birds, the shrieks of shadows without mouths. Sometimes he could taste and smell bits and pieces. Salt, bitter ash, fresh mountain air, ozone. He felt each image as though they were old memories of places he'd once been.

Kaden opened his eyes and glanced around the room. No one even looked his way. *No one ever sees it.* A deep loneliness welled up inside him. *No one.*

Kaden closed his eyes once more and pulled up an image of rust orange mountains edged by a sea the color of radiator coolant, glowing green under the white sun. The chemical fumes stung his eyes. He wiped the tears away.

Kaden selected another image. Tall grass edged by massive trees. Black and silver tigers hunted something that resembled a deer. Kaden shivered despite the warmth of the overfull classroom. That had been his first trip. *Lucky I made it out alive.*

He selected another image. Pure energy exploded away from empty space, beyond hot, beyond the superheated gasses of dying stars. Dangerous, volatile energy swirled, blindingly into the dark. It would be millions of years before this cooled to the point of becoming matter. This was moments after a big bang, moments after this universe collided with another.

Kaden sent the image away, sweat glistening on his face. *Need to remember not to touch that one. That's a death wish.*

A bell rang and he closed down his Egg so he could walk safely to his next class. He had learned that it wasn't wise to walk with his Egg open. He didn't care too much about making friends, but

he swore this school wouldn't know him for running into drinking fountains. *Only three times and everyone thinks you're a freak.*

The paper crinkled in his sweating hands as he pulled his schedule from his bag. *Fifth period...History. Great.* Kaden walked the halls with his head down and snuck in the classroom, taking a quick seat in an open chair and praying the teacher didn't have a seating chart. It was always awkward having to stand up and move.

He pulled out a piece of paper and doodled for a bit, but the temptation to open his Egg proved too much. He tried his best to be as disinteresting as possible as he closed his eyes and the Egg blazed open. The golden shell became a barrier in his imagination that blocked everyone else out. A one-way mirror.

I've traveled to another universe, braved monster tigers, and can't handle a few kids looking at me...sad really. I guess I should at least try to make an effort.

Kaden opened his eyes and looked through the yellow shell at the teacher. History was not his favorite subject. The other students mirrored his boredom in their faces, tinted yellow by the Egg. Tracy looked over at him and smiled. She'd been kind to him earlier, though a bit too talkative. He smiled back at her and thought about how much his ears would hurt if they became friends. She blushed and glanced behind her. His eyes followed hers.

The girl behind Tracy was pretty, despite looking like she'd sprinted to class. Her breathing came hard, her face flushed with exertion. She had a light spattering of freckles across her pale nose and cheeks. Kaden smiled at her too and they locked eyes.

Kaden froze. The maelstrom gray of her eyes widened and Kaden felt himself drawn into them. He lost concentration and his Egg slid closed, returning his world to fluorescent light. *She's even prettier without the yellow.* He noticed that her eyes were two different colors. Her left eye was blue-grey and her right had a hint of green. *I should stop staring.*

He tried to blink and turn his head. Nothing moved. A tingling sensation crawled down his spine, information being sent to muscles, but not processed. The teacher's words turned dull and distant, pulsing in the background like the heartbeat of the universe, subtle, near silent.

Kaden felt a warmth flow out of Aren and into him and then back, like the waves of the ocean, in and out. Nothing else existed.

The girl's stormy eyes watered and tears flowed down her cheeks. Kaden tried to reach out to her, offer comfort, but his body still refused to move. He watched her cry for what felt like hours and his heart broke that he was unable to help her. Finally, she stood slow and graceful. As she stood, her eyes closed and the connection broke.

The world came rushing in. The teacher's voice grated against Kaden's heightened sensations, sounding louder and harsher than it was. "Aren, are you okay? Where are you going?"

The fluorescent lights burned too bright, stinging his now sensitive eyes. The air conditioner blew icy dry wind over his pinpricked skin and he shivered. As Kaden rubbed a hand over his gritty eyelids, the girl folded to the floor.

Her head bounced off the hard tile twice. Her eyes flitted open for a second and Kaden dropped his hand as he felt a hint of the connection, but she closed them again and the link broke once more. Classmates rushed to her side and the teacher yelled out commands that no one heeded.

"Stay seated! Calm down, everyone! Tom, hit the page button. Stay seated!"

In the midst of the chaos, Kaden found himself surrounded by the comforting glow of his Egg. He looked out through the golden sphere to where the fallen girl lay and his mouth fell open. *That's weird.* He hadn't pulled his Egg open. *Did she?*



Aren spun in silence, out of control, unable to focus on anything. Colors flashed around her as she spiraled through the air, dizzy. She tried to find balance, to reestablish order. The colors slowed, became faces, eyes, souls.

Every person she knew turned toward her, their bodiless faces bobbing in the air, eyes locked on her. Anger, fear, and hate filled those faces. She had violated their trust, looked too deep. They wanted her dead because she knew what they kept hidden.

The faces moved closer, suffocating. They moaned in pain. Spit running from their open mouths. Their faces pressed against her, pushing down heavier and heavier, trapping her as they dragged her deep into the ocean of their pain.

"No! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to!" She screamed at them hoping they'd understand.

"Too deep. Too deep." The faces moaned and chanted. Wet lips touched her ear, her face, cold as they spoke of her betrayal over and over.

Aren pulled away in revulsion. She had to find someone who would listen. "Tracy!" Aren saw her friend's face swim through the madness toward her. Tracy's eyes were upturned and her mouth open. "Tracy, help me!"

The eyes turned toward her, but the color was wrong. They were black, so black and lifeless, like the eyes of an octopus or cockroach. Aren screamed and tried to swim through the faces away from Tracy, but a mass of heads blocked her path. They bumped into her, spinning her back toward her best friend and those black, lifeless eyes.

Aren shivered as Tracy's slack jaw moved slowly, "Too deep, too deep." Her voice sounded animal and masculine. Oily black spittle dribbled down her chin and onto Aren's face, the dark mucus so cold it burned where it touched.

Aren screamed. She felt herself sliding along the slippery wet faces toward Tracy's black eyes and dribbling mouth. She reached out one last time for any help. "Please!"

Kaden's face swam out of the crushing pile and slipped between Aren and Tracy. Silver eyes turned toward Aren, mirrors. She felt herself reflected, pushing what had been slipping away back into her soul. She awoke to find the school nurse frantically shaking her.

"Are you ok?"

Aren replied by vomiting on the floor until nothing was left, until she felt somewhat clean again.



"Keep her steady." The nurse put a hand on the board Aren was strapped to.

Kaden looked down at the girl he carried. Her short brown hair, not reaching her shoulders, framed a small round face. Kaden could see blue veins pulsing beneath her pale skin and her freckles stood out more in the natural light that flowed through the skylights in the hall. Her short and thin frame made her easy to carry, like carrying a child. But her eyes hadn't seemed childlike, too wise and old to fit with her teenage body.

Just thinking about them made his legs weak and he nearly dropped her. The other boy grunted as the weight shifted. "Sorry, man, just slipped." Kaden forced the memory of her eyes to the back of his mind.

They managed to lay her down somewhat gently on the small table-bed in the office, paper crinkling as her weight pushed the board against the plastic. The room smelled of disinfectant and alcohol with a faint hint of cotton. Kaden wrinkled his nose as he thought of his hospital visit a month ago and the craziness that had followed him since.

The nurse dismissed them back to class as soon as they put Aren down. The other boy shot off in the wrong direction, but Kaden wanted to stay as long as possible.

"Is she going to be okay?"

"She'll be fine. Just fainted. Not enough skin on her bones, no wonder."

"I was just worried about her is all." Kaden tried to sound as sincere as possible and found himself more sincere than he expected.

The nurse's look softened. "She's your friend then?" She started to undo the Velcro bands that held Aren down.

“Yes, Ma’am.” He lied and felt ashamed for his pretense. *Why do I care?*

“Okay, you can stay for a while, but—”

Aren screamed and writhed on the table.

The nurse jumped at Aren’s spastic body. “Help me. She’s going to fall off!”

The nurse grappled the kicking legs, leaving Kaden to wrangle with flailing arms. He caught them and put his weight down, placing his chest on hers in order to keep her from falling. The warmth of her body beneath him made him blush. He tried to focus on her face instead of the softness beneath his chest. Her eyes shot open, but they fluttered around wildly, unseeing.

“Aren. Aren.” He tried to get her attention. Her two toned gray eyes locked on his and humanity flowed back into her. Her eyelids slid closed once more. She calmed and the seizure ceased, but she continued to shiver uncontrollably.

“Go to the office! Get help! Call 911!” The nurse yelled at him.

Kaden pulled himself from Aren and ran to the front office.

When he returned, the nurse caught him at the door. She looked shaken, but smiled.

“She’s okay now, but a bit of a mess. I don’t think she’ll be wanting any company at the moment. Go back to class. I’ll let you know how she’s doing.”

Kaden opened his mouth to protest, but had no real argument behind it. He went back to class to wait for word about a friend he didn’t really have. He was more worried about this stranger than he’d ever been for anyone else in his life.

Tracy jumped to her feet and wrapped her arms around him when he arrived in a close hug. The thin veil of order the teacher had managed to establish shattered as everyone questioned him about Aren.

Wow. She has people who really care about her. Even the teacher was more interested in his story than continuing class. Kaden indulged them with all the details he felt safe sharing.

Tracy grabbed his hand when he mentioned Aren’s seizure. Despite himself, Kaden didn’t pull away. Her palm warmed against his, though he couldn’t help but wonder how the cool, slender grip of another’s hand would feel in its place.