

CHAPTER 1

Carthis Dacoro walked away from the lunch counter with his tray in hand when he felt a foot bump into his shin as something hit his tray. His food went toppling over. Before it could hit the ground, Carthis waved his hand and a small gust of wind put all of the items back on the tray while also keeping him from falling over. Using the wind, Carthis pushed himself back to a standing position and returned the tray to his hands. He glanced over to see Karn Stoneheart laughing at him. Karn was the top of the class and, in the eyes of the entire school, a paragon of proper elemental behavior. Carthis saw Karn for what he truly was: an egotistical bully who got pleasure from other people's suffering. Unfortunately, Karn was also a master of deception, and no one except his peers believed he was anything but the perfect citizen.

Carthis stomped over to the table where Kalli Stormweaver sat with her lunch. He slammed his tray down on the table, plopped down in his chair, and buried his hands in his face as he contained a scream of frustration. The School of Highly Gifted Students was considered the best primary education institution in the world - an opinion challenged by no one. No one, except for Carthis. He was more gifted, in several ways, than any of the students there, but despite his abilities, he had not been allowed to advance to a higher level. Instead, he was forced to drudge through the mundane and boring tasks that were assigned to him while dealing with people like Karn.

"I know you're not happy about being here for another two weeks," Kalli told him. "Just tough it out, and you'll be able to move up."

That was easy for her to say when it wasn't Karn's personal mission to torment her as much as possible. His purple

eyes stared at Kalli through his fingers. Her golden hair with its slight curl fell like a gentle waterfall around her angular face and rested on her shoulders. Light freckles dotted her cheeks. Her eyes were a shade somewhere between blue and teal, though he wasn't quite sure what to call it. Those eyes made his stomach leap and his heart attempt to break his ribs. He couldn't look at her without getting a little distracted from whatever was happening, a fact that may or may not have gotten him in trouble with some teachers on more than a few occasions. The allure of the color was not the source of his fascination. Something about her eyes made him feel like he mattered. Almost every person Carthis knew outside of his family met his gaze with disdain, judgment, or hatred. Such was the penalty of being part of a shamed family. Kalli, however, did not treat him like dirt. Instead, she befriended him when they were too little to understand the social constructs of their people.

"That's not the point, Kalli. Schools are designed to teach people. I know everything there is to learn here."

Kalli groaned. "There's more to life than the elements, Carthis. Art and history are vitally important to who we are. Math and science are important too. If you really want to make the world a better place, you would understand that. Maybe you should actually read your books once in a while."

Carthis rolled his eyes and shook his head. Being a historian was a worthless profession, especially for someone as gifted and powerful as him. He could split the ground into a fissure that could devour the entire school in the blink of an eye, yet the teachers taunted and tormented him with the menial tasks of making a simple stone cup and filling it with water.

"Kalli, we can control the elements of nature. Science is largely irrelevant against that kind of power. And as for history,

there's nothing to talk about. About four thousand years ago we adopted pacifism, and the world has never changed since."

"I give up," Kalli said as she tossed her hands in the air. "You are unbelievable. Do you know that?"

"I'm not unbelievable. The school should just focus on what a student can do rather than trying to make sure everyone is at the same basic level. It's a broken system."

Kalli groaned. How many times had she heard that? "Even if the system is broken, you are a part of it, and that means you need to live like you're a part of it. Coming of Age is in two weeks, Carthis. You've been debating this decision for years, just like the rest of us. Unlike the rest of us though, you still haven't given any indication about what you want to do with your life."

Carthis frowned at her. They had talked about this. Many times. She knew where he stood on it, yet she kept bringing it back to this point.

"How am I supposed to choose right now what I want to do for the rest of my life? We are about to turn sixteen. How can anyone expect us to decide the only career we will have for the next two hundred and thirty years? Especially when we don't want to do any of the options that are available to us?"

A deep and cruel voice answered the question for him. "It's easy. You do nothing, crawl away into the little hole you call a home, and stay out of everyone's way."

"No one asked you, Karn," Kalli said. She glared at him, which Carthis appreciated.

"Maybe I should sit here today," he replied, staring at Carthis. "Since I'm the head of the class, just being around me might help to shred some of that disgrace you have."

"She said go away," Carthis snapped.

Being cruel or mean disgusted Carthis. He hated every aspect of it. Yet with someone like Karn, it seemed to be the only attitude capable of blasting through his mountain-sized ego. Karn always brought out the worst in Carthis. In fact, Karn always brought out the worst in most people. If nothing else pleased him about the Coming of Age ceremony, he at least could take refuge in the fact that it would likely be the last time he ever had to see or talk to Karn again.

"Brave, for someone of no importance. Maybe instead of trying to figure out what to do with your life you should figure out how to embrace the shame on your family and just disappear. It's not like anyone will miss you. Kalli, why do you hang around this trash all day? You realize people think you're friends, right?"

"We are friends, Karn."

"Really? Wow. I always just assumed you were being nice. Kind of puts a damper on my plans," Karn said. "I was hoping we might get to know each other a little better. After all, you are the best looking girl in our class. I'm just not sure I would want anyone to know I was with a girl who made friends of rejects."

"Karn, I wouldn't be with you for any reason ever. You are a swine, and I would never let myself get even remotely close to someone as horrible as you."

"Strong willed and friends with trash? I guess I'll pass," Karn said with a smirk. "Now that I think about it, I guess you're not all that good looking."

Carthis's teeth pressed on each other to the point of pain. His left hand clinched into a fist while his fingers spread out on his right hand. Kalli spotted the tiny bolts of lightning dancing in Carthis's open hand.

"Carthis!" she said.

He ignored her and stood to his feet. Someone had to put Karn in his place. One blast. Full power. That's all it would take. He could do it faster than anyone else in the room, and no one could stop him. Then Karn would never insult anyone again. He would be reduced to a pile of whimpering flesh, too scared and too overpowered to fight back. Carthis felt an arm grab his hand, and he turned his head. Kalli stared at him, shaking her head. She was right, of course. Pacifism was the absolute law on the entire planet. Violence was met with swift and harsh punishment, and Carthis had no desire to live in the Exile's Territory or be shipped off-world to die on a barren planet. He sighed and let his charging powers fade out of existence. He sat back down, still boiling with anger, but in control. Mostly.

"Worthless and a coward," Karn said.

Karn shook his head and walked away. Carthis felt a burst of rage pounding on his temples. Kalli's firm grip on his arm was all that kept him from jumping out of chair and dropping Karn.

"Just ignore him, Carthis."

How much longer could he do that? Every day Karn found some way to take a jab. It was infuriating. It was unwarranted. It was unfair. But such was the story of Carthis's life. Dacoro. The name of shame. Given to his family so long ago the reason was forgotten. Taking Karn down wasn't just about putting an end to his bullying. Carthis had to prove he was worth more than nothing. To prove he didn't deserve the name of shame. He had to prove the whole world wrong about him. Only then would anyone treat him with the respect he deserved.

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Carthis roamed the halls for the last ten minutes of his lunch period. There was a certain peace to walking aimlessly. Thoughts could overwhelm him. An escape from the reality around him. This time, though, that didn't help. His jaw tightened as Karn's latest harassment played in his head. Kalli was right. He had to learn to control himself. Two more weeks. That's all he had to get through, and then he would be free of Karn forever. Maybe he could talk to the headmaster and have his classes rearranged to avoid Karn until the Coming of Age ceremony. He couldn't fight Karn if he wasn't there.

"Watch where you're going!"

Carthis stopped in his tracks and sighed as he shook his head. Of course. How could it not happen? Of course the exact moment he decided to avoid Karn was the moment an encounter with him was unavoidable. This time Karn's target was a first year student. Carthis's blood boiled. It was one thing for Karn to insult him directly. Though it felt nearly impossible, those could be shrugged off. But to see him treating someone else like dirt? Especially someone so much younger and defenseless? Restraint would have to wait. It was time for someone to teach Karn a lesson.

"Leave him alone!" Carthis yelled.

Karn turned his head towards Carthis and rolled his eyes.

"Go away, Nobody. Don't have time for you right now."

"Then make time."

The people with Karn all turned their gaze toward Carthis. Dozens of widened eyes stared at him. No student ever directly confronted Karn. Karn was the head of their class. There was no one in higher standing with the teachers and staff. To stand against Karn meant taking the blame, regardless of who was in the wrong.

"You've got a big mouth," Karn said. "But you can't do anything to me. Sage Stormweaver has already told me I'm his next protégé. I'm the best in this school, and in two weeks, I'm going to be studying under the best elemental that has ever lived. You are a worthless person from a disgraced family."

Karn put his hand on Carthis's chest and pushed with enough force to make him step back. Carthis smirked.

"You have no idea what I could do to you, Karn. You think you're some kind of superstar who should get whatever he wants. All you care about is yourself and your reputation. You are so full of yourself, you can't even see the truth staring you in the face."

"And what is that?"

"That in every way possible, I am better than you."

Karn and a few of the onlookers erupted in laughter. Karn was supposedly the best student in their grade. Karn had perfect scores in every class. Carthis, on the other, barely passed every class. How were they to know his academic standing was by choice?

"Someone needs to put you in your place, Karn. I'm not going to let you run over anyone else in this school, ever again. So back off and shut up before you force me to shut you up."

Karn gave Carthis another small push. The bully waited a moment to see what would happen. When Carthis didn't respond, he laughed.

"All talk and no action. You're nothing but a coward with empty threats. It's a wonder your mother even sticks around. Your father was right to abandon you."

The crackle of lightning filled the air for half a second and then vanished. From the spectators' perspectives, there was a loud pop and a flash of light. Before the light, Carthis and Karn were inches from each other. After the flash, Karn was on

the ground twenty feet away, curled in a fetal position, and whimpering in pain. Gasps echoed through the hall as people realized Karn was hurt.

“Carthis!”

It was the voice of the headmaster, Nuvek Frost. The other students turned to each other and whispered, some looking at Carthis and others at the headmaster.

“Come with me now,” the headmaster demanded.

Carthis couldn’t imagine how this would play out. What he did was illegal in the highest possible way. It broke the laws of pacifism. His reasons didn’t matter. As they walked through the halls of the school, he prepared his defense. It would be an uphill battle to convince someone what he did was right, but he would stick to his decision. He didn’t regret what he had done to Karn. Someone had to stop the bully, but the thought of exile shook him. Would his mother be able to handle losing another son? He could only hope exile wasn’t his punishment.