

THE CHOSEN

T A R A N M A T H A R U



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
NEW YORK

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*To my readers, for all your support.
This book could not have been written without you.*

THEY WATCHED FROM THE SHADOWS. Watched the people of the world going about their lives, unaware of the insidious gaze that followed.

So many candidates to choose from. Such potential.

But still, they hesitated. For this would likely be the last of their contenders, and it would not do to hurry. So, they waited. Brooded.

Until they were sure.

A boy. Unremarkable in so many ways, yet somehow ideal for the contest he would soon be doomed to enter. His mind held the knowledge to appreciate their game. Understand it. Perhaps even . . . win it.

He might very well die at the first hurdle. But he had the potential for greatness.

Yes. Him.

They chose: *Cade Carter*.

CHAPTER 1

Place:Unknown

Date:Unknown

Year:Unknown

THE CREATURE CIRCLED BELOW CADE LIKE A SHARK AROUND a sinking ship. It leaped for him, its jaws snapping just below the narrow ledge he stood on. He shuffled back, pressing his shoulders into the cold stone of the canyon wall. There was an eight-foot drop to the ground, and the bare earth had been churned to a thick sludge by the pacing of the monster beneath him.

It knuckled the ground with sinewy arms, growling at him like a dog fighting over a bone. The beast was already caked thickly in mud, and the rusty brown leather of its skin blended well with the rock formations Cade had woken among just a few hours ago. A slaverling mouth gaped, the long needle points of its teeth glistening with saliva. But it was its eyes that scared him the most: twin spheres of obsidian that bulged from its sockets.

The opposite wall of the canyon was perhaps a stone's

throw away from him, stretching up into the sky and casting the ravine Cade occupied in shadow. He was perched on a rock shelf, just above a narrow corridor of earth that formed the canyon bottom. The gully continued to his left and right, stretching in both directions to form a rough passage that curved out of sight, though he doubted he'd manage to run far before the creature tore him to shreds.

As he watched, the monster began to claw at the rock face, perhaps hoping it would crumble and send Cade plummeting down. Maybe if he remained still, it would give up and move on in search of easier prey. He ignored it, trying to figure out how he had ended up in this sorry mess.

The last thing Cade remembered was lying in his bed at his new "school for troubled youths," staring out of the locked windows at the moonlit sky. His thoughts had been tinged with misery at the time.

The stash of stolen laptops his trust-fund roommate had hidden beneath his bed. The arrest, the police interrogation. His court-appointed lawyer, who could barely remember his name. His mother, crying, and the confusion and shame in his father's eyes.

The ultimatum the judge had given him. One year of "alternative" school, or Cade would be sent to a juvenile detention center. His parents had agreed, though it devastated them to know his chances of being accepted to a top university would be ruined. That was six months ago now. Six more to go.

And then he wasn't in the dorm anymore.

It had been too immediate for him to be dreaming. One moment he was looking at the moon, and the next he was

standing on a ledge in the depths of a rocky canyon. Before he could give this surreal turn of events more thought, the creature had appeared, slinking out from behind the boulders in the narrow passage that ran along the bottom of the chasm.

He was pressed against a rock wall covered in a fine red powder, but beneath that there was little purchase for climbing. It was smooth like marble, with the orange glow of what he assumed was the setting sun visible in the swath of sky forty feet above him.

And it worried Cade that the sun was setting. He had never tried to sleep standing up before, and the ledge was too thin for him to lie down. But if he sat and dangled his feet over the edge, he would be within reach of the monster below. This situation didn't seem to have a happy ending.

It also didn't help that a jagged rock was pressed uncomfortably into his spine. Just his luck, the rock wall was smooth everywhere but the space he had to lean against. He decided that if these were to be his last moments, they might as well be comfortable. The ledge extended a few feet across, so he shuffled to his left.

He winced as his movement agitated the creature, its low growling turning to yelps of excitement as it jumped at him. Its thick black nails scrabbled at the rock, trying to find a foothold so it could reach the thin ledge.

Each time Cade looked below, he felt the bile rise in his throat. He was trying to think clearly despite the frantic pulse of his heart in his temples. It was all he could do to stop himself from hyperventilating.

Cade took a deep breath and turned his head to the side.

The protrusion was a black stone embedded in the wall, tapered to a rough point. It seemed out of place, a drop of sable in the sea of rust.

He slid his right hand up and took hold of it, if only to help anchor him to his perch. But the edges were so sharp that if he gripped it any harder it would likely slice into his palm. The stone wiggled slightly as he pulled, and the tiniest hint of hope entered Cade's mind, though he wasn't sure what he would do with it yet.

It only took him a few minutes to lever it from its root in the wall. It was almost relaxing to fixate his mind on such a simple task. When the rock came loose, a fine shower of dust settled on the creature's head, leaving it sneezing and coughing.

The rock seemed to be made from volcanic glass, shaped like a teardrop. The thicker end was caked in dust, allowing Cade a firm grip at the base. The tapered end was smooth with a chipped, rough-hewn edge. Stranger and stranger. It looked for all the world like a Stone Age axe.

Cade banged the rock against the wall, trying to make a dent, a handhold. More dust rained down on the monster, who pawed at its eyes, snorting. Cade smiled and continued, the crack of stone against stone echoing from wall to wall. The shower of dust became an avalanche of debris.

Cade laughed aloud, scraping his arms up and down as if he were making a snow angel, the gritty dust sticking to the sweat on his neck. Soon the marbled walls were bare and smooth, revealing a surface of light brown stone beneath.

His entertainment was short-lived. Beneath, the creature

rubbed itself back and forth in the mud and was soon rid of the irritant. A long, forked tongue slipped out of its mouth and licked at its eyes like a lizard, clearing away the film of dirt.

It was a disgusting monster, looking for all the world as if a mad scientist had spliced the skeletal structure of an ape into the body of a primordial deep-sea fish. Where this abomination had come from, Cade couldn't even begin to guess. But the question of what it was didn't matter at that moment. All he wanted was to get away from it.

His fun with the powder over, Cade considered throwing the rock at the creature. Perhaps the blow would send the beast scurrying away and he could make a break down the corridor in the opposite direction.

It was then that he noticed the pile of dust that had gathered on the ledge around his feet. And the shadows of a new idea formed in his mind.

But even as the plan formed, he cast it from his thoughts. It was a stupid idea; the monster would tear him to pieces.

An hour later, his legs began to cramp up. He tried standing on one leg at a time, but that just made it worse for the other. Crouching had helped, but it had forced him to lean precariously over the empty space, leaving him off-balance, much to the excitement of the creature below. It was sitting and staring like a starved hunting dog, only stirring when Cade moved himself.

He was exhausted, thirsty, and terrified, knowing eventually he would have to jump off and meet his fate. There was no rescue party coming, that seemed obvious.

But if he was going to die, it would be on his own terms.

He was going to give this monstrosity the most difficult meal of its life. Cade placed his foot behind the dust piled on the ledge, terror throbbing through his body with each pounding beat of his heart. He had no choice. No other options.

“I hope you choke on me!” he yelled. The creature looked up, startled by his voice. He kicked the dust, sending a spray of red into its eyes. Before he could even see what effect it had, he jumped.

He landed awkwardly, jarring his ankle on the ground, shooting pains flaring up his leg. So much for his hope of out-running the beast.

It had covered its face with its clawed hands, and Cade swung his rock, letting out a garbled scream of fear and revulsion. His blow glanced off the monster’s head, poorly aimed and with little weight behind it. Still, the creature rolled away from him, yowling in pain.

For a moment Cade stared at the rock, surprised at his own daring. Fear pulsed through him, the reality of life and death hitting home for what felt like the very first time.

Even as he prepared to run, the beast sprang, slamming headfirst into the wall next to him. Cade tumbled onto his back. The creature was still blinded by the dust, grasping for him as it hissed its displeasure.

He scrambled away, slipping and sliding in the mud, horror choking him. The monster heard the slap of his feet and lunged again, this time landing just beside him. Cade bellowed and flailed the rock, his vision filled with needle teeth.

The sharp tip of the stone sliced deep into the creature’s foot, pinning it to the ground before the beast wrenched itself

free with a squeal of pain. Its tongue darted over its face, and Cade readied himself, even as the inky black eyes fixed upon him once more. The creature took a tentative step forward, then yowled as it put pressure on its injured foot.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Cade backed away from it. When the creature turned its tongue to the bloody wound, he ran.

Ran through the agony of a twisted ankle, fueled by the adrenaline pumping through him in wave after wave of fear. On and on, down the gully, high walls looming on either side. It was only when he stumbled and fell that he stopped, waiting for the monster to give chase at any moment.

Cade shuddered, inhaling with deep sobbing breaths. Finally, when he had calmed, he was able to think once more.

The beast seemed to have given up on him, for now at least.

So he limped on, gripping his hand axe as if it was his lifeline.

Perhaps it was.

CHAPTER 2

Six months earlier

Cade shuffled down the line of boys in the cafeteria, careful not to meet anyone's eye. He could feel them watching him, their gazes sweeping up and down, seeking weakness.

What they would see was a skinny, light-skinned Indian kid, though they wouldn't know his father was white.

Not short, but not tall either, with amber eyes and wavy hair, cut in a tight-back-and-sides cut. A military cut, one that he hoped would make him look as tough as all the other "troubled youths" at the school with him.

Lucky for him, he had no glasses or smattering of acne to give away the inner nerd hiding just beneath the surface.

He tried to convince himself he looked no more vulnerable than the other teens he'd seen at intake that day. Yet, try as he might, he could not keep the cafeteria tray from shaking in his hands.

His blue uniform itched. It was the “therapeutic” boarding school uniform, though it felt more like a prisoner’s to him. Looking at the high walls outside the facility, he couldn’t see much difference.

“What you want?”

Cade looked up at the snaggle-toothed kid in front of him, a hairnet on his head, ladle in hand. Cade pointed at the mashed potatoes, peas, and what he assumed was meat loaf, and the kid dutifully slapped them onto his tray.

The cafeteria reminded him of the gymnasium at his old school, but there were no basketball hoops on the walls here. Only straight-backed drill sergeant-like counselors, their eyes scanning the tables.

Cade quickly realized he should have been planning where he was going to sit. Most of the tables were full, and the air filled with the loud banter of kids who knew each other well. How could he sit down in the midst of all that?

Cade hesitated, searching desperately for somewhere neutral to sit. There were no empty tables, but he spotted a kid he recognized from the intake. A gangly, pockmarked guy who had cried silently through it all as the counselors shouted at them to face the wall and shuffle sideways toward their rooms.

The kid was sitting alone on one end of his table, while a trio ignored him on the other. Cade realized he had taken too long to find a seat. He didn’t want to look intimidated, even if he was.

Adrenaline coursing through him, he walked the gauntlet of tables, his ears filled with the shouts, laughs, and belches

of the guys on either side. It felt like an eternity before he reached the other newcomer, who startled as Cade dropped his tray opposite him.

Cade nodded, then turned to his food. He soon realized yet another mistake. He'd left his cutlery behind.

"Damn," Cade muttered under his breath.

He had to go back. He went to stand, but suddenly a plastic spoon clattered onto his tray.

Cade looked up.

"Cade," he said.

"Jim." The kid gave him a tentative smile.

Cade felt himself relax, and he dug into his mashed potatoes with the spoon. They were watery and unseasoned, not to mention that Cade wasn't hungry. He ate regardless.

An awkward silence filled the space between the two.

"Why'd your parents put you here?" Cade blurted, the words spilling from his mouth before he could stop them. Was that rude to ask? It was too late now.

Jim looked up, surprised.

"I . . . a lot of things," he began. He paused, looking shamefacedly at his tray. "But the last one did it. I threw a party," he finally said. "Our place got wrecked. My parents didn't like *that*."

Cade gulped. "Sorry," he muttered. He racked his brain, trying to think of something else to say. Instead, he filled his mouth with another spoonful of bland mush.

"Well, hello there." Cade felt a hand clasp his shoulder, and his heart sank.

Here we go.

“Making friends already?”

Cade looked up, taking in the new arrival. He had a shaved head, with cool blue eyes and a pout to his full lips.

Cade’s heart sank even further as he took in a bruise on the boy’s cheek and scabs on his knuckles. The kid had been fighting. Cade had never been in a fight in his life.

Fear seized his throat, even as he searched for an appropriate answer. Any words would come out in a croak, so he remained silent.

“Nothing to say?” the boy said, taking a seat beside Jim, as another kid plonked his tray down beside Cade.

Cade turned and felt his heart thundering in his chest. The other kid was heavysset, with small piggish eyes and the beginnings of patchy stubble on his ruddy cheeks.

It was only then that Cade realized that the first guy was talking to Jim, not him. This made him feel a bit better, but the relief dissipated in an instant as the ruddy kid beside him cleared his throat, then licked his spoon purposefully, making sure Cade was watching. Cade felt his stomach twist as the boy reached over and dug it into Cade’s meat loaf.

“You were just making introductions, right?” the newcomer next to Jim said, shifting unnecessarily close to him. “You’re Jim, he’s Cade. Aren’t you going to ask our names?”

“Wh-what’s your name?” Jim stuttered.

“I’m Finch, and this here is Gobbler,” the first guy replied. “We call him that on account of his appetite.”

Gobbler stuck his spoon into Cade’s mashed potatoes demonstratively before slopping them into his mouth. He chewed loudly before going in for more.

“You’re new, and we didn’t want you starting off on the wrong foot,” Finch said, putting a conspiratorial arm around Jim. He had pitched his voice to a stage whisper so that Cade could hear.

“This guy, he’s not right for you. Apu here can sell you a candy bar at his convenience store, but he’s not your friend. Get what I’m saying?”

He tightened his grip around Jim’s shoulders, and the boy stared down at his plate, avoiding Cade’s eyes.

Cade felt the anger rise in him, like hot bile. Apu . . . from *The Simpsons*. He had been dismissed by this boy like some caricature, to be ignored. Avoided.

But the fear that had kept him silent before remained, and all he could do was grit his teeth.

“You should sit with us,” Finch said, placing a hand on the back of Jim’s neck. “Like, now.”

Cade could see the wheels turning in Jim’s head, calculating the risk of turning Finch down. Then he gave a nod, his shoulders hunched.

Finch looked up at Cade, his lip curling with disdain.

“Go find somewhere else to exist.”

Cade stood, but when he went to pick up his tray, Gobbler slammed a palm down on top of it.

“Leave it,” Finch snapped.

Cade felt the blood rush to his cheeks. Fear and anger twisted in his stomach like a coiled snake. His last school hadn’t been like this.

Oh, he’d experienced racism before. The disapproving stares when his mother and father went out together. The “random” selections at airport security. But nothing like this.

For the briefest moment he wanted to stand up for himself. Wasn't that what people said you should do with bullies? But this was a new school. He wasn't that guy.

Finch placed his clenched fists on the table, then looked up at Cade with an anger in his eyes that Cade could hardly believe was possible.

"I think he wants to say something, Finch," Gobbler mumbled through a mouthful.

But Cade didn't.

Instead, he hurried away, even as shame at his cowardice sent blood rushing to his cheeks.

CHAPTER

3

Place:Unknown

Date:Unknown

Year:Unknown

IT HUNG IN THE AIR IN FRONT OF CADE LIKE A GLAZED SHEET of glowing glass. An opaque barrier bisected the chasm, disappearing into the red-dust walls on either side and extending up to their summits.

Cade had almost run into it, for it had appeared suddenly in front of him, stopping him in his tracks.

He had been staring at it for the past few minutes, steeling himself to touch its surface. There was no other way out—the creature lay in the other direction.

Cade tried not to ask himself what the barrier was, or who had created it and why. He just needed to get as far away from the injured creature as possible. It could be following him, even now.

He extended a trembling finger and prodded the sheet as if it were a sleeping giant. The barrier was smooth. Smooth and chilly, like wet-slicked ice; as soon as he put pressure on

it, his finger slipped to the side. It was strange to the touch, and he pulled his hand away, inspecting his finger for frost-bite. But his fingertip wasn't even cold.

Suddenly, as if it had never been there at all, the barrier was gone.

"What . . . the . . . hell?" Cade said slowly, waving his hand through where the wall had been.

This was too strange. He tried to stay calm, think logically, even as his heart raged in his chest. He had no choice but to follow the path; see where it led.

Cade rounded a shallow bend and saw that the passage widened ahead. He stopped, confused. Rubbed his eyes, looked again.

The chasm ahead of him appeared almost exactly like the area he had started in. The same ledge—the same rocky outcrop opposite.

Had he gone in a circle? But the path he had taken was relatively straight. There was no way this was possible.

Stranger still, the wall above the ledge was caked with dust, and the same kind of rock he'd used as a hand axe was there too, protruding like a black jewel. This was all the same . . . but somehow different. As if the entire area had been sculpted to the same exact design as where he had been before. But how was that even possible?

He heard a bellow. Loud and far off, like a wounded bull. Only—it sounded human.

Cade didn't think. Instead, he hurried in its direction, cursing the twisted ankle that sent shooting pains up his leg. The yelling only got more frantic as he neared it, but he didn't care.

Anything was better than being alone in this desolate hellscape.

Then he saw them. Another monster, crouched in front of a tall kid, his back against another slick barrier like the one Cade had seen before. He wore only his underwear, using his uniform as a matador's cape in one hand, his other in a balled fist.

Strangest of all, Cade recognized him, even in the shadows of the chasm. The pale blond hair was unmistakable, as were the broad, muscled shoulders. Eric. Another kid from his school.

If Eric had seen Cade, he gave no sign, instead punching at the beast's face as its claws tangled in the cloth. As he did so, the creature darted forward, and the boy barely managed to evade its snapping fangs.

Cade wanted to turn back, but he knew that once the monster was done with Eric, it'd be after him. His best chance at defeating it would be when it was distracted.

So he charged, his heart pounding as he held the hand axe high.

Ten steps away.

Five.

He slipped in the wet mud, slamming onto his back. Ahead of him, the monster spun with a screech, its black eyes narrowed. It leaped onto him, and Cade lashed out, yelling with fear and desperation.

His hand thrust into its open gullet, the length of the hand axe all that stopped the teeth from clamping on his wrist.

The creature choked and screeched, its claws sinking into

his chest, the points breaking the skin. Blood ran down his arm, the stone's tip slicing the roof of the beast's mouth. Desperate, Cade kicked out, and the creature reared up, wrenching the stone from its maw.

Cade swung blindly, screaming as the monster's head whipped toward him. But the bite never came. Instead, the beast was yanked back, blood-flecked saliva spattering his face as it choked, crooked claws grasping at its throat.

Eric had whipped his uniform's belt around the beast's scrawny neck, and now he heaved on it, falling to his knees.

Cade watched as Eric's knuckles whitened, tightening the loop of leather as he pulled back on both ends. The monster's black eyes bulged as if they might burst from their sockets. Then there was a snap, and the eyes glazed over in death.

For a moment they remained that way, Cade panting on the ground, Eric holding the creature upright, the belt still in his hands. Then he let it fall, and stood. He kicked the corpse derisively and looked at Cade.

"Thank you," Eric said.

Cade stared back. It was the first time he had ever heard Eric speak. Not in the entire six months he had known him.

Eric had kept to himself, back at school, and most of the other kids were too scared to approach him. There were even rumors that he had killed someone. Cade only knew his real name because a teacher had said it in class once.

"You're . . . you're welcome," Cade stuttered as Eric helped him to his feet.

Eric craned his neck to see the back of his shoulder. Cade saw furrows in his flesh where the monster had managed to

catch him with its talons. The marks didn't seem too deep and had already started crusting over, leaving a trail of dried blood down his back. Eric winced as he prodded at them with a large finger.

"It was fast," he said, kicking his downed opponent again. "I didn't think I had a chance."

Cade nodded dumbly as Eric fished his uniform from the muddy ground and began to put it on.

It had been clever to use the uniform to tangle the monster's claws. As a result, the top half had been shredded, so Eric tied the arms in a knot around his waist, remaining bare chested.

For a moment they stood there awkwardly.

"You're from school too," Eric finally said.

"Yeah," Cade said, holding out his hand.

"Eric," Eric replied, smiling at the formality. "You're Cade, right?"

Cade nodded, and Eric's big hand enveloped Cade's as they shook.

It was strange only to introduce himself now. They'd been in the same classes and sat near each other for so long.

"You know what this place is?" Cade asked, hopeful.

Eric shook his head.

"Maybe we're dead," he mumbled.

"Like . . . there was a fire or something?" Cade asked. "We died in our sleep?"

"Yeah." Eric shrugged, bending down and unraveling the belt from around the monster's neck. "Maybe this is hell, and this is one of the devils. It looks like a demon to me."

Cade stared at it, his gaze skipping from its translucent needle teeth to the inky black eyes.

"Its head looks like one of those deep-sea fish, you know? Like a viperfish, I think they're called?"

Eric shook his head, as if he'd never heard of them. "A viper." He shrugged. "As good a name as any."

He looked down the chasm where Cade had come from and gave him an inquisitive look.

"Any vipers where you woke up?"

"I fought one off," Cade said. "I hope that was all of them."

Eric looked impressed, even a little disbelieving, but Cade felt no pride at what he had done. It had been a desperate, frantic affair. He didn't like remembering how close he had come to death.

"Glad you can hold your own," Eric said, patting Cade's shoulder. "I underestimated you."

Cade winced as he was knocked forward, knowing Eric was just being nice. The kid was as strong as a bear, and built like one too, in stark contrast to Cade's lean frame.

Yet Cade couldn't decide if he was lucky in finding Eric. He'd heard the rumors about Eric's past—and this kid would have no trouble overpowering Cade if he wanted to.

Still, he gave off more of a jock vibe than anything else, now that Cade had heard him speak for the first time. He had the build for football too.

Then, just like that, the barrier behind them winked out of existence.

Eric stared, then swiped his hand through where it had been before.

“Yeah,” Cade said. “They do that.”

For a moment he considered telling Eric about the hand axe, still embedded in the wall somewhere behind them—it could be useful after all. But even as he opened his mouth, he closed it again. Maybe giving a rumored killer a new weapon wasn’t such a good idea.

Instead, he examined the canyon beyond. This time, the passage looked different, although he wasn’t exactly sure if that was a good thing.

“I’m guessing there isn’t a way out behind us?” Eric said, motioning the way Cade had come with his chin.

“I don’t know,” Cade said. “But there’s a viper there.”

“Then we head this way,” Eric said, wrapping the belt around his fist. “Let’s go.”

CHAPTER

4

5 months earlier

CADDE STARED AT THE LINED PAPER IN FRONT OF HIM WHILE the teacher's voice droned on. It was strange to be in class, in this place, but he supposed the school had to educate them beyond its constant exercises and marching drills.

They even had a uniform—the blue shirt and pants worn by most of the students. A far cry from the uniform he had worn at his old school: a striped tie, shirt, and blazer.

Still, Cade found it hard to concentrate. Life at this new school so far had been one that oscillated between moments of anxiety and mind-numbing, soul-crushing boredom.

This lesson was a prime example. With the teacher at the head of the small classroom, he felt safe enough. But he wasn't learning anything new. His expensive private school had been light-years ahead of what they were teaching here. The teacher was currently outlining the very basics of the American Civil War.

Cade wasn't going to let himself fall behind, though. They had each been provided with a shiny new textbook. The class hadn't even cracked it open that month—Cade was pretty sure many of his fellow classmates could barely read anyway.

He'd heard that the vast majority of juvenile delinquents were functionally illiterate, and knew that many of the kids here would classify as such, having been sent there by court order, like he had, or because they weren't a "good fit" in mainstream schools. It had seemed impossible when he'd first discovered that, but now he saw it in action, in front of his very eyes. The reality was startling.

The teacher rarely used the whiteboard, though Cade could see the faded remains of what looked like a half-dozen examples of the male anatomy someone had drawn there in permanent marker.

With nothing better to do, Cade was slowly reading the textbook from cover to cover, working through the exercises and questions inside. There was nobody to mark his work, but it distracted him from his boredom.

He made sure to sit at the back of the classroom so nobody would see what he was doing, and he always scrunched up his work and trashed it when the lesson ended. So far, he'd gone unnoticed. He was doing the same with his textbooks in other subjects, but in history, he was on the final pages.

History was his favorite subject, mostly because his father was a college history professor. In fact, it was Cade's high grades in history that had led to his being offered a scholarship to attend the private school.

Even with the grant, his parents struggled to make pay-

ments, but they always beamed with pride whenever Cade came home from the dorm each weekend. Of course, that had been before the incident.

Cade was finishing an essay on the Great Depression's impact on international politics when a throat was cleared in front of him. He looked up, and suddenly boredom was replaced with gut-wrenching panic.

Mr. Daniels was standing there, his hand outstretched. The teacher was a bearded giant of a man, with spectacles that seemed to have been stolen from a Harry Potter convention.

"This isn't personal time, Carter," Daniels said, tapping his foot. "You're supposed to be paying attention. Stop doodling and hand it over."

Cade hurriedly scrunched up his paper and handed it to him.

"Sorry, sir," he said, earning some laughter from the others. Nobody called the teachers "sir" here.

"Shall we have a look at Carter's artwork?" Daniels said, striding to the front of the class.

Cade felt sweat prickle his forehead.

"No," he whispered.

But Daniels was already flattening out the paper on his desk. He stared at it for a moment, and the guys in the front row craned their necks to see what it was.

"This is . . .," Daniels began, his brows furrowed.

He glanced up at Cade with surprise, then swiftly swept it into the wastebasket.

"A letter home," Daniels said, shaking his head. "Maybe save that for rec time, Carter?"

"Yes . . . Mr. Daniels," Cade said, bowing his head.

He spent the next few minutes with his eyes fixed straight ahead, ignoring the curious stares of the other students around him.

It was pure, unadulterated relief when the bell rang, and Cade and the others lined up in the corridor outside the classroom. Teachers barked orders, but by now Cade knew the routine. He stepped into the tight, three-person-wide formation and began to march at their command.

That was how they always walked between classes, and soon they were left in the rec room, a crowded space full of noisy students and tables and chairs along with a television, foosball table, and several stacks of old comics.

Cade didn't spend much time here, though. It was a minefield, where one wrong move could earn resentment from other kids and, by proxy, their friends. Usually he retreated to the library, a far quieter area. Given the choice between fear or boredom, he always chose the latter.

"All right, boys, let's have a look at Cade's letter home to Mommy," a voice called out.

Cade spun around in horror, only to see his essay being waved in the air by Finch. Gobbler swaggered beside him, his deep-set eyes daring Cade to provoke him.

Clearly, Finch had fished the paper out of the wastebasket in class. Already, a crowd had gathered around him.

Even as Cade made to leave, Finch unfolded the paper and cleared his throat as the others laughed and gathered to listen.

"Dear Mommy," he began in an exaggerated tone before turning his eyes to the writing at the top of the page. "The Black Friday stock market collapse of 1929 set off a global . . ."

He stopped, confused. The room fell silent, and Cade seethed with fear. This was far worse than Daniels reading it in class.

“Hold up,” Finch said, scratching his head. “You were writing this . . . for fun?”

Cade snatched at the paper, but Finch held it out of reach.

“I’m just trying to learn,” Cade replied. “Like everyone else.”

“No, not like everyone else,” Finch said, holding the paper higher as Cade jumped for it. “You don’t see us writing this crap, rich boy.”

The onlookers laughed, and Cade cringed. His parents had *never* been rich.

“I’ve seen you avoiding us, all high and mighty. You think you’re better than us, Apu?”

Cade backed away with his palms raised.

“I’m just—I’m trying to get by, like everyone else,” Cade said.

“Listen to him. ‘Get by’?” Finch put on a pompous British accent, though Cade sounded nothing like it. “Why’d your parents send you here; you not clean your room?”

“Nah, man, he forgot to mow the lawn,” Gobbler chimed in. More laughter.

“I got done for grand theft,” Cade snapped.

That shut them up. But even as he said it, he realized it was a mistake.

“Yo,” another boy said, a pasty-faced boy. “Man thinks he’s gangster.”

“Watch out, boys,” Finch laughed. “Apu here’s a kingpin.”

“King Apu,” someone yelled.

“Bow to His Majesty,” said another, bending in mock reverence.

Finch bowed too, letting the essay fall to the ground. Cade backed away, stuttering denials and shaking his head. Finally, Finch turned around, distracted by a shout from someone across the room. It was his turn on the foosball table. Just like that, the crowd began to disperse, the afternoon’s entertainment seemingly over.

Cade fought back bitter tears and sought refuge somewhere else. He couldn’t leave—most of the onlookers were now leaning against the wall by the door. But there was a line of ragged armchairs up against one wall. Usually these were occupied, but today they were mostly empty, perhaps because of the kid sitting among them, reading a magazine.

Eric. He ate alone, and spoke to nobody, not even during rec time. He simply glowered at anyone who came near him, and few did.

After all, he was a veritable giant, lifting weights in the gym and standing several inches above Cade’s own five-foot-eight frame. No one wanted to mess with him.

At this point, Cade didn’t care. He threw himself into the seat farthest away from the boy. Only, instead of glaring, Eric gave him a level look. Was that sympathy in his eyes? Before Cade could decide, Eric turned back to his reading.

Cade was glad to have not annoyed him, but even so, his hands shook with frustration. King Apu. His new nickname.

Someone tapped his shoulder. Cade looked up, preparing himself for another barrage of insults, but instead found himself face-to-face with a short, stout kid with glasses so thick

they looked like the bottoms of soda bottles. Cade knew him by his nickname: Spex, though he knew from the teachers calling on him that his real name was Carlos. He held out Cade's essay.

Cade took it and stuffed it into his pocket.

"Thanks," he muttered.

Spex sat down next to him. Even the librarians called him that, and Cade often saw him reading the same book: *Guinness World Records*.

Cade wondered why he'd come to talk to him. After this, nobody would want to be caught dead with him. But then, he'd seen Finch haranguing Spex too.

"You're really here for grand theft?" Spex asked.

"Yeah," Cade said. "Doesn't mean I did it."

Spex nodded contemplatively. Cade hesitated, then finally found the courage to speak.

"My roommate stole a dozen laptops from my school. He must have kept them hidden under my bed, because the school found them during a room inspection. Called the police right away."

"Did you tell them it wasn't you?" Spex asked.

"I did. But my roommate's family was rich, you know? Donors to the school. Why would he steal the laptops? He didn't need the money. But me? A poor kid on a scholarship? I got expelled right away."

"That sucks, man," Spex said.

Cade had loved that school. Then the laptops had been found. Everyone had believed it so . . . easily. Nobody expressed surprise. Their assumptions about him had been lurking just beneath the surface.

“The police said they found my fingerprints all over them,” Cade went on. “And stupid me, I believed them. You know the police can lie to get a confession?”

Spex shrugged.

“My parents tried to fight it, but they were in shock. Couldn’t believe I might have done something like this. They told me to do whatever the lawyer said,” Cade went on. “Only that crappy, overworked public defender couldn’t be bothered to take it to court. He said if I pleaded guilty, the judge would take pity on me.”

Cade cringed at the memory of it.

“The laptops were expensive—it was grand theft, a felony. So the judge said I had to come here for a year, or he’d send me to juvie.”

Spex shook his head.

“Man, you got screwed. But hey, this place is better than juvie.”

Cade nodded dully.

“What about you?”

“Forgot to clean my room.” Spex winked, the gesture all the more noticeable behind his magnified glasses.

“Seriously?” Cade laughed.

It felt good to laugh. It felt like the first time he had done so in a long, long time.

“Nah,” Spex sighed. “My parents are super religious, and I’ve been straying from”—he paused to crook his fingers into air quotes—“the path.”

He shrugged.

“They’d been threatening sending me to this place for

years. If I missed church, it was, ‘We’re sending you to that boot camp.’ Skip class—‘boot camp.’ Bad grades—‘boot camp.’ Never thought they’d do it. Then one night they catch me out with a girl, sneaking a beer in the park. And I thought it would be a good idea to run away for a few days after that.”

Cade groaned in sympathy. “Worst. Idea. Ever.”

Spex nodded. “I won’t argue with you. Brazilian families, they can be judgmental, you know? I swear, half the time my parents were more worried about what my grandma would think than what *they* thought. And when I ran away, the whole family found out. Even back in Brazil.”

He gave a long sigh and pushed his glasses up his nose.

“I went back home when I ran out of money, and that was the last straw.”

Cade opened his mouth to speak again, but Spex was already on his feet.

“Maybe see you in the library sometime. Take care, Cade.”

Then he was walking away, leaving Cade to his thoughts.

Cade didn’t dare to hope Spex would hang out with him, at least not in public. But now Cade didn’t feel quite so alone. Not a friend but . . . someone.

Someone who didn’t hate him.

CHAPTER 5

Place:Unknown

Date:Unknown

Year:Unknown

THE PASSAGE WIDENED. ONE MINUTE THEY WERE SHUFFLING sideways through a tight corridor of rough-hewn rock, the next they found it falling away. Now they stood in a V-shaped opening, and beyond, an expansive plain of flat, white ground lay before them.

“Is this a salt flat?” Cade said, unable to take his eyes from the shimmering expanse. “I saw one in a documentary once.”

It was almost identical to the one he had seen all those years ago, stretching endlessly into the horizon, the crystals that coated its surface glimmering in the dusk glow. The dry heat seemed to suck the very moisture from Cade’s skin.

Cade turned as Eric grunted with surprise. They had walked out of one of three identical passages, all converging on the opening they now stood in.

“Look,” Eric said, pointing at the wall on their left side.

To Cade’s amazement there was a basin there, carved into

the rock itself, protruding from its wall like a shallow bathtub. As they approached, they saw the barest trickle of water seeping into the receptacle from the cliff above, and within, a still pool waited for them.

Both immediately began slurping cupped handfuls of the lukewarm liquid into their dry mouths, gulping it down until their bellies sloshed full to bursting, then drinking some more.

It was heavenly, and, for the briefest moment, Cade could think of nothing else. He hadn't realized just how thirsty he had been.

"Save some for us, would you?" a voice called from behind.

Cade spun, only to find himself looking at the gap-toothed grin of a scrawny ginger kid. He wore the same uniform, and he held a hand axe.

"I'm as thirsty as a hungover camel," the kid continued.

Beyond, Cade spotted a second kid peering at him from the shadows of the passage they had emerged from, another bloodied hand axe in his hand.

"Scott," the first kid said, giving Cade's hand a cursory shake before scooping up a handful of water for himself. "And this is Yoshi."

He leaned in conspiratorially and mumbled through a mouthful.

"But don't mention *Mario Kart*, okay? He doesn't like that."

Cade backed away as Scott dipped his head into the basin like a horse at a trough. He watched as the water level fell with each heave of his shoulders.

Yoshi approached, his face dark with foreboding—a grim contrast to the smiling Scott. Yoshi was new to the school, and

Cade knew little about him. His hair was thick, styled in a sweeping wave, with sharp cheekbones and a thin mouth beneath.

The boy sidled out of the shadows.

“Sup,” he said, giving Cade a curt nod before joining Scott at the water basin. By now, Eric had stepped aside too, and the large boy looked bemused at the new pair. Somehow, everyone seemed a whole lot calmer than Cade felt.

By the time the two were done, there was barely any water left, and Scott groaned and clutched his distended belly with mock exaggeration.

“So,” he said, wiping his face with the back of his hand. “Any ideas how we got here?”

Cade looked at Eric, who shrugged, and said, “I think we’re dead.”

Scott slapped the hulking boy’s back and laughed.

“The big dude speaks at last.”

Cade remembered Scott now. Like Yoshi, Scott was new at the school. He’d been sent there for joyriding, or so Cade had heard. The kid was obsessed with cars.

But Cade didn’t have time to search his memory for long. A bloodcurdling scream drifted from the third passageway, tearing Cade from his thoughts and setting his teeth on edge. A human scream.

Then, before he could even consider heading toward it, the same glowing wall that he had seen before appeared, blocking the three passages.

“Sounds like someone didn’t make it,” Eric growled, striding to the wall and pressing his fists against its surface. “The vipers got them.”

Silence.

"You see the monsters too?" Scott finally said.

Eric gave him a slow nod.

"So, what's the verdict?" Scott asked. "Mutants? Monsters that go bump in the night?"

"Hell," Eric muttered, scooping up a handful of the reddish sand from the ground and letting it trickle through his fingers.

"He's a cheerful one." Scott winked. "Yoshi, any thoughts to add?"

Yoshi gave Scott a level look.

"No," he said, taking another sip of water.

Scott chuckled and turned to Cade, who shrugged and looked out at the salt flats again.

"Someone put us here," Cade said. "And someone built this place—the layout is the same down each passage, like identical movie sets. I think they're watching us. Why else go to all this effort?"

"A military exercise?" Eric asked.

"Maybe," Cade said, squinting at the horizon. "Maybe we're guinea pigs in some kind of experiment."

"So they knocked us out with gas or something in the dorm rooms," Yoshi said.

"I don't think so. I wasn't sleeping, I just . . . appeared here," Scott said. "And why this? A glowing force field, some creatures straight from a lunatic's nightmares, and putting us in a weird canyon they built to look real. Then giving us nothing but a rock to fight them with? What the hell kind of experiment is that?"

Cade shook his head. "The real question is, what do we do

now? There's water here, but it won't last us, even with that trickle refilling it."

"We'll go hungry too," Yoshi agreed. "We can't stay here."

"Oh right, let's go wandering around the desert," Scott said sarcastically. "Sure to be plenty of water and food there."

Cade gritted his teeth, glaring at the endless flats in front of him, as if he could force the answer of where to go next. And then . . . he saw it.

At first he thought he was imagining things, but then it happened again. A glimmer. Flashing, like a polished piece of glass spinning in the wind.

"There's something out there," he said, pointing at the horizon. If he squinted, he could just make out a few specs of black. Objects of some kind, or a trick of the light.

Eric walked to his side and peered into the distance.

"I see it," he grunted. "Something shining."

"Whatever it is, it's miles away," Scott grumbled.

"Well, we should finish the water and head for that," Eric said. "It's metal, maybe glass. That means civilization."

"Or a sniper scope," Scott said airily.

"Or a camera, filming us," Yoshi added.

"Whatever it is, we leave at sunrise tomorrow," Eric said. "Soon it'll be too dark to see where we're going."

"It's already night," Yoshi said. His voice was quiet, but the fear in his voice cut through Cade's thoughts like a hot knife. "We can leave now."

Cade turned, confused. Yoshi was staring into the sky.

"We need the light to see where that reflection is coming from," Cade said. "After sunset, we won't be able to see it."

Yoshi didn't respond, only continued to gaze upward and pointed with a trembling finger.

Cade looked up, and suddenly his knees seemed to buckle as he saw what was there.

A red-orange moon hung in the sky, casting the wan light that Cade had taken for the dim light of a sunset. A second, smaller moon floated in front of it, like a white baseball orbiting a basketball.

"That's . . . it's not—" Cade began, but his mind couldn't begin to form a reasonable explanation. He had to be dreaming. This was impossible.

"Yoshi . . .," Scott said. "I've got a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."

CHAPTER 6

3 months earlier

“TURN.”

Cade turned sideways, and the counselor leaned closer with his flashlight. They were doing body checks on all the boys, making sure there were no unusual bruises. If they found injury or markings, it was a sign that they’d been in a fight. That meant punishments—if you didn’t rat out who’d done it.

Cade couldn’t believe that the adults didn’t differentiate between fighting and a beatdown. How was it fair that if some boys jumped Cade, the counselors would punish *him* for getting beaten up?

Luckily, his strategy of keeping to himself had kept him mostly safe so far. He got bullied in passing, which had never happened at his old school, but here nobody hated him enough to risk being punished for attacking him.

It wasn’t much of an existence, but it would be over eventually.

The counselor grunted with approval before moving on. They were in a barracks-style room, among wall-to-wall bunk beds. The place was cramped and smelled like a locker room, and he'd even seen mice scampering about. And the counselors only seemed to care about getting through the day and keeping the boys in check. Even the therapy sessions often devolved into sports talk.

He knew not all therapeutic schools were like this. In fact, he knew many of them were good places that helped troubled kids learn leadership and discipline.

He just didn't think this was one of them. Not to mention the fact that he knew he didn't belong here.

Cade had almost told his parents about the conditions at the school. But he didn't want to worry them, especially since they couldn't change anything. He didn't mention it on his weekly calls, or the few times they visited.

His dad hadn't visited him for two months. His mom said it was too painful for him, so she came alone the last time. Cade had asked her to stop coming so often. After all, when he had been at the private boarding school, he had seen his parents only a few times a year.

But now Cade couldn't forget the distrust in his father's eyes. The suspicion. The doubt. Before, they had been thick as thieves. Now . . . he didn't want to think about it.

"Nice chicken legs," said a kid standing behind Cade. "You got some spaghetti arms too, damn. Yo, guys . . ."

Cade swiftly tugged his uniform back on, and the kid gave up, his friends uninterested in mocking Cade's body. He'd always been thin and had already lost weight at the school, in

part because Gobbler stole his food several times a week—and what he didn't steal, Cade rarely finished. The food here tasted terrible.

This was compounded by the exercises they did, seemingly endless push-ups, jumping jacks, and interval courses. Despite the exercise, he felt himself weakening. Drifting through the corridors like a ghost, careful not to be seen, not to be heard. He never spoke at their group therapy sessions—but then, few did.

A shout snapped Cade out of his reverie, and he suddenly saw two kids wrestling further down the room. The counselor had moved on to the rec room to check on the others.

It was typical. Scores were always settled directly after the body checks; it gave the best chance of any bruises to heal before the next inspection.

But this was more than a tussle, he realized. It was two on one, and Cade recognized all of them. Gobbler had pinned someone to the ground, and Jim was helping him, if somewhat reluctantly. And he'd know those glasses anywhere. They had jumped Spex.

"Get him up," Finch said, striding into view, a few of his cronies following.

Cade could see the reluctance on Jim's face, and in his body language. It was like he was trying to hold Spex without actually touching him.

"Heard you've been talking shit about me, Spex," Finch said as Gobbler hauled the boy to his feet.

"I didn't say anything, man. You got the wrong guy." Spex's chest heaved with fear, and his words were choked by Gobbler's thick forearm around his neck.

Finch tapped his chin. "Maybe."

He stared contemplatively at Spex, then his fist whipped forward, thudding into the boy's stomach. Spex doubled over as the breath whooshed out of him, followed by a mouthful of vomit.

For the briefest moment, Spex caught Cade's eye and, despite the pain, he motioned with his head, almost imperceptibly.

"Just in case," Finch said.

Cade knew what Spex wanted. He wanted Cade to get an adult. But that was taking a side. That was making a choice.

"Jim, get over here," Finch said.

Jim went to stand beside him, and Cade could see the terror on Jim's face.

"Hit him," Finch said.

Cade stayed hidden in the shadow of the doorway. The corridor was so close—the rec room just a few dozen feet away. He could do it. And yet he was frozen by indecision. By fear. He felt sickened with himself.

"He l-looks like he's had enough," Jim stuttered.

Finch laughed.

"He's faking," he said, lifting Spex's chin, drool dribbling from the boy's mouth. Spex was gasping like a beached fish, taking small, shallow breaths.

"Come on. Do you have my back or not?"

Jim hung his head, and Spex turned his face to Cade once more. Pleading with his eyes.

Cade knew why they'd picked Spex: he had no real friends to protect him. There would be no retaliation, only a small risk of intervention if a teacher came in. Finch was a cold, calculating bastard.

Now that Cade thought about it, it could easily have been him. They'd just spotted Spex first.

"You're with us, or you're with him," Finch said, moving closer and forcing Jim to meet his gaze. Now, Finch's face was an inch from Jim's, and Cade saw the boy's resolve waver.

Again, Cade glanced at the door, only to see another member of Finch's crew standing outside. A lookout. Cade doubted they would stop him from leaving, but they'd know who'd gone for help. Cade willed himself to move, but he stayed rooted to the spot.

"Come on," Cade urged himself under his breath. "Do it."

There was a slap. Cade saw the imprint of Jim's palm blazing red across Spex's cheek, and heard glasses clatter to the ground. Then a crunch as Finch stomped down, shattering them. Jim had made his choice. And Cade his.

"Good man," Finch said, clapping Jim on the back.

Gobbler left Spex to collapse to his knees, and the group filed out of the room, congratulating Jim.

"Oh, and Spex?" Finch called over his shoulder. "If you tell anyone about this, I will hunt you down. Blind you permanent."

Then they were gone, their laughter receding down the corridor.

Spex cradled the broken pieces of his glasses in his hands, blood bubbling on the corner of his mouth. Cade hurried over, picking up the pieces and placing them in Spex's hands.

"Cade?" Spex said, looking blearily up at him.

"I'm so sorry, Spex. There was a guy at the door . . . I couldn't."

"Yeah. Whatever," Spex said, touching the side of his

mouth. His lip was swollen. There was no hiding that. Serious punishments were meted out for fighting, and it would only be worse if Spex didn't tell them who else had been involved.

"You gonna tell?" Cade whispered.

"Nah," Spex said.

Cade hovered uncertainly. Spex wiped his chin and staggered to the nearest bunk.

"Can I . . . can I get you anything?"

Spex shook his head, staring at his broken glasses.

"Just leave me alone," he whispered.

Cade opened his mouth. Closed it.

Then he went back to his bed, staring at the names scratched into the metal slats of the bunk above him. There was nothing he could have done . . . right?

So why did he feel so guilty?