

K A J A
S T A R
NO PLACE LIKE HOME

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KAJA STAR

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Book 1

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PROLOGUE

CHERIM HAD BEEN ON THE kaursed, disgusting piece of useless rock known as Earth for so long. Oh how he hated watching the humans, most of the time anyway. He couldn't remember exactly how long it had been. He watched them march around like dricks with no idea how weak they were. Cherim was so *bored* with the humans. Even thirties were more interesting... barely.

But it is all coming to an end now, he thought. He finally had his ticket out of this place, a golden ticket that would put him face to face with Sergheed Idane again. The ticket was a seemingly ordinary human. Cherim had been watching him for a very long time. Normal at first glance, but there was no mistaking the growing kaja power inside that particular human. He knew the human was a young adult male, just not exactly how young. It didn't really matter to him. He just had to run a few tests, play a few games, and then he could get off of this lowly post His Omniness punished him with. If his assumptions were correct, this human would prove to be more of a challenge. All he needed to do now was to set up the trap he had been planning. *The ol' bait and snatch*. Today was a very big day for Cherim.

CHAPTER 1

TODAY WAS A VERY BIG day for Titus. The clock was ticking down to the most important moment in Titus Markava's life. The previous hours of the day had felt no different than the hours of days prior. It wasn't until late afternoon as he stood in a field not far from his home that the importance of this day began to dawn on him. He stared at the big diamond and the ring it was attached to. It was an engagement ring he had purchased in the town of Melonweed a few miles west of where he now stood. Her name was Alice Cherim and she was perfect. It was almost as if someone had reached into his head and designed the perfect woman for him.

So now he would make the perfect evening for her. A picnic. Corny perhaps, but also a perfect way to showcase his ability to follow a recipe while enjoying a cool summer afternoon. The food would only be possible, so it would be up to the great outdoors to pick up the slack in the ambiance department.

That didn't mean he couldn't help it along. Titus snapped the lid of the ring case shut, stuffed it into his pocket, and surveyed the spot he had selected. He concentrated for a moment and stomped his foot on the ground. The ground in a growing circular radius in front of him began to ripple slightly at first and then with more confidence. A couple of stones hidden underneath the grassy canopy tore free of the dirt and obediently rolled away. Titus pressed his foot down harder and the ground became perfectly even and flat before it went still. He turned his attention to the checkered blanket perched comfortably on top of the basket also purchased

for this evening. With a wave of his hand the wind rudely pitched the blanket into the air over the flattened spot. Titus snatched it with one hand to hold it level as the wind unfolded. The wind grew calmer and Titus let go of the blanket to see just how long he could get it to float there.

My powers. Along with the nervous anticipation of proposing, he was also debating the possibility of telling Alice about his miraculous gift. It seemed dishonest not to, but he wasn't sure of what his powers actually were. The few books he had read for answers suggested that telekinesis was the closest explanation, but it still didn't quite fit. At least he was pretty certain that he wasn't demon possessed.

His attention to the blanket was diverted by a soft rustling of the grass. *It's her!* Titus halted the wind and quickly grabbed the blanket guiding it down to the ground. Trying to keep a cool head, he spun around and almost stumbled despite the perfectly level ground he was on. Alice smiled as she approached across the field. Her outfit looked new and her dark blonde hair waved around her head as she walked. She waved and jogged the last few steps to meet him, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him twice.

"How are you today *mon ami?*" she asked. It was the first thing she always said whenever they saw each other.

"I'm great now that you're here" Titus replied.

"So what's this big surprise you have planned for me? I've been dying to know all week." He stood aside and gestured towards the set up. Alice looked over the spot, and nodded in approval. "Ah a picnic. How..."

"Corny?"

"No! I was going to say *classic.*" She took Titus's arm and as he led her to her spot she practically bounced with every step. While Titus finished setting up he noticed that Alice was staring intently into a nearby forest that bordered the field. He got the chicken piccata out and tried for her attention,

"Hey, you interested in the woods or in me?" He lifted a plate to her. "I'm the one with the food." She turned slowly toward him and spoke as if she was coming out of deep thought,

"Yes... of course, let's eat."

Titus sat and felt the lump of the ring case hit his leg. The butterflies in his stomach went into overtime as he swallowed down his first bite.

"Not bad, if I do say so myself" he announced.

Alice smiled and picked at her food. She wasn't saying much and kept staring at him, occasionally looking into the woods again.

"What's the matter? I thought you were..."

"Let's go for a walk" Alice interrupted as she abruptly jumped to her feet. She turned and began striding purposefully in the direction of the woods without waiting for a reply.

"Wait, just let me..." Titus began as he hurried to throw things haphazardly back into the basket. Alice stopped at the edge of the woods. When Titus looked up, she smiled impishly before turning and disappearing into the trees. *This is not going as planned.* Shaking his head, he followed without bothering to finish securing their picnic site.

The woods forced him to move slowly through the lower branches along his path. The woods seemed darker than they did a minute ago and he narrowly avoided tripping into a stream. *Must be getting late.* "Alice!" he called out. "Alice where are you?"

"Over here!" she called back from no particular direction.

"Where?" Titus stepped into a clearing.

"Right in front of you!"

Indeed she was, just standing there waiting for him in a clearing although she hadn't sounded that close before. Maybe there was some sort of echo. A different smile on Alice caused him to pause. Maybe it was his imagination, but it seemed more devious. The case in his pocket seemed heavier.

"What was that all about?" Titus asked, fighting a small frog in his throat. *Nervous, so nervous.*

"Oh nothing, I just wanted to make sure no one would see us," she replied matter of factly.

Shocked, Titus coughed. Who would have thought a picnic could be so effective? Since Alice seemed in the mood for games, he decided to play along.

"So why wouldn't you want anyone seeing us?" he asked as suave as possible. Alice began to slowly walk toward him.

"Oh, for something very special I assure you. You are one of a kind Titus. I really need a specimen like you..." *Specimen? What?* "... You just have to prove that you're the right human for me." She was close now. He needed to say something perfect, but she didn't give him the chance. She leaned forward and kissed him. He closed his eyes to concentrate on the wonderful kiss. After a few moments he felt her pull away and he slowly opened his eyes. When his vision returned he was shocked to see that he was staring back at *himself*.

"Wow, we're good kissers!" his copy said in his own voice, smiling fiendishly. "We're not very good cooks though, sorry." Titus yelled out in surprise and terror. The copy frowned and placed a painful backhanded strike across his face, knocking him backwards. The taste of blood filled his mouth.

"Shut up Titus!" the copy yelled. "Do you have any idea how much I've heard that annoying bleating sound from all of you humans?" As the copy said 'humans' its skin rippled and it transformed into several different people with terror stricken faces. The copy changed back into Titus and continued, "I was hoping our encounter would be different."

Who? What? Where? How? Humans? A million thoughts rushed through Titus's aching head, but only two made it out his mouth,

"Who or *what* are you?" The copy smiled and began pacing in front of Titus, speaking the whole time as if it had rehearsed the answer on many occasions.

"I am Cherim! Great kaja mage of His Omniness, Sergheed Idane of the Ka System! I have been here for... over a century... I guess. I dunno I don't quite get your math. Anyway, I've been looking for a very unique human such as you and now that I have found you it is time for you to prove yourself worthy."

Cherim stopped and looked as if he was trying think of what his next line was. He shrugged and his skin started to ripple again. Titus backed away as Cherim grew horns and two hairy hooved feet. His upper half became red and muscular. Titus looked in disbelief at the big red bull-like monster Cherim had become.

"Where's Alice!? What did you do with her!?"

Cherim growled at him in a beastly voice much different from the one he was using before,

"I *was* Alice you inbred wastrel." To prove it, Cherim's head rippled and it became the blonde haired woman Titus had intended to marry only moments before. Cherim's voice became Alice's, "How are you today *mon ami*?" Cherim giggled as Alice for a moment before changing his head back to match the monster body.

"All those months... everything... they were with you?"

"Was it good for you?" Cherim's voice became beastly again and he laughed. Titus suddenly felt very ill. It had all been a lie. "Now Titus let's see what you've got. Fight or die!"

Fight!? The huge red monster thing lumbered toward him. He had never been a fighter, but in the past he had accepted an invite from the karate club on a whim back in college and it hadn't gone very well. Though he had signed up as a beginner, he had no trouble keeping up with everyone. The instructor suspected him of having prior training and denying it only made him irritated. Yet Titus somehow had an innate talent and when the time came he easily defeated all who sparred with him. The correct counters, blocks, and attacks just came naturally. That is to say they were correct to him, just not correct for karate. They didn't match anything that he saw while in the club. He left after attending for only a few weeks to no one's disappointment.

Neither Alice, nor their love had been real. Feeling betrayed, Titus's confusion turned into anger, and he ran forward placing a high kick right into Cherim's stomach. The kick didn't even phase the beast, and Titus stumbled back instead. Cherim laughed. Anger turned into fear. Titus's next thought seemed like a more effective one. *Run!* He turned and started running, but was lifted off his feet by his shirt. Cherim snatched him with two of his massive fingers and brought him close to his face. His hot and lightly chicken piccata laced breath blasted Titus as he spoke,

"What's wrong Titus? I know that's not all that you have. I know you are hiding your true power from me. I can sense it, and I want to SEE it! I won't let you leave alive unless you use your powers!"

My powers. How did he know about my powers? He hadn't told anyone, and he didn't use them in public. Maybe this Cherim had observed him once. If he could change into anything, it wouldn't be hard for him to hide. The thought of using them as a weapon had never occurred to him.

Cherim threw Titus with one light flick of his arm. Luckily a tree stopped his flying lesson. Pain gripped his back as he slowly stood up from the ground. Cherim bellowed and charged while Titus raised his hands to defend himself. A ball of fire jumped suddenly from his hands and splashed across Cherim's body. Cherim roared in surprise and stumbled back.

Where did the fire come from? While Cherim burned, Titus risked a glance at his hands. He saw nothing unusual. Cherim cleared his throat. Titus looked back up at the creature that was burning, yet seemed unhurt. Through the flames he could see that Cherim's snout was actually curled into a smile.

"I changed into a *Fire Monitore* you legless drick! Your little cinder tricks cannot harm me. It feels rather good actually. Which is more than I can say for what you're about to feel."

"How am I supposed to know what a... a *Fire Monitore* is? I haven't even heard of one!"

Cherim shrugged, and for a moment it looked as if he was actually going to apologize. Instead he charged again with the flames still burning on him. *Great now I've just made it worse.* Titus stood his ground and concentrated on a new tactic. The wind quickly responded to his call and blew forest debris into Cherim knocking him off his feet. However this backfired too. The wind caught the fire on Cherim and blew it all over the surrounding trees turning the clearing into a raging inferno. He made the wind stop as quickly as he could before it fanned the flames any further.

The situation was once again worse. *Great, now I'm going to be burned to death.* His despair faded a little as he remembered the stream he had almost fallen into. Ignoring the fact that Cherim was getting back up, he began to concentrate.

"Now look what you've done!" bellowed Cherim. "I was indeed wrong about you human. While you posses kaja energy, you are too

simple minded to wield it. The sergheed..." Cherim's words were cut short as Titus's new stream poured into the clearing. The stream divided into two and formed a circle around the clearing shooting up like a geyser, putting out fires as it went. In an instant all the fire was out except for the remaining flames on Cherim. Titus opened his eyes and looked right at Cherim. The water understood, and it flew towards him. Cherim's beastly bellows became gasping yells as he changed again, but into what exactly Titus couldn't see. He released his hold on the water and it flowed back to its stream as if in reverse.

Cherim coughed for a few moments from the soaking he had received. The smoke cleared and Titus finally got a good look at what was possibly Cherim's true form. He wore a long leather coat that went down to his boots. His pure white skin contrasted the coat. There weren't many features on his face. His nose was very small and flat and he had no ears or hair. The most unusual thing was his eyes, which were totally black. Titus was surprised to see that Cherim's mouth was curled into a grin again.

"So now that we got *that* over with," said Cherim. "This is going to be a very important day for us both!"

"What are you?"

"Huh? Oh, I already told you all that stuff, keep up. Cherim... kaja mage... yada, yada, yada. Don't worry, all your other questions will be answered soon."

"How did you know about my powers, and why did you just try to kill me!?"

"No, no, no, I was trying to *test* you! The whole life and death thing was just to speed up the results. The sergheed will be very pleased with me! Now come, it's time for us to go." Cherim stepped forward and looked up while he mumbled to himself. Titus took a step back.

"Let's see how do I open a portal back to Nix... it's been so long. Ah well, I am the great and powerful Cherim. How could I fail? Here goes."

Cherim reached over and tapped a blue glowing button on a bracelet Titus hadn't noticed before. He stood ready in case Cherim

attacked again. There was no attack, but there was a large snap as a blue glowing portal appeared in thin air and then disappeared. Cherim cursed under his breath and slapped the button hard. This time the portal snapped, sparked, but stayed open. Titus stared in amazement at the portal. He had a strong urge to see what was on the other side, but an even stronger urge told him that it was a bad idea.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," he said forcefully, "and I want to know what's going on now." Cherim looked to him in annoyance. The portal began to waiver a bit. He approached Titus speaking in a threatening tone,

"You listen here human. You're going in now before the portal becomes too unstable. AH!" He cried out as a large rock flew up from the ground and struck him in the side. Titus made more rocks rise out of the ground and they hovered around Cherim in a threatening manner.

"Why don't you just shut that thing off and sit down. I bet I can throw these much harder."

"Hmph."

Cherim took another step closer. *I warned him.* Two rocks hit Cherim in the legs and another hit him in the head. Cherim clutched his bald white head and fell to one knee. Out of the bigger rocks, Titus concentrated harder and made smaller stones rise from the ground to strike. One stone hit the bracelet on Cherim's wrist. The portal flashed red for an instant, and crackled. Titus was getting nervous, he couldn't keep this up forever, and the small stones couldn't be hurting Cherim very much. *Run! Now is the time to just get out of here!* But running now would essentially mean leaving Alice behind, even if there really wasn't an Alice. There was too much for Cherim to answer for.

"Uncle! Mercy please! I surrender! Bazooka Joe, anything! No more!" cried Cherim pitifully.

Feeling slightly sorry for the strange man Titus stopped. Big mistake. With frightening speed Cherim's arm turned into a slimy green tentacle, and he wrapped it around Titus. The tentacle shivered, grew even bigger, and Cherim lifted him off the ground.

Titus struggled to escape Cherim's grasp, but it was no use. The portal flashed again and several sparks flew from it.

"I hope you have better manners in front of the sergheed. He is far more powerful and less patient than I. Off we go now! Oh I can't wait to get back home, away from this kaursed planet!"

Titus's head was spinning with panic. *Planet? This guy is from another planet?* Cherim flung him into the portal.