

Prologue

- Based on a true story from a different reality
Six years ago

Isis ran as fast as her body would allow, despite the aches in her legs. Her heaving breath echoed through her ears. It sounded like a car engine about to explode. The large rows of apartment buildings on either side of the street passed at a rapid rate, but not fast enough as she could hear the screams of determination behind her. Soon, they'd catch up and probably kill her in a most brutal way. Maybe if she stayed, they'd have granted her some mercy and killed her quickly.

The bruise on her face still stung. Worse yet, the swelling blocked the vision on her left side. The beating was supposed to cure her, at least that's what they said, but it didn't. Neither did holding her head under water.

And neither did locking her in a dark basement without food or drink. "*Matarlo de hambre*, starve it out," they shouted through the door. They meant it, too. No one fed her. No one even brought her something to drink. The only liquid she had in her system came from the condensation she licked off a rusty pipe.

Three, or maybe four days, had passed before Isis could will the deadbolt to slide. She had to work on it at

night, and for most of that time, it barely budged. During the day, people were around the door. If any of them had caught the deadbolt moving, they'd have opened the door and done who knows what to her. The hunger and pain made it a taxing endeavor, but whispers of setting her on fire were motivation enough.

The whispers had come from her foster parents, a fact that made Isis' brain want to explode. Who the hell would set a nine-year-old on fire, and one they had raised for the last eight months? Then again, they didn't really raise her. For the most part, they never treated her like their kid, only as the reason they got their monthly check. Still, she tried to make it work; it was slightly better than the last place, a tiny bedroom she had to share with four older girls who kept getting into fights with each other. Well, at least this was better until her new foster family discovered what she could do. A temper-driven scream had caused that picnic table to fly across the park and crash into a four-year old. It wasn't what Isis wanted to happen, and definitely was not how she wanted everyone in neighborhood to find out.

Her skinny legs screamed in pain with each lunge. So did her stomach, which growled for anything edible. The vision in her right eye blurred. With that went balance. Isis hit the pavement. .hard. The only thing that came between her body and the solid ground was her right arm. The crunch sound upon impact hurt, she didn't have it in her to scream.

Despite her best efforts. Isis only made it half block. The chase was about over.

"I see her. She's over there!" the adult female voice shouted over the sound of feet scampering against

the street. The voice belonged to her foster mother, Nikki. Not the friendliest of ladies, but Isis had thought their relationship was growing. She'd thought Nikki was warming up to her. Guess not.

Isis' huffing increased as nine adults—five men and four women—surrounded her. Some held baseball bats; one had a steak knife. Her foster dad, George, kept a pistol pointed her way. Although his hands shook, the narrow eyes and furrowed forehead told Isis that he had every intention of shooting if she tried anything. Nikki held a rolled-up newspaper with a flame at the top.

"I'm going to die," Isis muttered. "I'm really going to die."

"I told you all," one of the women shouted, "and then you saw it for yourselves! This girl is filled with maligno!" Isis' Spanish wasn't good at all, but she knew from the tone that "maligno" didn't mean sugar and spice. This woman was their sweet old next-door neighbor and the only one Isis had felt close enough to trust with her secret. It freaked the lady out. Then, she told everyone. No one believed her, until that moment in the park when Isis proved her right.

Nikki's eyes were opened wide. She stepped forward and pointed the homemade torch at Isis. Isis flinched from the heat licking at her face. "Mom, please!" she cried, using the name she had called her for the last few months. It never got much of a reaction, but she hoped it would now.

"Don't you call me that, don't you dare!" So much for the sympathetic plea. "If I knew the devil was inside you, I'd never—"

"Just do it, Nikki, you have to!" George shouted. "We all saw what it can do to us!"

Everyone in the circle shouted at once. Although Isis couldn't make out every word, they all seemed want Nikki to do the unthinkable. These were people who knew Isis, her neighbors for the last eight months. Now, they were screaming for Isis to die. They ac wanted her to get set on fire while she was on knees, helpless in the middle of the street. For Isis, worst part was hearing George refer to her as "it." wasn't an "it," she was a person, a little girl who ii now was scared out of her mind.

The shouting turned into a deafening roar. flame at the end of Nikki's rolled up newspaper engulfing half of the makeshift torch. She was re going to do it. "No, I don't want to die, I don't," Isis mumbled. She narrowed her eyes as rage filled her head. The in the back of Isis' neck throbbed. It matched the that traveled through her right arm.

"LEAVE ME ALONE!" It was the loudest Isis ever screamed. She pounded her left fist against ground.

The street vibrated. Then, it outright quaked. adults lost their balance. One woman fell, while others scurried a few steps back. Isis darted her head all directions. The shaking, somehow, was caused her. It created a little more room, but not enough escape even if she could stand up. A slight crack in pavement formed. The ground made a tearing so like paper ripping. The crack enlarged. it grew in circle around her—like an island. Screams and filled the crowd.

The shaking stopped. Screams turned into murmurs. They were shouting words that shouldn't be

said by adults. Her display may have startled everyone, but not enough to make them scatter. It also scared the hell out of Isis. She didn't want to hurt any of them. Hell, she'd never in her life even stepped on a bug. The thought of killing anything filled her with guilt. Not that any of these people cared about how she felt at the moment.

The circle of people started to close in. Isis had no more fight left. Her head and right arm screamed in agony. It was time to accept her fate, burned to death in the middle of a dark street. She hoped it would happen quickly. She didn't like pain...

A loud roar filled the sky. It sounded like a lion, but amplified about a hundred times. The pistol dropped from George's hand, as did everyone else's weapons. George let out a loud shriek, then ran as if he were the one about to be set on fire. Panicked screams filled the air as footsteps stampeded in the opposite direction. The fire from the newspaper torch burned out the moment it hit the ground.

Isis wiped away the brown matted hair that covered most of her face. She gawked through wide eyes. What she saw made no sense. A red dragon with a long nose, wings, and a forked tail trotted her way. This thing was nearly as tall as the surrounding buildings. She could probably climb the scales that ran across its legs. "This can't be real," she said to herself, blinking her eyes several times to bring it into focus.

Isis took a deep breath and struggled to her knees. The dragon's red eyes locked onto her. At first she thought it was her imagination, but the others had seen it, too. Isis had accepted that she would die today, but from starvation, beaten to death, or the most likely

scenario, getting set on fire. She never expected she'd meet her end getting eaten or crushed by a large red dragon. Maybe this was the better way. At least her death would be different.

As the dragon approached, its body turned to a red smoke, a smoke that grew lighter with each step toward Isis. Soon, it evaporated completely, leaving only a Caucasian man in tight blue jeans and a plain black T-shirt. Isis figured him in his early thirties, just like her foster parents...well, her former foster parents. That relationship was probably finished the moment they decided she was the devil.

"Wow, conjuring one of those is harder than you'd think," the man said in a tone filled with pride. "It looked pretty good, though, didn't it?"

She'd never seen such a thick head of hair on a man before except on television. It was dark brown, wavy, combed upward, and spiked in the front. She was sure he had more gel product in his hair than Nikki had on her bathroom counter. Isis had a ton of questions she wanted to ask him. The first was whether or not he was here to kill her. Right now, her throat was so dry, she'd gladly give her life for a cold glass of water.

The man walked up to Isis and leaned down on one knee. He wasn't fat. but based on his gut. it was clear he ate well. "Hola. He smiled, sporting pearly white teeth. "Como estas?"

"I-I don't know too much Spanish. Her lower jaw trembled.

"Oh. That's good, because I just exhausted all the Spanish I know." He chuckled and patted her right shoulder.

Isis winced.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"I'm.. .Isis."

"Isis, like the ancient Egyptian goddess of magic. But you're not from that part of the world, are you?"

"No." Her voice croaked through heavy breaths. "What is your last name, Isis?"

Isis clutched her forehead. With the striking pain going through her skull, she actually had to think to remember the answer. "It's, um.. .Rivera. Isis Flores Rivera."

"Isis Flores Rivera. That's a pretty name. I'm thinking you're from somewhere in Central America? Maybe farther south, like Colombia?"

"I'm from the Bronx."

He chuckled. "Fair enough. My name is Sebastian. Sebastian Santell." He rubbed a finger along the crack in the pavement. "How long have you been able to do this, Isis?"

"I don't know. A few months? It started happening after my birthday."

"After your birthday." His eyebrows rose. "How old are you?"

"I-I'm nine." Isis caught her eyelids closing. She forced them open. This wasn't the time to fall asleep, even if her body demanded it. Right now, she wanted to know more about this strange man who just saved her life.

"Holy cow, nine years old," Sebastian responded. "It's rare that it happens so young."

"I can also move things with my mind. I don't know how I do it." She also couldn't make it happen all the time by choice.

"I know how you do it." Sebastian's grin widened.

"You are connected to a great power that surrounds us every single day. It's the universal energy that gives our planet life. It's in the air. It's in the ground, in the space we occupy at any given time. The energy is everywhere around us. It makes up everything we know."

Sebastian brought a fist toward Isis' face. She flinched back. Her heart beat so fast she expected it to rip out of her chest.

"Stay still," he demanded.

Sebastian opened his hand a few inches from her ear. Her forehead tingled where she had the gash. It felt like many tiny insects scurrying around the bruise. The throbbing stopped.

Sebastian closed his hand and pulled it away. He stared at her, admiring his work. "Okay, that looks much better." He gave her a smile. "I'll bet you feel better, too."

Isis placed her fingers against her forehead. She couldn't feel the raw, open skin. Somehow, the gash was healed. The bruise that had swollen her left eye shut was gone. For the first time in three days, she didn't feel like she could throw up at any moment. "How did you. . .

"People tap into this energy all the time." Sebastian explained. "When a mother lifts a car off her child, or when someone has a dream that comes true, they are connecting with the plane, but unconsciously. Psychics and hypnotists are tapping in at a low level as well. We happen to be among the lucky few who have a far stronger relationship with our planet. We can manipulate the energy around us. Many centuries ago, people with that gift were called witches. I've heard that the term was originally meant to be derogatory.

Over time, though, the meaning changed and the name stuck."

Sebastian put a finger under Isis' chin and brought her head up. "Right now, you tap into this energy through instinct. But once you learn to control it, you will be able to do more than you ever dreamed possible."

"How... how do you know me?" Isis asked.

"You ask a lot of questions. I like that. A curious mind is a good thing." Sebastian held out his hand and made circular motions. A tiny rainbow appeared inside the imaginary circle. Isis reached with her left hand for the rainbow. Her fingers went straight through as if it wasn't there.

"My wife and her sister sensed you. They're far more connected to the energy than I am. But maybe not as connected as you. We'll have to see." Sebastian's rainbow suddenly spread wings and morphed into a butterfly. Isis watched it fly into the night sky. Wow. Isis had to admit, she was impressed with this witch guy. As easily as he created a big scary dragon, he could also make something as beautiful as a butterfly.

"We haven't sensed another witch in years, not since we were teenagers. Curiosity took over and we came looking. We wanted to find out who you are. It seems we got here at just the right time. Wouldn't you agree?"

She did, although a few days ago would have been better.

"Those people may come back. We should probably get out of here as soon as possible."

Isis tensed at his words. Were they coming back to finish the job? Isis swung her head back. No, they were

alone, at least for now.

Sebastian stood and stretched his hand toward Isis. "The others are waiting. They'd really like to meet you. I think you will fit in well with us, even with Luther. He can be a bit standoffish, but he's basically a big teddy bear. Sometimes."

Isis stared at his right hand reaching for her to take. "I'm sorry, I can't. . . I can't feel my arm."

"Hmm, it looks dislocated," Sebastian said. "I'm sorry I didn't notice right away. Let's fix that." A light flickered inside his pupils. He chanted, "Heal the arm, heal the arm, heal the arm."

The tingling returned, now against her shoulder and down her arm. Once again, the sensation felt like dozens of little feet scurrying over her flesh. This time, it didn't freak her out, especially when she was able to wiggle her fingers. "My arm..." She held her hand in front of her face. I can feel it."

"It's healed he replied. We should go. Now."

Isis took Sebastian's hand. She didn't know anything about this man except what he told her. . . and that he could create a huge red dragon. That part was really cool. So was the butterfly. Besides, where else could she go? Whatever he wanted of her, wherever he wanted to take her, it had to be better than staying where she clearly wasn't wanted.

Sebastian pulled Isis to her feet. With a wave of his hand, he motioned her to come with him. She stepped forward, although her right ankle throbbed, and when it touched the crack on the ground she almost fell over. Sebastian grabbed her by the arm, keeping her upright.

"Take it easy. The others are nearby," he said. "I'd teleport us to them, but twenty-foot illusions take a lot

out of me."

"I'm a witch?" Isis asked more to herself than to Sebastian. "Like, with magic spells?" She thought back to all the movies she'd seen about witches. They were usually real ugly and real evil.

"Essentially, yes, although the spells are just how we define them. They're more like chants. Their sole purpose is to help us focus on a single thought. The last thing we want is for our minds to wander onto other ideas while in the middle of manipulating the planet's energy. If that happens, we'd lose the effect. Even worse, we could lose control. That could lead to terrible repercussions. Do you understand?"

Isis shrugged. She'd think this man was playing her for a fool, if not for the dragon that chased away her would-be killers. Well, and the fact he just healed her face and arm with his mind.

"I promise, soon enough this will all make sense. Right now, are you hungry?" Sebastian peeked at her midsection. "I'm guessing the answer is yes. You look like you haven't eaten in years."

Isis looked down at her stomach, or what was left of it. Everything he said sounded nice. It also went against everything she'd been taught about trusting strangers. Of course, that advice came from a social worker who kept leaving her with strangers.

"Wh-what are you going to do to me?" she asked.

"Short-term, I plan to get you cleaned up and fed. Based on that limp, I'm betting you have a few more wounds in need of healing." Sebastian put his arm across Isis' back, hooking his hand under her shoulder for support. "Long-term, I want to teach you the full extent of what you can do. I want to teach you how to

move things with your mind. . . on purpose."

Yeah, she liked how that sounded.

"I want to bring you into my coven, Isis," he continued.

"What's a ... coven?"

"Normally, they're a gathering of witches. With mine, however, they're my family." Sebastian grinned. "We will combine our powers to create a new path in this world. I have a plan that ensures we can live freely and flaunt our powers without fear of being hunted or persecuted." Sebastian once again threw a glance at Isis. He giggled. "I can't wait to see their faces when they find out you're nine."

Isis lifted her head. "Are we going to hurt people?" "No, not at all. We don't do that."

"Are we going to help people?"

"Well..." Sebastian paused in thought. "I guess, in a way. We will be providing amusement in their lives, if that counts as help. I think it does count, don't you?"

Isis nodded, although she really didn't have a clue what he was talking about. She couldn't remember the last time her life had "amusement" in it. Most people just treated her like an annoyance. This definitely sounded better, or so she hoped.

Sebastian walked forward, letting Isis lean against him. "You don't need to be scared anymore, Isis. No one is ever again going to hurt you. Trust me." Although they just met, she did.

Excerpt from Chapter 1:

"We are about to bring out a new, young witch to the stage," Sebastian explained. "She will have you believing that a young girl can become lighter than air!"

"Lighter than air." Isis closed her eyes and chanted under her breath. "Lighter than air." Her hands and feet tingled with each step toward the stage. The magic flowed through her veins like a steady leak from a faucet.

"Ladies and gentlemen, put your hands together for the future goddess of magic, Isis!"
The crowd applauded. A slow, soothing music played through the speakers. Isis took a deep breath, then stepped out from behind the curtain. She could hear the audience but couldn't see them behind the blinding spotlights. "Lighter than air," she whispered a few more times.

Isis raised her right foot as if resting it on the first step of a long staircase. She placed her left foot next to the right. A few inches separated the soles of her bare feet from the stage floor. The crowd let out an "ooh."

Time to make them "ahh."

Isis reached up with both hands, then, like a swimmer at the bottom of a pool, pulled her body straight up. She floated until her hands touched the ceiling. Way too high. Isis pushed against the ceiling so she'd float down ever so slightly. She let her body go horizontal, then breast-stroked past the spotlights and directly over the audience. Astonished faces pointed her way.

"Lighter than air," she, said once again as a reminder to herself not to lose concentration.

Several feet ahead, a metal hoop hung from a rope attached to the ceiling. It had been placed there specifically for Isis' benefit. Isis swam through the air until she passed through the hoop.

The crowd applauded.

This was the moment Isis was supposed to return to the stage. But from the sound of chaotic murmurs, this sold-out crowd was digging her. She wanted to give them more. Isis brought her knees to her chest and performed a somersault.

The applause brought her a sense of glee.

Isis straightened her body and executed a backflip, which she paused while completely upside down. From this angle, she could see every single mesmerized face. They all had widened eyes and open mouths. Couples were holding hands tight, as if it was their daughter up here and they feared for her life. Mothers and fathers held their young children while pointing up as if they didn't know where to look.

She took notice of one boy about her age who didn't blend in with the rest. It wasn't his golden-blond hair or his worn-out leather vest that may have been jet black a long time ago. It's not like he looked bad in the vest. She just didn't think boys her age wore vests, not that she hung around a lot of people her age. Maybe vests were a thing. She really didn't know.

What stood out to Isis was his lack of awe. While everyone had their eyes planted on her, this boy was scratching his chin, glancing at every part of the ceiling except where she hovered. Whatever the reason, something about him seemed familiar. Isis was sure she'd seen him before, maybe in passing on the Vegas strip. She rarely forgot a face, especially one so cute

with such green eyes...

OH CRAP!

The spell broke. The air rushed past Isis as she went down. The audience gasped. So did Isis. The floor approached at a rapid speed...

She stopped mid-air and hung face-to-upside-down-face with the boy. He looked panicked, which probably mirrored the expression on her face. "Urn, hi," she said.

She was suddenly yanked through the air and to the stage as if a hook had snatched her around the midsection. Isis managed to turn her body right side up on the way. She dropped and landed on all fours in the middle of the stage. Dizziness forced her eyes shut. She could barely hear cheers and applause that boomed through the theater.

"Are you okay?" Sebastian called, but not through the mic.

"I'm good." Isis opened her eyes, stood, and stretched her arms to the roaring ovation.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Sebastian's voice boomed through the speakers, "the young witch who defies gravity, Isis!"

Isis shook off the lightheadedness so she could take a hearty bow and exit through the side curtain. She stepped aside while Sacha rolled a clear glass coffin onto the stage. She stepped away from the curtain where Selena wrapped her arms around Isis and gave her a tight hug. "Wow, that was a close call," she said in Isis' ear.

"I'm okay," Isis said.

Selena placed a hand under Isis' sweat-covered chin. "Good. It's over now. You did well up there

except for that little gaff. We'll work on it. For now, go catch your breath."

The applause fizzled out. Anticipation for the next trick grew. Sebastian introduced Luther to the stage. It was time for the finale where Luther would get locked inside that glass coffin. The coffin would fill with water, submerging the vampire, all while Sebastian provided dramatic commentary. After that came Isis' favorite part, when the coffin would levitate in the air and float through the theater rows, passing each seat. Luther always made eye contact with the audience members. He did this while gasping for air he didn't need.

After giving everyone a chance to see it up close—and even touch the glass as it passed—the coffin floated high above the audience. It then exploded into an amazing multi-colored fireworks display. From the explosion, confetti fell and covered the crowd.

After the amazing display, smoke from a machine they controlled off-stage would cover the stage. Once the smoke cleared, the audience would cheer from seeing Luther standing in the middle of the stage, soaking wet. Of course, he never bowed. It just wasn't his style. The only reason he begrudgingly participated in the grand finale was because it involved the witches' use of illusion, teleportation, and transmorphing. It also forced them to work together on one cohesive project. He called it good practice for their teamwork.

Everyone always left the theater commenting on that amazing explosion. For Isis, she had seen that effect more times than she could recall. She always enjoyed it, but with a slight disappointment that she couldn't be out there soaking 'in the moment. Today,

not only was she part of the show, but the act before the grand finale. Wow, all that anxiety coursing through her veins, and now it was over. Isis leaned against the wall and let out a deep exhale. She felt a bit wobbly, but proud. It wasn't entirely the debut performance she anticipated, but it wasn't all bad. Sure, she almost cracked her head open on the floor and splattered brain tissue on the audience, but she didn't, and it worked out. She survived, and the crowd loved it. Overall, she gave herself a B. Well, maybe a B-minus. Nah, definitely a B.

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