

MARKED

Soul Guardians Book 1

KIM RICHARDSON

Marked, Soul Guardians Book 1:

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*For my mother Danielle,
in Horizon*

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Chapter 1

Reborn

“Wait for me!” Kara jogged along Saint-Paul Street. She pressed her cell phone against her ear with a sweaty hand. “I’ll be there in two minutes!”

Her black ballet flats tapped the cobble stones as she avoided oncoming traffic. She jumped onto the sidewalk and ran through the crowd. Her portfolio swung at her side.

“I can’t believe you’re not here yet,” said the voice on the other line. “You had to pick today of all days to be late.”

“Okay, okay! I’m already freaking out about the presentation. You’re not exactly helping, Mat.”

A laugh came through the speaker. “I’m just saying . . . that this is supposed to be the most important day of your life. And you, *Mademoiselle Nightingale*, are late.”

“Yeah, I heard you the first time—MOTHER. My stupid alarm didn’t go off!” Kara dashed along the busy street. Her long brown hair bounced against her back. The smell of grease and beer from the pubs reached her nose. Her heart hammered at her chest. She knew if she missed the presentation, her hopes of landing a scholarship were over. She didn’t have any money for college. This was her only shot.

Over the heads of the crowd, Kara could just make out the sign, *Une Galerie*. Stenciled elegantly in bold black letters, the name hovered above the art gallery’s majestic glass doors. She could see shadows of people gathered inside. Her chest tightened. She was only a block away now.

“You know, the presentation won’t wait for you.”

“I swear I’m gonna kick your butt when I get there!” Kara growled into the phone.

She thought about getting off the sidewalk and running along the edge of the street. She looked back to see how bad the traffic was.

Then her heart skipped a beat.

Less than half a block behind, a man stood motionless and indifferent to the wave of humanity that flowed around him. He was staring at her. His white hair stood out against his dark grey tailored suit. Kara frowned.

His eyes are black, she realized.

A chill rolled up her spine. The man melted into the crowd and vanished, as though he were a mere trick of the light. The hair on the back of Kara’s neck prickled.

“I think I’m being followed,” Kara spoke into her cell phone after a few seconds.

“You always think you’re being followed.”

“No! I’m serious! I swear—this guy is following me—some psycho with white hair. I—I think I’ve seen him before. Or at least my mother has—”

“We all know your mother is a little nutty sometimes. No offence, I love your mom, but she’s been seeing and talking to invisible people since we were five. I think it’s rubbing off on you.”

“Listen. I was with my mom yesterday on Saint-Catherine Street, and she said we were being followed by someone. What if this is the same guy? Maybe she’s not as crazy as everyone thinks.” She wondered if there was a little truth in her mother’s visions. She loved her mother very much, and she hated herself at times for thinking her mom belonged in a loony bin.

Mat laughed. “Are you serious? It’s bad enough that your mom sees spirits and demons. If you start believing in all that, they’ll lock you up.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. Remind me why you’re my best friend again?” Kara decided to drop the subject. She focused on the gallery sign as she ran. “Okay—I can see you now.”

Mat was leaning against the gallery’s brick exterior. His head was turned toward the glass doors. He pulled his cigarette from his lips and blew smoke into his phone’s receiver. “I think it’s starting. Hurry up!”

Kara felt her cheeks burn. Her heart pounded in her ears and muffled the sounds around her. She took a deep breath, hoping it would calm the fluttering in her stomach, and she sprinted onto Saint Laurence Boulevard. Her cell phone slipped out of her hand. It hit the pavement.

“Crap!” Kara crouched down to grab her phone.

A flicker of movement appeared in the corner of her eye.

“WATCH OUT!” Someone shouted. She stood up and turned around.

A city bus hurtled towards her. She stared, transfixed. The bus kept coming.

EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!

An arm reached out to her. She saw a split second image of two monstrous head lights.

And then it hit.

Thirteen tons of cold metal crushed her body. She didn't feel any pain. She didn't feel anything at all.

Everything around her went black.

A moment later, Kara was standing in an elevator.

At first, streaks of white light obscured her vision. She blinked and rubbed her eyes. She shook her head. The elevator was elegant—three sides appeared to be made of handcrafted cherry panels decorated with golden-wing crests. The smell of moth balls lingered in the air, like her grandma’s dusty old closet. When her eyesight improved, she realized she wasn’t alone.

On a wooden chair, facing the elevator's control panel, covered in black fur, and wearing a pair of green Bermuda shorts, from which protruded two hand-like callused feet—sat a *monkey*.

It spun on its seat, wrapped its feet around the backrest of the chair, opened its coconut-shaped mouth and said—in a British accent—“Hello, Miss.”

Kara's jaw dropped, and she swallowed the urge to cry out. She stared at the beast, terror rising up inside her.

His hairless face crinkled into a grin, so that he looked like an oversized walnut. His square head sat directly on powerful shoulders. He raised his chin and looked down upon Kara. His yellow eyes mesmerized her. She couldn't look away.

He looks like Old Man Nelson from the hardware store, she thought wildly.

After a minute, Kara was able to force some words out of her mouth.

“H...hey there, little talking-monkey-person,” she croaked. “How's it going?”

Her throat was dry. She tried to swallow, but all she could do was contract her throat muscles.

“I have to remember to tell Mat about this tomorrow,” she whispered to herself.

The monkey frowned. Then he growled. “I'm not a *monkey*, Miss. I'm a chimpanzee! You mortals are all the same. Monkey-this, monkey-that. Might as well call me a *dog*!” A splatter of spit hit Kara's face as the words escaped his lips.

Kara retched as she wiped the spit from her face. It was yellowish green and smelled like a bad case of gingivitis.

“Ah...sorry, monk—chimpanzee.”

She rubbed her hand on her blue jeans. “Gross! This is really nasty—it's all sticky!”

The chimp glared at Kara with disdain. “*Chimp* Number 5M51, if you please.”

He then began to scratch his behind and only stopped once he noticed Kara's disgusted expression.

“You'll be arriving at your destination momentarily.” And with that, he turned his attention back to the control panel—hands away from his butt.

Gradually, Kara began to feel more awake, as though she had woken from a long sleep. Reality slowly crawled back in. She bit her lower lip as she told herself to *think*.

“Um, what destination? Where are we going?” she asked.

Chimp 5M51 turned his head and smiled, exposing rows of crooked yellow teeth. His eyes locked onto hers. “To Orientation, of course. Level One.”

“Orientation?”

“Yes. All mortals who have passed must go through Orientation. That's where you're going.” Chimp 5M51 clamped his feet around the edges of the chair and extended an abnormally long arm in the direction of the elevator's control pane. He pointed to the brass buttons.

Kara leaned over for a better view. The panel read:

1. Orientation

2. Operations

3. Miracles Divisions

4. Hall of Souls

5. Department of Defense

6. Council of Ministers

7. The Chief

“OUCH!” cried Kara, “Hey—what the—?”

Chimp 5M51 had picked a flake of dry scalp off Kara's head. He popped it in his mouth and swallowed.

“Mmmmh. My apologies, I couldn't help myself. I am a primate, after all.”

“Freak,” mumbled Kara crossly, as she rubbed her scalp.

A feeling of dread slowly rose up inside her. She stared at the panel. “This—this doesn't make sense. I—I'm dreaming. This is a dream!”

Kara shut her eyes and pressed her back against the elevator wall, trembling. “It *can't* be happening. It just *can't*! I need to wake up now!”

“You're dead, Miss.”

Kara opened her eyes. The word *dead* echoed in her ears. The weight of his words started to pull her under. She fought against the sick feeling of panic.

“I'm not dead!” she hissed, “I'm right here, you stupid BABOON!”

“—Chimpanzee!” spat Chimp 5M51. “Think what you must,” he said, as he lifted his chin. “But, think about this. Can you remember the events before this elevator?”

Kara floundered, trying desperately to remember. Bits and pieces flashed inside her brain: a white light ...metal ... darkness ...

The bus.

Kara dropped to her knees. The city bus had hit her—pulverized her core and crushed her like a tomato. But then she remembered something else, something that didn't make any sense. It was coming back to her

now, like a faded memory sharpening into a clear picture. It flicked before her eyes. She saw an arm reach out and touch her during the bus crash.

Someone tried to save me?

“See? You're dead,” said the chimp, matter-of-factly, and Kara detected a hint of amusement in his voice.

She pressed her hand against the left side of her chest. Kara couldn't feel a heartbeat. She pressed down on her rib cage. Nothing. She clasped her wrist. No pulse. No beating. No movement at all.

“See. No beating. No heart—you're dead,” declared the chimp again. She felt herself wanting to punch him. But before she could start freaking out, she was thrown off balance as the elevator stopped abruptly.

“Level One. Orientation!” The chimp announced.

“Wait!” Kara pushed herself away from the elevator wall and wobbled up to the chimp. “I don't understand. What's Orientation?”

With his finger still on the button, he turned his head. “Orientation is where all the new GAs are categorized.”

Kara stared stupidly into chimp 5M51's yellow eyes. “What are GAs?”

“Guardian Angels.”

“Huh?”

Kara heard the swish of doors opening. A hint of a smile reached the chimp's lips. He raised his arm and pressed his hand on her back—

She flew out the elevator.

Chapter 2

Orientation

Kara belly-flopped onto a cold stony surface. Face glued to the floor, she raised an eyebrow. The floor vibrated against her cheek. She winced. Chaotic noises hit her ears, as though thousands of voices were speaking at the same time.

She lifted her head off the ground and looked around. Her jaw dropped.

She was surrounded by people. As she jumped to her feet, she saw they were gathered inside an assembly hall the size of ten football fields. Lines of people of every shape, size and ethnicity twisted through a maze of offices and corridors. The air was humid, and it smelled remarkably like the ocean.

Crack!

Kara turned just in time to see the elevator with chimp 5M51 disappear back into the ground. “Well, there goes one monkey I’m not going to miss,” she muttered to herself.

The commotion was louder than a rock concert. Kara pressed her hands to her ears. There were thousands of them, and they were all dead—just like her. They pushed and shoved one another, itching to get to the front of the line. This wasn’t exactly how she had pictured the afterlife, especially not with self-satisfied apes that picked from your scalp. But then again, she had never really given much thought about the spirit world, or death for that matter. She was only sixteen. She had felt invincible.

Kara was alone, lost and *dead*. She knew she should be feeling something like happiness. After all, she’d just discovered that life after death existed. Beside her, an oversized middle-aged man chatted happily with an old bald man. *They* looked pretty excited. Most of the walking dead around her seemed overjoyed, except for a few people who looked like she felt—nauseated and horrified.

Not knowing what else to do, Kara joined the line nearest her. She stared at her feet. She wasn’t up for a chat, especially with some stout dead old guy who was prancing around as though he’d just won the lottery.

But she wasn’t *ready* to die just yet ... she wasn’t *finished*. All her hopes and dreams—vanished into thin air. The soundless empty hole where her heart once lived was cold. She knew her life was over.

“Ahem.” Someone cleared their throat.

Kara kept staring at her feet.

“Excuse me, miss. Are you feeling okay?” the man persisted.

Was there any hope that she could avoid *sharing*? Couldn’t she just disappear?

Unfortunately for Kara, it appeared that he wanted to share. “You know, it's really not *that* bad,” continued the voice.

Kara stole a look and saw that the voice belonged to the fat old man. His face was plastered with a lopsided grin. He licked his pink lips in anticipation. “We're in Horizon! Alive! Can you believe it! Well—sort of alive. We're dead but alive! Isn't this great!”

Kara lifted her head. She tried to fake a smile, but the corners of her mouth were sewed in place. “Yeah. It's really great.”

The man beat the air with his arms. “This is *so* exciting!” And with great effort, he leaped into the air and twirled. His tiny legs kicked underneath his gigantic undulating belly. He hovered for half a second and then landed with an echoing *boom*. “Who would have thought that Horizon actually existed! Life after death—it's *real!*” If he wasn't already dead, Kara was sure his heart would burst out of his chest like red chunky sauce and hit his neighbor smack in the face.

She studied the man for a moment. “What's Horizon?”

He stopped twirling to give her an answer. “Utopia. Shangri-la. Zion. Elysium. Horizon is the afterlife. It's real and we're here! Isn't this wonderful?”

Kara scowled as the man spread his enthusiasm to his next victim, in another row of the dearly departed. She felt a presence behind her and turned to see that at least a hundred newly expired folk were bringing up the rear. The noise level increased, if that was actually possible. Kara hung her head and tried to cry—but no tears would come. She crossed her arms over her chest and stared into space.

Time seemed to have no effect at Orientation. Before she knew it, Kara was next in line to enter one of the score of office buildings that surrounded the acres of happy dead. She wrinkled her face and stared at the building. From the outside, it looked like a regular office: beige painted walls draped with beige colored paintings, beige industrial carpeting and glass windows with beige horizontal blinds.

Creative.

The door was the only thing that looked out of place. It was ancient, with a mammoth sized wooden frame, and it was decorated with a brightly lit neon sign which read: *Oracle Division # 998-4321, Orientation.*

Kara frowned. She wasn't sure whether or not she should knock. Sooner or later she knew she would have to make up her mind, for thousands of impatient dead people were anxiously pushing her against the door.

She sighed. “Okay, here goes nothing.”

Making a fist with her right hand she raised it to the door. And as her hand lingered in the air, the door swung open with a screech. The office was jam-packed. She sneaked in and stopped. A salty gust of ocean fragrance embraced her. Hundreds of scattered papers covered the ground and littered the desks. Filing cabinets filled the office, stacked on top of each other, twisting all the way to the ceiling—and giant crystals balls.

It was like a crazy bowling alley. Huge glass balls rolled across the office flattening everything in their path. Tiny old men ran balanced on top of the spheres like circus acrobats. Their silver gowns flowed behind them. Using their bare feet, they maneuvered the balls effortlessly in all directions. Like single entities, man and ball moved as one.

The crystal balls bumped into cabinets, and the men rummaged through the contents. They tossed their long white beards over their shoulders, flipped through papers and caused an avalanche of white parchment. Kara's eyes flicked to a drifting sheet of paper making its way down towards her. She jumped up, caught it and read:

Guardian Angel: Peter Jones

Class order # 4321

Rank: Rookie 2nd year, W-1 Guard squad, (lowest rank)

Assignment: Elizabeth Grand. 5585 Sherbrooke Street, front entrance.

11:42 am. Crushed skull by slipping down 2 flights of stairs.

Status: Pass. Saved Charge. Soul untouched.

Kara shook her head. She bent down and picked up another paper from the floor and read it. It was similar, except that this time it was Tina Henderson who had saved Affonso Spinelli from choking to death on a meat ball, at Luciano's Porte Vino Restaurant.

Were all these papers about guardian angel assignments? She let the paper slip from her hand. She snooped around the filing cabinets. Papers rustled under her feet as she moved around the office. Along the way, she discovered several smaller rooms from which more men emerged treading above their glass spheres like oversized unicycles. They all appeared very much engaged at the moment—

“KARA NIGHTINGALE!”

Kara nearly jumped out of her own skin. Her legs wobbled as she made her way through the towers of filing cabinets and followed the voice. Around the corner to her left, she spotted another office. The door stood ajar. There, above a large crystal ball, sat another one of those men, surrounded by piles of paper. He jumped down to a great semi-circular wooden desk. He wore a frown on his brow and gestured impatiently.

“Come in. Come in. No time to waste. Lives to save!” he said in a strange high pitched voice.

Kara dragged herself inside the cramped office. More cabinets were stacked on top of each other and spread across the walls. A five-foot round pool was mounted in the back corner. The aroma of salt water was strong in the little office. A low *tick tock* distracted her. Following the sound, Kara spotted a huge grandfather clock leaning against the wall to her left, its long pendulum swinging from left to right.

She walked over to the desk and stood with her hands at her sides, biting her lips. She opened her mouth to speak—but shut it again. Alive, when she'd get nervous, her heart would pound so hard against her chest that it would sometimes hurt. But not this time. No hammering or pounding, only nervousness with a silent core. It didn't feel normal.

She forced the words out of her mouth. "How—how did you know my name?"

The old man stopped ransacking his desk and finally grabbed a file. His eyebrows shot up on his forehead. "Ah, yes, yes. Here it is. Kara Nightingale ... aged sixteen ... hit by a bus ... pretty nasty way of dying ... so sorry about that ... soul was already chosen to be a guardian ..." He stroked his beard and was silent for a moment.

Kara cleared her throat. "Um ... excuse me, sir? Um—what am I doing here—?"

The man's head snapped up. "Doing here? Why ... you've been chosen, that's what! And now we need to get you started on your new job. Okay. Let's see here ... what's the assignment again ...? Oh dear. I think I've forgotten." His face cracked into a grin. "It's not as easy as it seems—to see into the future. You tend to get the present and the future mixed up! Now—where is that piece of paper?"

Kara frowned deeply. "I don't understand—what new job? I have a job?"

The file slipped from the man's hands. He fell forward to collect the papers. "Oh! Right!" His face lit up. "Well—you're *dead*, obviously. And you've been preselected to become a guardian angel! To work at saving lives! Isn't that wonderful?" He crumpled the papers in his excitement. "And today is your first day on the job!" He scratched his bald head. "Or is this your second day? Oh dear."

Kara stared at him. "Me, a guardian angel?" She remembered movies she'd seen with guardian angels protecting men and women from evil. She wondered if she would get a pair of wings.

"Well, let's see here—right. As a rookie you'll be stationed in the W-1 Guard Squad, of the Guardian Angel Legion, lowest rank. Your duties today will be to *observe*. Your combat training will commence *after* the orientation period is over—after your first trip." His kind eyes glistened as he looked upon Kara.

She tried to speak, but her lips were glued together. She shivered. She wasn't sure if it was because of the excitement of the situation, or pure fear.

"Your Petty Officer will enlighten you with the details." He closed the file, slammed it down against the desk with a *bang*, clapped his hands and bellowed, "DAVID!"

Kara glanced sideways and turned her head. A handsome teenager, a year or two older than her, popped into the doorway. His broad shoulders were covered by a brown leather jacket, which hung closely around his muscular build. He strutted his way towards them. Two golden stars marked his forehead, just above his brow.

"Yes, oracle? You called—your *holiness*?" Smiling widely, he combed the top of his blonde hair with his fingers. He stopped beside Kara and gave her a wink. His laughing eyes were the color of the sky. Normally,

Kara would have blushed, but seeing as she was without blood flow, she felt a strange tingling instead, from the tip of her head all the way down to her toes, as if her body were under attack by hundreds of prickling needles.

The oracle jumped up and extended his arms. “Clara, meet David McDonald. David, meet Clara Nightingale.” His eyes darted from Kara to David. “*She* is to be your new rookie.”

“Uh—it’s *Kara*, not Clara.”

The oracle stared at her as if she had said the strangest thing. “Oh, right! Forgive me, Kara.”

David laughed. “They usually get it right after about a hundred times.”

Kara studied David’s face. His lips parted and twisted into a sly smile. He clasped her hand in his and shook it. She felt an electric current flow from her fingers to her toes. His hand wasn’t the blood warm touch she remembered feeling when shaking a mortal hand, but it wasn’t cold either. It was perfectly cool.

“Hey, there, Kiddo,” he said, as he flashed a row of dazzlingly white teeth. “Nice to meet ya. And it’s *McGowan*. Not McDonald.” He let go of her hand and lifted the collar of his leather jacket.

“Um—hi ... it’s just ... let me get this straight,” stammered Kara. “I’m getting a new job as a guardian angel, and you’re going to be like my boss? Is that what’s happening here?”

“You better believe it, cutie.” David marched up and grabbed her dossier from the oracle.

“I think I’m losing my mind.”

“No—you’re just dead.”

Dead, Kara thought. She wanted to dissolve on the spot. She might be dead, but her core could still feel pain.

“Come closer, Clara,” said the oracle. With his feet, he steered his crystal ball away from the desk and came towards her. “It is time for you to take the oath! Or did you take it already? Oh dear. Here I go again, mixing everything up! Have we been here before?”

Kara shook her head. “Uh—no. What oath? I never took an oath.”

“Oh good,” sighed the Oracle. “It is the oath all guardian angels must swear to. A sealed oath which can only be broken if the soul dies.” A sudden glow emanated from the crystal ball, bathing the oracle’s feet in a soft white light. The brightness subsided. A cloud-like mist formed from inside the globe. It swirled around, changing its form with every twist. The oracle pressed his wrinkled hands together in front of his chest, his eyes still fixed on Kara’s. To her great surprise, they started to change color—morphing from blue to brilliant golden.

Kara’s eyes widened as she backed away. “Wait! What if I don’t *want* to become a guardian angel? Can’t I just go back home?” This was all happening so fast that she wasn’t sure she wanted to be part of it.

The oracle shook his head. “I’m afraid not. This is how it has to be ... there is no other way. Your life as you knew it is over. Today—you’re starting your new life and your new job.”

She blinked, her mind working overtime. It had to be better than doing nothing, being *really* dead. And then there were the broad shoulders of Petty Officer Dav—

“Come closer,” said the oracle sternly.

Fighting the urge to run away from David and the oracle, Kara stepped forward. “Wait a minute—I think you’re making a mistake. I don’t think I’m the right person for this job—”

The oracle put a finger to his lips and nodded imperiously. “The Chief has chosen *you*, Clara, to join his army, to become one of his guardian angels, a true and sacred honor.” His golden stare hypnotized Kara. “Now, you must repeat after me.”

Kara nodded.

The oracle continued. “I, Clara Nightingale—”

“It’s Kara.”

“Oh no! Did I get it wrong again? My memory is not what it used to be.” The oracle smiled and wiped his brow.

“Let’s start this again.” He cleared his throat. “I, *Kara* Nightingale, declare myself servant of the Legion of Angels. I will perform my duties as a guardian angel wholeheartedly. May the witnesses of my oath hold me to it.”

Kara felt foolish but repeated everything word for word anyway.

“We will hold you to it!” declared the oracle and David together.

And then something strange happened. First, the oracle’s skin started to blaze a soft golden color, and then he leaned forward and pressed his thumb on Kara’s forehead. His touch burned a spot between her eyebrows and sent a sizzle of electricity from her head to her fingertips. She felt heavier somehow, as though the simple touch had weighed her down. After a moment the oracle leaned back, and Kara watched his eyes slowly return to their natural blue color. The crystal ball shimmered and then lost all of its brilliance.

She reached up and touched her forehead, running her fingers along the spot where she had felt it burn. Her brows drew together. She could feel the outlines of a star—just like David’s. The oracle had branded one on her as well.

“I have a *star* on my forehead?” said Kara, which was more of a statement rather than a question, as she rubbed her brow. A tiny smile reached her lips.

“It is the symbol of the Legion of Angels. You are a guardian angel now—you swore the oath.” The oracle steered his crystal ball back to the other side of his desk and sat back down. He glanced at the clock. “And now *you* have a job to do. Time is of the essence! Daniel!”

David flipped a black duffel bag over his shoulder and strutted over to the pool. “That’s me. Let’s go, Kiddo. We only have a half hour to get to Mrs. Wilkins, before she dies in a weird dishwasher accident.” He climbed up the little ladder hanging over the edge of the pool and stepped onto the ledge.

Kara frowned. “Hold on. You mean to tell me, that to reach Mrs. what’s-her-name, we have to jump into the pool?”

“That’s right,” answered David as he lowered his bag and jammed the file into it.

It was too weird. But then again, she *was* dead—walking, talking, with a golden star burned into her forehead.

She took a few tentative steps towards the pool. “Wait a minute—how come *I* wasn’t saved? Where’s *my* guardian angel?” Images of her life flicked inside her head—her family, her friends, her paintings. “Why wasn’t there anyone to save me?”

David zipped up the bag and threw it over his shoulder. He flicked his eyes down at Kara and grinned widely. “You were saved—well, your *soul* was, that is.”

“Huh?”

His eyes were thoughtful as they rested on her. “Your soul was chosen. You were destined to become a GA. It was just a matter of time before you died and were shipped up to Horizon! We’re running low on guardian angels you see, and you were next on the list.” He winked.

“I was *chosen*?”

“Yup. By The Chief himself. Thinks you’ve got what it takes to do the job. And—speaking of the job, we have to go—” David threw out his hand and beckoned her to join him.

“So—how do you know what’s going to happen to her—that woman—before it happens?” Kara clamped her hands around the metal pool’s railing. It was cool. “I mean, how is that possible?”

“You forget where you are. Oracles can see into the future. It is their gift. They know days before that someone is about to die. So they assign a guardian angel to save that person’s soul. It’s your job to save them, no matter what, before the demons devour it.”

“Demons?” Kara’s eyes widened. She felt her body tense. It took a few seconds to gather herself. “Are you kidding me?” An image of her mother flashed in her mind’s eye.

She turned her attention to the oracle who was ignoring their conversation completely. His eyes were gold again. He stared into space, still as a statue. Kara wondered if the little man was scrying into the future at this very moment.

“The oracle’s busy now. He’s doing his job; now it’s *our* turn.” David grabbed hold of Kara’s arm and pulled her up the little staircase, settling her next to him. His gaze narrowed. “Now—listen carefully. Are you listening?”

“I’m all ears.” But Kara couldn't shake it off, the feeling of dread. Demons were her mother’s favorite subjects—a crazed woman’s imaginary foes—right? “No-no one said anything about demons.” She tried to put on a brave face for David, but she knew it wasn’t working.

“Don’t worry. Nothing’s gonna happen—it’s a real easy assignment, trust me. We’ll be back before you know it.”

He smiled and studied her face. His blue eyes glistened. “Up here, water is important. Remember that. It’s the gateway between Horizon and Earth—it's how we travel.” He flashed another smile, his teeth exposing their radiance. “So we have to jump in. You ready?” He grabbed Kara by the elbow, edging her forward.

Kara stared at the pool's reflections, imagining demons in the deep water—waiting for her.

“All right then,” said David, “on the count of three—”

“What? Wait! I'm not sure I want to do this—”

“One ...”

Kara jerked her arm around, desperately trying to rid it of David’s iron grip.

“Two ...”

“Wait!” Squealed Kara. “I can't swim!”

“Three!” David pushed himself off the ledge and jumped, dragging Kara down with him.

She splashed into the water and sank to the bottom. The water didn't *feel* like water at all, more like fog, or a heavy mist, like when you've stayed too long in the shower. Kara could breathe easily, somehow, probably because she had no lungs. She turned her head and tried to look for David, but she began to spin fast—horizontally—with ear-piercing shrieks as whitish bubbles seemed to consume her. White light exploded all around her. Shielding her eyes, Kara managed to look down. The light was coming from her. Her entire body was illuminated by fluorescent white light. She felt a sudden pull and watched her body disintegrate into millions of brilliant particles. She started to flow away.

With a last flash of light, everything around her disappeared.

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