

# Light & Dark:

The Awakening of the Mageknight



D. M. Fife

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# **Light & Dark: The Awakening of the Mageknight**

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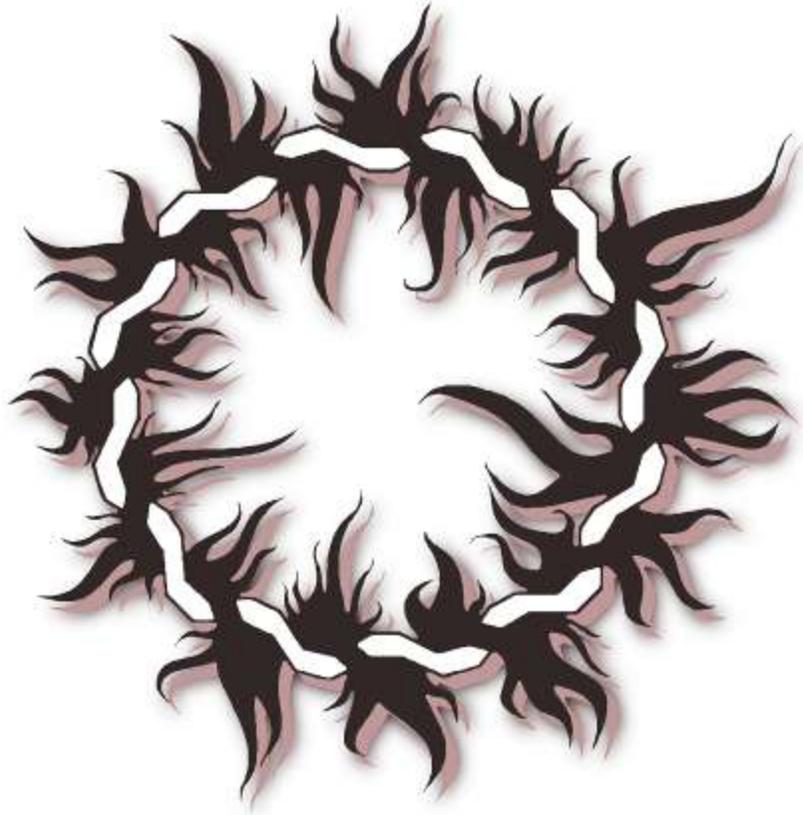
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## Chapter 1 - A New Face



Wake up!" Danny's mother yelled, opening the creaking door of his room. "You're going to be late for your first day of school."

"Alright... alright, I'm up... I'm up," Danny said, more out of instinct than waking thought. He heard his mother's footfalls stop at the side of his bed. Reaching over him, she turned on the lamp that rested on top of the nightstand near his pillow. The bulb hummed with power, the soft light it produced compelled him to pull the blanket over his head.

"Come on!" Danny heard his mother call as she retreated down the hall. Her voice sounded muffled from the distance, yet, still able to force his eyes open.

Grumbling, Danny drove himself from the warm comfort of his soft bed. Throwing the covers off, he put both feet on the floor. Yawning, he stood up and walked to the front of the closet. Examining each colorful piece of clothing that hung, pressed and wrinkle-free, on a series of plastic hangers, he forced his mind to the task of getting ready. He—or, rather, his

mother—had already selected the outfit he was supposed to wear on this particular day. She'd made up her mind the night before after what had felt like hours of indecisiveness. A pair of new khaki shorts and a blue T-shirt lay folded on a rocking chair to his left. However, now faced with the uncertain importance of a first impression, he was not quite sure what to wear.

"Danny, come on!" his mother yelled once again.

"I'm coming!" Danny yelled back, his frustration getting the better of him.

He yanked his favorite white printed T-shirt from the hamper and grabbed the new pair of khaki shorts, leaving the blue T to fall in a heap on the floor. Putting on the shorts, slipping on the T, he sighed with satisfaction as he looked down to admire the black dragon printed on the front of the shirt. It was still summer, after all, and although jeans were preferable, he refused to sweat just by the simple act of walking to the bus. He grabbed a black sweatshirt on the off-chance that he might get cold in the climate controlled school, then he threw on his socks, his shoes, and walked down the hall; his mother was waiting for him in the kitchen.

The smell of bacon and toast invaded his nostrils as his stomach made a low, rumbling growl. He was hungrier than he originally thought.

"Danny!" his mother yelled, just as he rounded the corner and entered the kitchen. "Oh," she said, lowering her tone of voice after seeing him standing in front of her. "I guess you are awake, then, aren't you?"

"...If you consider this awake," his tone thick with sarcasm as he stretched out stiff limbs.

Used to the morning cynicism, she ignored his tone. "Your breakfast is on the table. You should hurry. The bus will be here in about fifteen minutes and I want a picture of you on your first day of school."

Danny let out a long sigh, retrieving a plastic cup from the cupboard.

"Don't you sigh at me," she said, smiling, "besides, you look so cute in your new shorts." Doing a double-take, she added, "Where's the blue T-shirt I picked out for you?"

Danny shrugged innocently.

"Isn't the shirt you're wearing dirty?"

Once again, Danny shrugged his shoulders. He refused to lie, but he also refused to give his mother the satisfaction of being right.

She sighed, but, was content to let the matter go.

With sullen shoulders, Danny opened the refrigerator and poured a glass of cold milk.

"Hurry up, you still need to brush your teeth."

Danny obeyed as he crossed the short distance to the table. He made quick work of his breakfast. The warm meal filled him with energy.

Finished, he made his way back down the short hallway, into the bathroom. Standing in front of the mirrored cabinet, he inspected his appearance. Not too scrawny, not exactly built of brawn, Danny was, perhaps, the picture of an average thirteen-year-old. His short brown hair didn't require much care, but he ran a comb through it anyway. He stared back at the dark-green eyes that regarded him in the reflection with interest, eventually deciding that his appearance was as good as it was likely to get. He sighed, splattered his toothbrush with paste, and began pushing and pulling the brush across his teeth.

"Danny, are you almost done?" his mother yelled from down the hall.

Refusing to respond with a mouthful of white foam, he rinsed and spat.

The floor rumbled with the sound of heavy footfalls. "Danny!" she said again, this time her voice coincided with the rhythmic approach of her feet. She stopped just outside the door.

"Come on, Danny. The bus will be here soon."

Throwing his toothbrush back into the small cup on the side of the sink, he finished, wiped his mouth and opened the door. His mother stood there, in her blue cloth nightgown and yellow slippers, with a camera in her hand. Her hair, unkempt and frayed, was a faded brown, the same color as her eyes. She was pleasantly plump; perfect for hugging, a fact Danny enjoyed taking advantage of—just not in public.

"Come on, get your bag."

Since he had little choice, he moved with purpose, picked up his book bag and his sweatshirt, and walked outside.

"Okay, um... stand over by the bushes," she said, gesturing with her hand.

The sun had just begun the long climb into the sky; the bright morning rays forced Danny to squint.

"Don't squint, hold still," said his mother, her tone stern and commanding.

In the distance, Danny could hear the hum of the bus engine, the unmistakable sound of a deep, rumbling roar. "Mom, the bus is coming!" he yelled through clenched teeth, still holding his pose.

"Alright, just hold still." There was a slight clicking sound as the camera snapped the picture. "Got it."

"Bye, Mom." He didn't wait for her response, just sprinted to the other side of the road where the bus would pick him up.

"Have a good day!" Danny heard his mother call out.

The large yellow bus turned the corner down the street and had to stop at a stop sign, giving Danny just enough time to reach the opposite side of the street. The bus hissed to a stop and the sliding door squeaked as it opened. Taking a deep breath, he climbed the three steps up and into the bus.

The bus driver smiled at him as he passed by, "Morning, Danny," she said.

"Morning," Danny said, making his way down the aisle, looking out of the side windows. He couldn't believe it; his mother hadn't gone back into the house. She was still in the same spot, vigorously waving at him in her nightgown and slippers.

At that moment, he was glad that he was one of the earlier pickups—sixth, when he counted the other kids on the bus. They all wore familiar faces, but they weren't friends of his. With a quickened step, he moved back toward the rear of the bus. The door behind him squeaked as it closed and the engine thrummed with power. The sudden movement forced Danny to grab onto one of the seatbacks to slow him down. Using the slight force of motion, he swung himself into the second to last seat.

Slumping down in the seat, he stared out of the window as houses, trees, and cars flashed by, causing the hypnotic spell of movement to force his eyes downward.

"Hey, Danny," said someone from behind him.

Danny felt the weight of an impact as someone sat down next to him. Looking out of the window, seeing the white and blue house, he already knew who it was.

"Hey, Alonso," he said, turning to see the familiar face of his friend.

The slender, black-haired boy smiled back, his usual smirk. Of Latino descent, Alonso had a darker complexion, accenting the blue of his eyes. On most days, Danny appreciated his straightforward way of talking, but not today.

"Hey, your backpack is kind of stupid-looking," he said, gesturing to the puke-green bag in Danny's lap.

"Yeah, my mom bought it without asking me first."

Alonso Martinez was the kind of person who could talk for hours upon end about any subject that he deemed important. He was one of those who simply liked to talk, whether anyone was actually listening or not. Worse still, he lacked a filter; he would often say whatever came to mind, no matter how socially awkward. However, he was also well-known for his athletic ability on the wrestling team; his wiry build made him the perfect choice for the lighter-weight classes. He had a reputation as one of the best wrestlers on the team, allowing his mouth to get him into trouble only with teachers, while deterring peers from picking on him.

The bus, now full of students, screeched to a stop on a slight incline and lined up at an angle to the sidewalk that ran the length of the school. Danny, along with Alonso—in the midst of discussing his summer—was one of the last ones off. Familiar faces walked past Danny as he followed the line toward the double glass doors that marked the entrance to the lower half of the school. He allowed Alonso to go through first, holding the door open for himself and one other, being polite.

He saw a flash of movement in the corner of his eye; his heart sank to the pit of his stomach as he gazed upon a new face. Her skin was the creamy color of the pale moon, dotted by a collection of soft freckles. Her hair was jet black, draped just past her shoulders, with a subtle indication of curling. Her almond-colored eyes, accented by the slightest pull of an oval shape, hinted at her Asian heritage; they seemed to glow with golden flecks in the morning sun.

"Thanks," she said in a delicate voice as she breezed past him, the scent of wild roses following in her wake.

Danny gulped down hard, struggling for something to say. However, time refused to wait forever; as the moment passed, she disappeared into the crowd of incoming students.

"Who was that?" he asked Alonso.

Alonso's blue eyes darted into the swell of students. Turning back to Danny, he shrugged in response. "Must be a new student," he said.

The ten-minute bell rang, forcing Danny out of his sudden reverie.

"Well, I'll see ya later," said Alonso, bounding off up the stairs.

Alone, in the middle of a sea of familiar and unfamiliar faces, Danny walked down the hall that paralleled the gym and looked for his locker number. He found it without difficulty, made a mental note of its location and then ascended the stairs to locate his first class.

The day progressed smoothly. His first class was music, his second was math. He had yet to acquire any homework, but since it was the first day, that was to be expected.

Looking down at his schedule, in the busy hallway after math class, he confirmed that gym was next. He walked through the double steel doors that marked the entrance to the gym, just before the five-minute bell. He was surprised to see Chris Greene standing over by the bleachers.

"Hey, Chris!" Danny yelled, waving.

Chris Greene was his best friend and his only popular acquaintance in school, other than Alonso. Known for his aptitude in the martial arts, as well as the wrestling ring and football field, Chris had broad shoulders, intimidating biceps and an ever-present look of confidence. Practicing the martial arts, specifically Bushi Ryu Jujitsu, was a family tradition—a tradition his father had insisted upon as soon as Chris had been capable of walking. He was, perhaps, in better shape than anyone else in school. He was the last person anyone would ever try to bully, which often worked out well for Danny. He kept his brown hair trimmed short and his green eyes always seemed to have an air of wisdom about them. He was, over-all, the typical jock—except for the fact that he was, above all, a nice person and a good friend.

"Hey, Danny, how were your first few classes?" Chris asked, after waving back, closing the distance between them.

"Alright, I guess. No homework."

"Same here, but we still have three more classes today."

"Oh, don't remind me," Danny said, jokingly.

The final bell sounded, echoing throughout the gym.

"Well, I guess that means it's time for P.E.," said Chris, looking around, running his right hand through his dark-brown hair.

"Alright, ladies and gentlemen!" Mr. Ingram yelled. The gym teacher stood in the middle of the glossy wooden floor. "Over here please, so that we can take attendance," he said, pointing to a spot in the center of the gym floor. "Now, when I call your name, I want you to sit where I direct you."

While Mr. Ingram called out names and organized the group, Danny took the opportunity to investigate the other faces that made up his class.

The first person he recognized was Steven Rooney, the all-around jock and bully. Big and bulky for his age, Steven used his size to intimidate others and push them around. He had a bulbous nose and a rounded chin, giving him a comical look that might have made others laugh if he wasn't a middle school bully.

Standing beside him as he scratched a scalp of long, curly, brown hair stood Marie Topeland, a mean-spirited young girl who thought the world owed her everything and more. With cold grey eyes, accented by a heavy dose of eye shadow, she looked lazily around the gym while sighing at her own misfortune. Her clothes mimicked those of the most fashionable. The popular girl in school, she seemed to always have the same smug look on her face. Mean, vicious, and condescending, she could often be crueler with words than Steven could ever hope to be with brawn.

Danny sighed at his luck. Of all the classes, why did he have to end up in the same class with these two?

Continuing to search through the crowd, he stopped, noticing one familiar person, in particular.

Her black hair, now tied up in a ponytail, left her softly freckled face revealed for him to investigate further. She wore a white T-shirt and blue denim jeans. She was slender, yet commanded an aura of strength.

"Chris?" Danny asked, nudging his friend in the side.

"What?"

"Who's that?" Caught in his own trance, Danny neglected to point out the person he intended his friend to name.

Without questioning him, Chris followed his friend's gaze. "I don't know, man. I've never seen her before. She must be a new girl."

No matter how hard he tried, Danny couldn't take his eyes off her. He had suffered the curse of crushes before, yet nothing had ever felt this strong to him. For some reason, he had to get to know this girl.

Her head swiveled in his direction. Danny felt his heart skip a beat as he moved to avert his eyes, hoping she hadn't noticed him staring.

Someone said his name. "Danny! Danny Firoth!"

Danny searched the gym and found that all eyes were on him.

"Pay attention, Danny!" Mr. Ingram yelled, giving the other students an excuse to laugh. "Quiet!" he commanded, pushing a pair of black-rimmed glasses farther up the bridge of his nose. With slinky, black hair cut in the shape of a bowl and a bulky build, Mr. Ingram was a humorous, imposing sight, but no one ever laughed at him, openly. "You're in group B, Danny," he said, pointing to a spot on the gym floor.

Beyond embarrassed, Danny stalked over to his designated spot and sat down. He sighed as the teacher called out three more names, one of which, to Danny's sullen surprise, was Marie Topeland. However, Danny felt a little better when Mr. Ingram announced Chris's name next.

The students sat in rows of four, which placed Chris right next to Danny, and Marie to his upper right. Both boys gave each other a high-five as Chris walked over to where Mr. Ingram pointed.

"Alright, and now those of you who will be in group C," continued the teacher, after calling off the last three names of the students who would be in Danny's group.

Danny kept his attention focused on the new face. He was desperate to know her name; he figured he was relatively clever to wait until the teacher placed her in a group, calling her name out loud.

Mr. Ingram went down the list as Danny waited with a growing impatience. He listened painstakingly to name after name, and he grinned triumphantly when he heard the unfamiliar one.

"Sabrina Drake?"

Danny watched her with a focused stare as recognition flashed in her body's posture; she raised her slender right arm in confirmation. "Here," she said in a soft tone.

To his upper right, Marie snorted. "The new girl looks ridiculous. Just look at her clothes. And her hair—I mean, come on."

Danny glared at her, intent on doing or saying something in Sabrina's defense.

As if sensing his anger from behind, Marie turned around. "Boo, can I help you?"

Danny bit his lip and turned his gaze back to Sabrina Drake as she walked to her designated place and descended with a practiced grace, folding her legs as she sat. She flicked the length of her long black ponytail behind her so that it rested in the small of her back just before turning and looking in Danny's direction. Whether she'd sensed his gaze or heard Marie's comments, Danny wasn't sure. In either case, her eyes stared into his.

He felt his heart skip a beat for the second time as his body temperature jumped ten degrees. He dropped his gaze with a quick jerk of the head and turned to Chris, who looked interested in a girl of his own.

In group A, in the first row, second back, sat Ann Nelson. She was athletic, labeled by most as a tomboy, which Danny surmised held Chris' attention. Her deep-red hair danced as she talked with another girl behind her.

"You talk to her yet?" Danny asked, trying to puzzle out his own emotions.

Chris shrugged. "Yeah, but I think I'm stuck in the category of 'just friends.'" He held up his hands and made little quotation marks with his fingers to emphasize his point. "What class do you have next?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Uh," Danny said, digging in his pockets and pulling out a half-sheet of white paper, "Science. What about you?"

"Shop class, Ann is in the same class."

"That should be fun."

"Yeah, we'll see."

The time passed slower than Danny would have liked. The first day of school was always the worst. It was the distinct and final end of the summer, a time of freedom and exploration. The start of school signaled the end of fun and the beginning of learning.

Fantasies and daydreams danced through Danny's head as Mr. Ingram explained the rules and outlined the activities of the year. Occasionally, Danny would hear something that caught his attention, but he spent most of the time staring at the new girl or lost in his own creative delusions.

At long last, the bell rang, an indistinct tone came through the school's intercom system.

"Thank god," said Marie and, for once, Danny was inclined to agree with her.

"Which way you going, Danny?" Chris asked, standing up, stretching, looking in the opposite direction.

"I have to go to my locker and get my science book." Danny followed his friend's gaze and saw Ann in deep conversation with another girl. "I'll see you later, man."

Chris nodded, "Yeah, later, man." He waved and walked toward the group that held Ann's attention.

Danny searched the dispersing group and found what he sought. Sabrina Drake was about to walk out of the double doors on the left side of the gym. He needed to hurry if he was going to find out where her locker was.

Danny made quick time to his own locker, surprising himself as he remembered the combination without looking at the piece of paper in his pocket. Pulling out his backpack and stuffing the science book inside, he slammed his locker shut, spun the lock and darted off down the hall. He felt a rush of excitement as he dashed in, around, and between the busy students of the crowded hallway. Taking an immediate right down the smaller hall that led to the stairs, he weaved between two groups of bodies. He took the steps two at a time; he knew he had to hurry if he was going to catch her. By his calculations, she should be halfway down the upper hall. Luckily, this part of the school was much wider, giving him ample room to maneuver.

"Stop running in the halls!"

Danny knew that voice didn't belong to a student. Strong arms gripped him, grinding his progress to a shuddering halt. Danny turned around to find Ms. Samantha, the art teacher, with an iron grip on his backpack. Tied up in a ponytail, her long, blonde hair draped just past her neck, leaving her focused brown eyes to peer into Danny's frightened gaze. Her expression was firm, but carried an air of kindness.

"Walk, please," she said with a slight grin.

Danny nodded, "Sorry."

"That's alright, just don't be in such a hurry next time. You still have five minutes till class starts." She smiled and relinquished her grip, allowing Danny to disappear into the small stream of quick-moving students.

Danny trudged along in annoyance. He would have to find her locker some other time. He sighed and realized that he was close to science class at least. With the need to hurry over, he descended the stairs located in the middle of the long hallway and located the large, green double doors, the entrance to the science labs.

Taking out the small piece of white paper, he found the classroom and sat in a desk near the back.

The room, separated from the other classrooms by a series of thick boards on wheels, was in the shape of a crude triangle. Six science stations, each equipped with a faucet and sink, test tubes and stools lined the back of the room. Above each station were slanted windows with

white blinds, shielding the room from the sun. The entire science area was one large octagon, with six classrooms constructed in the east and west corners, three on each side.

Danny could hear voices coming from the labs on the other side of the building, most likely sixth or seventh graders. He heard two familiar voices echo down the hall, nearing the room. Danny recognized the quick-tongued boy as none other than Alonso; the other, a rather loud, high-pitched voice, had to be Matt Mickler. The two youths strolled past the wheeled wall and entered the room.

Danny was happy to see the pair of familiar friendly faces.

Matt Mickler, somewhat overweight, kept his bulk concealed beneath oversized shirts that tended toward the darker shades of the color spectrum, featuring his favorite metal bands printed across the chest. His jet-black hair was just long enough to get in the way of his purple eyes, causing him to adjust a pair of black glasses with thick lenses and heavy frames. Due to his tendency to be a bit hyperactive at times, in combination with his nerdy appearance, Matt was often the target of bullying. His quick wit and sharp tongue never seemed to help matters. He usually found victory in conflicts of rhetoric, but disagreements of the physical nature tended not to end in his favor.

"Hey, Danny!" Matt yelled. "Wait till you see my new card. Did you bring your deck to class?"

Danny nodded and dug through his backpack, pulling out a small rectangular box.

Over the summer, Danny and his friends had gotten involved in Knights, a popular card game, where creatures of fantasy and knights of legend were used to defeat the opposing players. The players were divided into three factions: Light, Grey, and Dark. The game pitted the forces of good, neutral and evil against one another. Danny's box portrayed the emblem of Light, an intricate circle of glowing white chain intertwined with links of black, engulfed in tendrils of darkness.

Matt pulled a small card box from his own backpack, with the symbol of Grey emblazoned upon it, a weave of grey chain linked in a circle. Matt had chosen the neutral faction for his deck, using technology and fanatical knights to win battles, while Light used righteous knights and holy dragons to defeat opponents.

"Look at this," Matt said. He pulled a deck of cards from the box, took the top card from the pile and held it up for both Danny and Alonso to see.

"That game is stupid," Alonso said, sighing, taking a seat in front of Danny.

Ignoring the boy in front of him, Danny leaned over to inspect his friend's new card—a heavily-armored knight in brass-colored armor sitting upon a jet-black steed. The artwork, as with most of the cards in the game, looked quite detailed.

"Wow, that's going to be tough to beat," said Danny, taking the card and admiring it. Opening his own deck box, he pulled out a crisp, glossy card. The picture on the card boasted a monstrous silver-scaled dragon. Written in bold, black lettering on the upper left of the card was the name of the dragon, *Tyramear*. Handing the card to Matt, Danny said, "I got that about two days ago, had to trade some of my best cards to get it."

"Wow!" Matt said, taking the card, looking it over. "We still have a few minutes before class. You want to play?"

Danny was about to say yes when a familiar face passed through the doorway and entered the make-shift room. "Um... no, I don't think we have time," said Danny, handing Matt's card back with a quick jerk of the hand. Retrieving his own cards, he put the deck box back in his pack.

Sabrina Drake crossed the row of desks and walked down the aisle next to Danny's, sitting next to him.

Danny's palms began to sweat, and the room seemed to jump twenty degrees.

"Hi, I'm Sabrina."

Danny's heart thumped with a heavy throb. He felt like he was about to pass out.

"Hi, I'm Matt," said the purple-eyed boy as he reached across Danny's desk with an outstretched hand. "Nice to meet you," he added with a smile.

After hesitating, with a look of puzzlement, she took Matt's hand and shook it, returning the smile. "You guys play Knights?" she asked, looking at the deck of cards in Matt's opposite hand.

"You know all about Knights!" Danny said, forgetting about his awkwardness.

Reaching into her small book bag, Sabrina pulled out a pale-colored deck box with the emblem of Light on the top.

"You play with the Light army?" Danny asked.

Nodding, Sabrina pulled out a handful of cards. "I like dragons and Light has the best-looking dragon cards."

Danny nodded, already knowing this simple fact. The truth was that he liked dragons as well.

"You want to play?" Matt asked.

Sabrina shrugged. "I don't think we have time."

Already, the room was filling up with a gathering of faces and a massing of voices.

Matt sighed, an obvious signal that he agreed, but he was also disappointed.

The final bell toned and an adult, Danny suspected she was their teacher, entered the room and held up her hand, ordering quiet.

"Alright, quiet down," she said. "My name is Mrs. Turner; I'll be teaching you biology this year." She was slender, with dark-red hair, with a voice that demanded attention.

However, that didn't stop Danny from focusing his attention on Sabrina as she slipped the white deck box back into her pack.

The hour passed more slowly than Danny could have imagined. He fluctuated between daydreams, the lecture and staring at Sabrina, who sat attentively next to him.

After what seemed like hours, the bell rang, signaling the end of the class. Looking over, Danny noticed that Sabrina had her science book open in front of her, as did anyone else who had been paying the least bit of attention. Looking down at his own empty desk, he realized that he needed to buy some time if he was going to walk with the new girl.

Bending over, Danny rifled through his backpack, attempting to give the appearance that he was searching for something. Looking over, he noticed that Sabrina was just about done packing.

"You coming, Danny?" Matt asked.

Looking up, Danny sighed.

Matt and Alonso were waiting by the exit. Matt's left foot thumped with impatience.

Standing up, Danny pulled his pack over his shoulder and looked over to find Sabrina smiling at him, still getting her things organized.

"Bye," she said in a musical tone, returning to the task of putting her book back in her bag.

"Bye," Danny said, he stalked off to where his friends waited.

Two more classes remained, history and English. Danny walked into his history classroom and sighed; he saw Steven Rooney sitting at the back.

*At least the day is almost over*, he thought, taking a seat toward the front. Danny wanted little to do with the troublemaker in the back of the room.

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## Chapter 2 - Trigger of Power



Danny awoke to the same sound most mornings, the high-pitched voice of his mother yelling his name.

Stretching, he yawned and went through the motions of the morning. He got dressed, ate breakfast, brushed his teeth, gave his mother a goodbye hug and went out to meet the bus.

The universe seemed right. Once again, Alonso plopped down next to him in the same seat that he always did, continuing to make meaningless small talk. Danny had come to learn that Alonso had a tendency to tell some outrageous fibs from time to time, yet they tended to be more amusing than anything else, so he felt content to let his friend babble.

A month had gone by; the sun rose just as it always did, casting a warm glow onto Danny's left cheek, Alonso continued to tell his tall tale.

The bus door screeched open and Danny followed in the tradition of standing up behind his friend, even though he'd been sitting toward the back. It would still be a little while before the line started moving. After a few moments, he worked his way to the front of the bus, greeted by chilly air. Winter hinted its approach, but he found the cool breeze refreshing.

The school day progressed just like any other day. Danny participated in a heated game of baseball during gym class; he struggled to make interesting small talk with his lab partner, Sabrina, in science class and he ate lunch with Matt, Chris, and Alonso. At least, it seemed like a normal day.

"Hey, Firoth!" an obnoxious voice yelled out, loud, deep, and throaty.

Danny stopped in mid-step. He was almost to the bus. He sighed, he knew whose voice had beckoned him. Turning, his fears were confirmed as he spotted Steven Rooney and his goons walking straight toward him.

Clay Tanter stood to Steven's left, Clay was a tall, slender boy with slick black hair, known for his ability on the football team as the school's quarterback. Marie Topeland swayed menacingly on Stephen's right.

"Hold on, Firoth, I'm talking to you."

Danny looked around for anyone who could offer some assistance; he found only sympathy in the faces that regarded him. They weren't about to help him—his friend Chris was nowhere to be found. Alonso was probably already on the bus and Matt couldn't help, even if he was around and willing—he was no fighter.

Steven walked up and stopped a few feet from Danny's face. "You think it's funny, I failed that history test, Firoth?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I saw you laugh when Mrs. Swortsberger blurted out that I had the lowest grade in the class."

"Hey, Danny, what's going on?" a familiar voice asked from behind.

Danny turned to find Doug Garrett standing nearby. Doug was a newcomer to his circle of friends, as well as a Knights gamer. Doug dressed in the latest fashions, faded jeans, flip-flops, and light-colored polos—blue today. He often moved in the upper circles and kept himself distanced from those who would threaten him with bodily harm. No one ever seemed to be safe from Steven.

Looking on with a mixture of curiosity and fear, Doug stopped mid-step as he saw Steven Rooney looming just beyond him, where Danny stood.

"Get lost, fatty."

Doug was modestly plump—but Steven had the worst timing ever.

"Don't call him that!" Danny yelled, growing a backbone.

"What're you gonna do about it, Firoth?" Steven asked, inching forward so that his face was only a short distance from Danny's.

"I'm going to..."

"Shut up," interrupted Steven, stepping within striking distance, shoving Danny backwards.

Danny stumbled back and felt his body topple over. Instead of fighting the fall, he embraced it, rolling his body into a small ball. He planted both hands on the hard cement of the sidewalk; his back began to lift like a teeter-totter and he pushed himself upward. He landed flat on his feet with his fists balled up, poised for a fight.

"Oh, you wanna fight, Firoth?" Steven snickered.

Looking down at himself, Danny noticed his stance and his clenched fists. He hadn't done that on purpose, he really didn't want to fight. Looking around, he noticed that the confrontation was drawing a crowd. If he backed down now, he'd surely earn the label of coward. However, if he didn't, he knew he was going to get hurt. *What do I do now?*

Danny desperately wanted to run away, but he held his ground.

Steven stepped closer. "Oh, you're gonna get it now, Firoth," drawing back his right fist.

Time seemed to slow as Danny focused his mind, he clenched his fists tighter, causing his knuckles to turn white.

*An outline of Steven's body broke free of his physical form. The silhouette was white, translucent, like a ghost leaving its body. It jumped forward with a closed fist, followed through and released a wicked right-handed punch that dissipated as it passed through Danny's stomach without the slightest hint of density.*

Confused, without a clue about what had just transpired, Danny stood still as a stone, stunned. However, he had no time to figure it out—time seemed to refocus, Steven stepped forward, moved in the exact same motion that the image had predicted he would, and connected with a solid punch to Danny's abdomen. An overpowering sensation of pain forced the air from Danny's lungs as his legs buckled beneath him; he toppled to his knees.

"That's what you get, Firoth," goaded Steven as he turned to leave.

Danny crisscrossed his arms around his stomach as he struggled to breathe. "It's... not... over," he said, wheezing through grunts and groans.

Steven stopped mid-step before turning back to face Danny; his expression was one of utter joy.

Coughing, Danny shuffled to his feet. He let his right hand fall to his side in a balled fist while his left remained clutched at his stomach.

Smiling, Steven stepped back within striking distance.

Rage fueled Danny's movements and focused his mind. *Again, an image appeared in the form of a soft, white aura, outlining Steven's body. It moved just in front of him, predicting his progress.*

"Are you sure about this, Firoth?" Steven asked, placing his hands on his hips.

*Danny grimaced as he watched the outline of the larger boy's next move.* "Positive," he said, ignoring the pain in his stomach.

*The aura surrounding Steven's body jumped forward as the phantom image of his right arm slipped down from his side and shot outward. Aimed at the tip of Danny's nose, the balled fist passed harmlessly through his head, causing him to flinch in an instinctive reaction.*

Moments later, Steven followed through with the same movement the silhouette had predicted.

Recovering from his confusion, knowing where the arm of the bigger boy would end up, Danny dodged to the right and aimed his own fist for the center of Steven's face. Connecting solidly, Danny's arm shuddered from the impact. The blow produced a loud thud, followed by a slight cracking sound; it sounded like a stalk of celery snapping in half.

Steven's expression turned from determination to surprise as he fell backward, his hands covering his face in a mix of pain and protection.

Danny stood at the ready, hovering over the larger boy. Steven was laid out on the ground in front of him. Danny remained still, fists balled up, prepared for whatever Steven might try next; he felt the eyes of everyone upon him. However, Steven never got up.

The only sound seemed to be coming from Steven's cries of agony as he clutched his nose. Crimson seeped from between Steven's fingers, streaming down the slope of his face, a sight Danny was not ready to see.

*I didn't mean to hurt him. It wasn't my fault. He attacked me first.* These thoughts, as well as many others, rushed through his mind.

Danny looked into the eyes of Marie Topeland as she stood behind her fallen friend. Her face showed a mixture of surprise and horror. Seeing nothing but fear in her gaze, Danny looked at Clay. Danny's sudden eye contact caused the slender boy to take a step backward.

"Danny Firoth!"

*That's Mr. Ingram, my physical education teacher.*

Strong arms gripped him and held him fast. "There's no fighting allowed on school grounds, you know that."

Confusion and fear spread through Danny's body like a forest fire.

Steven rolled from side to side, holding his face. A small puddle of blood began to accumulate beneath him.

"Take him to the nurse's office," Mr. Ingram said to Marie and Clay. Neither of them moved, shock still on their faces.

"Now!" ordered Mr. Ingram.

They nodded slowly, helped Steven to his feet and began walking back toward the school.

"You're coming with me, Danny Firoth. We're going to call your mother and tell her what happened. Then you're going to detention."

Unable to believe what had just happened, with no real choice of his own, Danny found himself pulled back toward the school.

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