

AKARNAE

THE MEDORAN CHRONICLES

ΒΟΣΚΟΝΕ

LYNETTE NONI

For anyone brave enough to believe in the impossible.

Embrace the wonder.

One

“Honey, if there was any other way, your mother and I would take you with us in a heartbeat.”

Alexandra Jennings stared out the car window into the dense forest and sighed deeply into her phone. “I know, Dad. But it still sucks.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” came her father’s reply. “But the International Exchange Academy is one of the best schools in the country. They’ll take good care of you.”

Alex only just managed to hold back the words that tried to leap from her tongue straight down the phone line.

Take me with you! she wanted to scream. *Don’t abandon me!*

That was exactly what it felt like her parents were doing, even if it wasn’t their fault. They’d been offered the opportunity to study under a famous archaeologist—a once in a lifetime invitation—but there was a catch. They couldn’t take anyone with them, which meant Alex was being shipped off to a boarding school for the rest of the school year—*eight whole months*.

And it got worse. Not only were they leaving her behind, they were also headed to some middle-of-nowhere dig-site in Siberia—as in, *Russia*—which was in a complete communication dead-zone. No phone coverage. No Wi-Fi signal. Not even a *postman*. Alex literally wouldn’t be hearing from them again until they returned at the beginning of June for the summer holidays.

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“I just hate that I won’t be able to contact you,” Alex said, not for the first time. “What if I get bitten by a tick and end up with Lyme disease?” Her eyes scanned the thick woodland. “It’s a definite possibility. And don’t even get me started on how many wild animals *Wikipedia* says are in the forest up here. What if I get eaten by a bear? Or a cougar? I won’t be able to call you and tell you what happened!”

Her father’s amusement rang clearly through the connection. “In the unlikely event that you’re mauled to death by the wildlife, you won’t be able to call *anyone*.”

“True,” Alex acknowledged. “But no one else will be able to call you on my behalf, either. That means you’ll miss my funeral and you’ll never get any closure about my death. You’ll always wonder if it was a wolf or a bobcat that enjoyed *Alexandra à la carte*.”

Her father chuckled. “I’m going to miss your sense of humour.”

“Dad, I’m being completely serious here. Carnivorous animals are no laughing matter.”

He wisely ignored her and instead said, “Your mother’s making weird hand gestures at me. I’m guessing the Valium have finally kicked in. I made her take a double dose—you know how much she hates *ying*—so I think the peacock-bobbing and *apping* arms mean she wants to talk to you. I better put her on before she takes someone’s eye out.”

Alex smiled into the phone. “Probably a good idea.”

“I love you, sweetheart. The time will pass quicker than you realise.”

Before she could respond, a crinkling noise sounded through the earpiece as he handed the phone over.

“Alex?” came her mother’s somewhat slurred voice. Another ten minutes and she’d be out cold—which was for the best, since she *really* didn’t do well on planes.

“I’m here.”

“I don’t have long, they’ve just started boarding our—*hic!*—ight,” she said. “But I wanted to say—*hic!*—goodbye, again.”

Alex frowned at the back of the seat in front of her. “Are you all right?”

“Fine, ne,” her mother said, hiccupping again. “I just had a little drink to help wash down the sedative. *Hic!*”

“I’m pretty sure you’re not supposed to mix alcohol with those drugs, Mum,” Alex said, failing to keep the humour from her voice. “And you know, statistically speaking, you’re more likely to get kicked in the head by a mule than to die in a plane crash. You’re going to be ne.”

“Of course I will be.” Her mother’s words became even more slurred as the medication continued taking effect. “And you will be, too. I know you wanted to come with us, but this is really for the best. *Hic!* You’ve been stuck following us around the globe for your entire life—it’s time you settled in one place and had a chance to make some friends your own age.”

Her mother had a point. Moving countries every few months while her parents chased the next big archaeological discovery hadn’t helped Alex’s social development. She didn’t have any friends—she wasn’t even sure how to *make* friends. High school politics were beyond her understanding; she had no idea what to expect from her new school. It wasn’t like she could just go and sit beside someone in the sandpit, eat dirt with them, and declare a state of ‘besties forever’. She was too old for that now. People would just look at her strangely.

“You’re right,” Alex said, mustering up as much optimism as she could. “I’m sure everything is going to work out great.”

“That’s the—*hic!*—spirit,” her mother replied. “Now, I better go before the purple monkey eats my last banana. *Hic!*”

Alex pulled her phone from her ear and looked at it quizzically before returning it once more. “What did you say?”

“I said—”

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She was interrupted by Alex's father in the background. "*Time to board, Rach. Say 'goodbye'.*"

"I have to go, Alex," her mother said. "I know you're going to have a fabulous time at the—*hic!*—academy. We'll see you in June. Not long now!"

Clearly the meds were doing their job, especially if eight months equalled 'not long now'. But Alex didn't want to ruin her mother's happy buzz, so she kept her mouth closed.

"I love you, baby. Be careful, but have fun!" And with those nal words, a quiet *click* disconnected the last phone call they'd share for a long, long time.

Feeling disheartened, Alex turned to look out the car window again, noticing that there were many more trees surrounding them now than before. It was clear evidence of just how easily a few hours of driving had transported her from her most recent home in Cannon Beach, Oregon, to somewhere on the outskirts of Mount Hood National Forest. The change in scenery from the rocky coastline to the thickening woodland was startling, and Alex couldn't help but feel like she was already a long way from her comfort zone.

"Miss? We're here," her driver nally said.

They'd stopped in a private driveway barricaded by two massive, wrought-iron security gates. A sign woven into the steelwork spelled out the words: 'International Exchange Academy'.

The driver spoke quietly through the intercom and a moment later the gates opened without so much as a creak. They moved slowly up the narrow, tree-lined path until they reached the academy itself.

"You've got to be kidding me," Alex muttered at the view out the window.

The academy really wasn't all that different from the stereotype she'd envisioned—big, ostentatious, gothic even. But the students?

They looked miserable. All of them wore tight, uncomfortable-looking uniforms despite the fact that it was Sunday afternoon and there were no classes until the next morning. And they didn't appear to be *doing* anything; they were just loitering aimlessly. It was as if they had nothing better to do than wait for someone to come along and break into the monotony of their boring existence. Looking at them, Alex seriously doubted she'd be able to follow her mother's advice to 'have fun'.

When the car pulled to a stop, she noticed a group of students mingling near a gaudy, medieval-styled water fountain. They weren't smiling. They weren't laughing. They were barely even talking amongst themselves. All Alex could think was that she would be more likely to make friends with a rock than any of the students scowling in her direction.

Don't judge by appearances, she told herself. First impressions weren't always accurate, right? Alex might not like being abandoned at the academy, but she was determined to at least try and make the most of her stay. And that meant keeping an open mind, regardless of the unwelcoming vibes coming from her new classmates.

"I'll take your bags," her driver offered, interrupting her thoughts. "You should head into the administration building and speak with the headmaster."

Alex grabbed the enrolment papers from her bag and handed the rest of her luggage over. She wasn't an official student yet since her parents hadn't had the time to properly enrol her before leaving.

"Which way do I go?" she asked the man as he started to walk away with her belongings.

He pointed to the closest building and left her standing on her own while the zombie-like students just stared at her.

Right, let's get this over with, she thought, gathering her courage. She wasn't an animal in a zoo, and she didn't appreciate all the

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speculative glances directed her way. Nevertheless, she held her head high and headed towards the administration building.

As she walked around the fountain she icked through her paperwork once more—partly to avoid looking at the creepy gargoyle statues around the water feature, partly to avoid making eye contact with the other students, and partly to make sure everything that needed to be signed was, in fact, signed.

Alex was so distracted by her papers that she barely heard the whispered, “Fish out of water, think we should help her?” and the corresponding, “Absolutely. We wouldn’t want her to choke.”

Before she could properly register the words, something slammed into her, causing her to stagger forward. She managed to regain her balance just in time to avoid a messy fall into the grungy-looking water.

“Oh, I’m *so* sorry!” a girl around Alex’s age said. “I’m so clumsy sometimes.”

“It’s okay,” Alex assured her, straightening up. “No harm done.”

“Brianna! You’re always getting in the way! You almost sent the new girl into the fountain. What kind of a welcome would that have been?” said another girl who stepped up beside them.

“Really, it’s *ne*,” Alex said again. She didn’t want to cause any problems before school even started. It was bad enough that she was transferring mid semester.

“It’s *ne*?” the newest girl repeated with a toothy grin. “Hear that, Brianna? She said it’s *ne*.”

Alex wasn’t sure what to make of their exchange. Their identical beaming smiles put her on edge, so she quickly excused herself. “I have to go and see the headmaster, but I’m sure I’ll see you both around.”

“Oh, allow us to help,” the non-Brianna girl said. “It’s the least we can do. You wouldn’t want to go to the wrong place and cause a—”

Her timing was perfect, really. The moment Alex took her first step forward, Brianna ‘accidentally’ tripped over her own feet again. She bumped hard into Alex who had nothing to hold on to and no room left to find her balance. With her arms cartwheeling uselessly, Alex fell straight into the fountain.

The moment her head broke through the surface of the water, she heard non-Brianna gleefully finish the last word of her sentence.

“—splash.”

The previously quiet courtyard erupted into laughter.

“Welcome to the academy, Newbie.”

Alex scowled at the two girls in front of her as she swiped her sopping hair out of her eyes and pulled herself out of the fountain. She ignored the continuing laughter and marched towards the administration building, determined to put as much distance between her and the uniformed—and *mean*—zombies as possible.

Barely five minutes had passed since she’d arrived at the academy and already she knew her parents had been wrong. Judging by her classmates’ welcoming committee, there was no way she was going to have an enjoyable time, nor was it likely she’d make any friends. Not a single person had tried to help her out of the fountain—they’d all been too busy laughing at her. That told her all she needed to know. She would just have to grit her teeth and get through the next eight months, and once her parents were back, she would never have to return to the academy again.

She trudged forward with bitter resolve and tried to air out her enrolment papers, but there was nothing she could do since they were just as soaked as she was. At least the ink hadn’t run, that was something.

Alex entered the building and paused when she caught sight of her reflection in a mirror just inside the doorway. Her clothes

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were stuck to her shivering body, her long dark hair was stringy and wet, and her normally warm brown eyes were darkened by her turbulent emotions.

She shook her head and turned away from her bedraggled appearance. So much for making a good first impression.

Dripping water all the way, Alex headed over to the reception desk.

“Can I help you?” asked the lady seated there, without so much as a glance upwards. It was probably for the best since Alex was leaving a small lake on the pristine floor.

“I’m here to enrol,” Alex said. It didn’t take a genius to hear the misery in her voice.

“Name?” the woman asked.

“Alexandra Jennings.”

“Take a seat, Miss Jennings.”

Alex shuffled over to a line of chairs and sat down with a *squelch*. She still couldn’t believe what had transpired outside. She wondered if it was too late to try and call her parents one last time—and convince them to find a way to smuggle her away with them—but she knew it was useless. Their plane had probably already taken off; they were likely long gone. She was on her own.

“The headmaster will see you now,” the receptionist said, still not bothering to glance up. “Down the hallway, third door on the right.”

Alex rose from her seat and headed down the brightly lit corridor, soon losing sight of the reception area.

If only things could be different, she thought sadly, knocking on the headmaster’s door. There was no answer, so she tried again, louder. When still no call came to enter, Alex shrugged and turned the handle.

It was dark inside the room. Pitch-black, in fact.

“Hello?” she called out from the doorway. “Is anyone in here?”

Just as she was about to retrace her steps and go back to the reception, the room exploded with light. Alex had to hold her hand up to shield her eyes from the sudden brightness. When she was able to lower her arm again, she stared in shock at the sight before her.

“What the...?” she whispered.

I must have hit my head when I fell into the fountain, she reasoned. It was surely the only explanation for the view in front of her.

The doorway opened into a small forest clearing. Sunlight streamed through the canopy of evergreens and their shadows dappled the mottle-coloured forest floor. The surrounding trees continued further than her eyes could see, with no school buildings in sight.

“It must be some kind of optical illusion,” Alex muttered to herself. She glanced behind her and took in the sterile walls of the corridor before she turned to face the forest again. She couldn’t wrap her head around the different scenery, but something about the dense woodland captivated her attention.

I’ll just have a quick look around, she thought. *No one will know. Then I can come back and meet the headmaster.*

Decision made, Alex quickly stepped through the doorway before she could change her mind. She expected to hear the crunching noise of dried leaves under her feet, but instead the ground disappeared and suddenly, impossibly, she was catapulted through the air. The wind rushed past her, whooshing by her ears as she flew along at what felt like the speed of light.

Just when she thought she might throw up, everything stopped.

Alex’s heart thumped wildly in her chest. She lay spread-eagled on the ground but had no idea how she’d landed. Her eyes were shut tight, but she could feel the leafy forest floor underneath her; she could smell the woody scent of pine cones

in the air; and she could hear noises—branches creaking, birds singing, wind whistling through the trees.

Hesitantly, she opened her eyes and looked around, finding herself lying in the middle of the forest clearing she'd seen through the doorway. But the doorway itself—and the administration building—was nowhere in sight.

The good news was that her airborne journey had somehow dried out her sodden clothes and hair. She wasn't even damp anymore. The bad news was that she had no idea where she was or how she was supposed to get back.

Alex sighed and threw her arms out to the sides, sending leaves scattering. "This new school *sucks*."

Two

“That was quite the entrance.”

Alex jumped to her feet, but she had to wait for the resulting dizziness to pass before she was able to look up and find the owner of the unexpected voice.

“Hello,” he said when he had her attention, a slight smirk playing at the corners of his mouth.

Alex had to blink a few times before she could fully appreciate the picture in front of her. He was, without a doubt, the most staggeringly attractive man she had ever laid eyes on. Almost unnaturally so. She guessed him to be in his late twenties or early thirties, and he had honey-coloured hair and bronze skin. He wore black from head to toe, the material finer than anything Alex had ever seen before. The tailored long-sleeved shirt was open at the collar and tapered by a belt at his waist, meeting a pair of leather-like trousers. The contrast between his tanned skin and dark clothing was breathtaking. But more than anything else, it was his strange golden-coloured eyes that captivated her attention and clouded her mind.

“Forgive me for startling you,” he said formally, gesturing towards himself. “My name is Aven.”

“Aven?” she repeated, sounding as dazed as she felt. Seriously, he was practically inhuman with his Greek god-like beauty. It wasn’t her fault she was distracted. “That’s an interesting name.”

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“Yes,” he agreed, his tone pensive. “I suppose it is.”

He looked at her like he was waiting for something.

Oh. Right.

“I’m Alex,” she said. “Alexandra Jennings, really, but most people just call me Alex.”

Aven moved his hand towards her and she tentatively reached her arm forward, expecting a firm shake, but he surprised her by bowing slightly and pressing a tender kiss to the back of her wrist.

“Charmed,” he said, his eyes smouldering.

That’s right, *smouldering*. It was something she’d only ever read about in books before, not actually witnessed. Alex was surprised when her legs managed to keep her upright. She desperately hoped he wouldn’t notice her blushing. Or swooning.

Alex pulled her hand back and tried to clear her foggy brain. She couldn’t figure out why she was so affected by his presence, even if he *was* on a whole new level of gorgeous.

It was only the observation that he seemed to know exactly how he was affecting her that allowed Alex to regain some of her composure. She moved a step away from him, hoping the distance would help. His brow furrowed slightly at her less than discreet movement, but his expression cleared quickly.

“Any chance you can explain what just happened to me?” she asked.

He raised one perfectly sculpted eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“Well...” Alex gestured to the forest around them. “I just walked through a doorway in the middle of the administration building and then, uh, kind of *ew* here. Where is ‘here’, by the way?”

Aven was looking at her with a curiosity that bordered on incredulity. “You walked through a doorway and ended up somewhere completely different?”

She shrugged. “I know it sounds mental, but it’s the truth.”

After a lengthy silence where he stared intently at her, Aven said, “That is... most interesting. Tell me, Alexandra, where do *you* think we are?”

She had to hold back a shiver at the sound of her name falling so gracefully from his lips. Clearing her throat, she looked around the forest again. “Honestly? I have no idea. I can’t even see the academy from here. Which is, you know, weird.”

A slow smile began to stretch across Aven’s face, transforming him from beautiful to radiant. But even as Alex struggled to maintain her slipping composure, she felt like there was something not quite right about him. Sure, he oozed charisma and charm, but it almost seemed... tainted.

She shook her head and focused on the leaves under her feet rather than his appearance, trying to clear her mind. “Look, I guess it doesn’t really matter where we are. But I need to get back to the academy and enrol, so do you mind pointing me in the right direction?”

Aven didn’t answer. Instead, he slowly moved forward and began to circle her like a lion tracking its prey.

Alex couldn’t help but think of all the horror stories she’d heard about psychopaths dragging young women into forests to murder them. There was something decidedly dangerous about this Aven guy, of that she was certain.

“Tell me, Alexandra,” he said, completing his circle and returning to face her, “do you find it at all strange that I happened upon you the moment you arrived here? In the middle of the Ezera Forest, of all places?”

Alex blinked at the unfamiliar name. “The what forest?”

Aven cocked his head slightly. “You’ve never heard of the Ezera?” At her quick negative shake, he asked, “Then tell me, Alexandra, how is it you know of Akarnae?”

“Akarnae?” Alex repeated, mimicking his pronunciation. *Ah-kar-nay*. How strange. “Never heard of it, sorry.”

“Then to which academy do you seek directions?”

She frowned. “The International Exchange Academy, of course.” Duh.

“I’m afraid the only educational institution nearby is Akarnae Academy,” Aven said. “Are you *sure* you haven’t heard of it?”

“Positive,” Alex said. “But are *you* sure that’s what it’s called? Because, despite my crazy ying experience, I can’t be that far from the building I was thrown out of. The International Exchange Academy must be around here somewhere.”

“Oh, Alexandra, you have no idea how pleased I am to have found you,” Aven said, his eyes alight.

Alex took another step away from him as her inner Creep-O-Meter spiked out a warning.

He stepped forward, and she stepped back again. But he just kept moving towards her, his golden eyes glowing from within, trapping her in his gaze.

“I found you here,” he said, “just as it was foretold I would. *‘A chance meeting in the forest of greeting, their destinies will be bound as one...’* Don’t you see, Alexandra?”

She was still trying in vain to put some distance between her and the beautiful yet clearly deranged man, but her retreat ended when she backed into a tree, unable to go any further.

“See what?” she said, her voice quieter than she would have liked.

He stopped directly in front of her and reached out a hand, gently tracing his fingers down the line of her cheek. “You are to be my salvation.”

Alex’s eyes widened and then narrowed at his ridiculous statement. Just as she was debating whether to laugh hysterically at his words or knee him hard enough that he’d never reproduce,

he took a step away from her and tilted his head as if hearing something in the distance.

He stood like that for a moment before he moved back towards her, even closer than before, and leaned down to whisper in her ear. “I’ll give you some time to settle in and learn how to use your power, and then I shall come for you, Alexandra. Together we will rule all of Medora.”

He flashed his disarming smile again and stepped back, casually walking away and disappearing into the dense forest.

Only when he was completely out of sight did Alex breathe a sigh of relief. What a complete whack-job!

“Hey, what are you doing out here?”

Alex spun around at the new voice, and in her haste she tripped over a bulging tree root, lost her balance, and sprawled face-first onto the forest floor. She heard the sound of suppressed laughter and groaned quietly into the leafy cushions surrounding her before pushing herself to her feet. In front of her were two guys, both around her age. Unfortunately for her humiliated self, both of them were uncommonly attractive, too.

“Maybe it’s some kind of hot-guy gene therapy,” Alex muttered, wondering where all the average-looking people were.

“What was that?” asked the guy on the right, his blond hair mussed by the wind and his bright blue eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Nothing,” Alex said. “Who are you? And where did you come from?”

“I’m Jordan Sparker,” said the blond, before pointing to his friend and saying, “and this is Bear.”

Bear grinned at her, and it was such a genuinely friendly expression that she unconsciously returned it. Just like Jordan, he also had a mischievous look about him, but his shaggy dark hair and warm brown eyes helped him seem less... devil-may-care.

“And you’re from...?” she prompted.

“The academy,” Bear said. “Where else?”

Alex almost wilted with relief. Finally, some students who could show her the way out of the forest.

“Your turn,” said Jordan. “Same questions.”

“I’m Alexandra Jennings,” she answered. “I’m supposed to be enrolling at the academy today but I was thrown through a doorway and ended up out here. Then this crazy guy came along and went all weird on me, saying that together he and I would one day rule some place called ‘Medora’. That was a fun conversation, let me tell you.”

Both boys looked at her with amusement and she abruptly stopped her rambling.

“I think we’re going to get along really well, Alexandra Jennings,” Jordan said with a grin.

“Alex,” she told him.

He shrugged. “Sure. Now tell us more about what happened with this doorway?”

She repeated the story as best as she could, watching them both for signs of understanding. If anything, they looked more and more excited, though she had no idea why.

“All I really want to do is hand in my enrolment papers, and out where I’m sleeping, and put this whole day behind me,” she concluded. “So, how do we get out of this forest?”

Jordan turned to Bear and asked, “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“No question about it,” Bear agreed. “It’ll be a shock for her, but the best way is just to show her.”

“‘Her’ is standing right here, you know,” Alex said pointedly.

“Right, sorry, Alex,” Bear said. “You’ve just given us a lot to think about. If we’re right, then you’re the first Freyan to come to Medora in thousands of years. If not more. This is huge.”

“Epic,” Jordan said.

Alex looked from one of them to the other and asked, “What’s a Freyan?”

Bear turned to Jordan who cleared his throat and said, “Freyan is the name we use for someone who comes from Freya, the Original Earth. Medora is our world, which is Second Earth—kind of like a parallel Earth, but different. If we’re right about what’s happened to you, then you’re from another world.”

Alex stared blankly for a beat, waiting for them to jokingly cry, ‘gotcha!’ but their earnest expressions didn’t falter.

“Right,” she deadpanned. She was *so* not in the mood for any more first-day-at-the-new-school pranks. “I’d say it’s been great chatting with you, but... well, nope. Falling into the fountain was bad enough, you don’t need to continue this ‘let’s punk the newbie’ charade. So, thanks for the welcome, but I’ll just find my own way back.”

Alex chose a direction at random and headed straight into the trees. She half-expected Jordan and Bear to try and stop her from leaving, but they let her walk away without argument. She heard them following her and whispering to one another, but she didn’t deviate from her onward mission.

It took less than five minutes before the density of the forest began to lessen. The boys moved up beside Alex and together the three of them stepped out from under the canopy of trees.

“But—What—*How?*” Alex stared incredulously at the view, speechless.

Directly in front of them lay a beautiful lake, glistening in the late afternoon sunset. The forest where they stood led straight down to the water’s edge, and both the trees and the lake continued on to her right, much further than she could see. To her left, the forest cleared out into a grassy field which bordered the curve of the lake. Alex could even see a few horses grazing in the distance, adding to the picturesque image.

Further on from the fields and resting atop a small hill were a cluster of buildings, each one different from the next. Some looked like they were from the Dark Ages, while others looked as if they'd been built just yesterday. Two in particular stood out to Alex, if only because of their contrasting forms: one was a multi-storied U-shaped complex that was almost futuristic in design, and the other was a tower-like structure in the middle of the campus that looked like it belonged in a *Medieval Weekly* magazine. It was all very strange.

“Welcome to Akarnae, Alex,” Jordan said.

“What *is* this place?” she managed to say. “Where’s the International Exchange Academy?”

“We need to tell you some things that you’re not going to believe,” Bear said, “but you have to hear us out before you decide to ignore us, okay?”

She nodded absentmindedly, distracted by the picture in front of her. Where *was* she?

“Alex, *focus*,” Bear said firmly, turning her to face them.

Seeing their serious expressions, she hesitantly said, “Okay, I’m listening.”

They led her over to a fallen tree and made her sit down while they spent the next few minutes describing an impossible reality. When they were finished, she looked at them apprehensively, torn between laughter and tears.

“Let me get this straight,” she said. “According to you, I’m from another world, a world that was once identical to your own—this ‘Medora’ place—but over time the two places changed and became... different places?”

Yeah, that was really articulate. But they nodded, so she continued, “And people from my Earth—sorry, ‘Freya’—don’t know about Medora or how to get here?”

When they nodded again, she asked, “Then how do you explain me?”

“No idea,” Jordan said, grinning widely. “But I reckon we’ll have fun trying to figure that out.”

Alex looked from him to Bear and asked, “Are you aliens?” When both boys burst out laughing, she frowned at them. “Different worlds? Hel-lo! It’s not that strange a question, especially considering I feel like I’m the leading character in some kind of alternate reality movie. And you’ve just told me that there are all kinds of different beings in your world, not just humans. Give a girl a break, would you?”

“Sorry, Alex,” Bear said, still chuckling. “Rest assured, we’re as human as you are.”

Alex let that settle before her brain skipped a million miles ahead. “If I’m in another world, how can I understand you, and vice versa? How do you know English if there’s no England here?”

Even Alex had to admit that she was beginning to sound a little hysterical, but it was still a valid question, and one of many that were swirling around her head. Perhaps she should have asked something more pressing, though. Like, if she truly *was* in a different world, how was she going to get home again? Especially since she didn’t even know why—or *how*—she’d arrived to begin with! And her parents... Well, at least there was something good to be said about their inability to be contacted, since they would totally freak out if they learned she was missing. Alex shuddered just thinking about their reactions—or perhaps she shuddered because she was beginning to understand the gravity of her situation.

“English, England... I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jordan said. “We’re speaking Medoran, or the common tongue, and since you seem to understand it just fine, then I guess we can presume there’s some kind of cross-world comparison. Let’s just be thankful that we don’t have to mime this entire conversation to each other, and leave it at that.”

Alex figured she couldn't expect much more of an explanation, so she decided to move on. "Let's talk about this school of yours," she said, thinking over everything they'd told her in their 'welcome to our world' speech. "You mentioned something about Akarnae being a school for the gifted. What does that mean?"

Bear motioned for her to look at Jordan, so she turned to the blond boy. He smirked at her... and then disappeared into thin air. He literally *vanished*.

She gaped at the empty spot in front of her. "How—?"

"It's my gift," Jordan said, reappearing again and laughing loudly at the gobsmacked expression on her face.

"Your gift?"

"Transcendence," he said. "I can transcend—meaning I can disappear from sight and move through solid objects while invisible."

"That is..." Alex was lost for words, so she settled on, "very cool."

Jordan chuckled and squeezed her shoulder. "It's okay. You'll get used to it here. Everyone at Akarnae has a gift. Bear's is pretty handy too, especially when we want to get out of detention."

"What can you do, Bear?" Alex asked, even if in the back of her mind she was totally *ipping* out.

"I'm a charmer," he said with a wink.

She felt her lips twitch. "I bet you say that to all the new girls."

He laughed at that before explaining, "I can use my speech to convince people to do things. I literally charm them into action."

"That sounds kind of dangerous," Alex said. If what he said was true, then he had a gift that could cause a lot of damage in the wrong hands.

“It might seem that way, but it’s really not,” Bear said. “My charms are more like suggestions, you can either act upon or dismiss them depending on how much you like or don’t like the idea.”

Alex thought about that and said, “Can you show me?”

Bear shared a sneaky glance with Jordan before turning back to her and saying, “You must be hungry, Alex. I doubt you’ve eaten for hours, right?”

His voice sounded the same, but there was an almost hypnotic quality to his tone. Before she even realised what she was doing, Alex nodded in agreement.

“You’re probably so hungry that you would eat anything just to feel relief.”

Alex’s stomach clenched painfully. She was *starving*. What had she last eaten? A piece of toast for breakfast? She couldn’t even remember what it had tasted like, it seemed so long ago.

“I wonder if there’s anything around here that we can give you to eat?” Bear continued in that same mesmerising tone.

“Please,” Alex said, her own voice sounding strained. “I’ll eat *anything*.”

“Here, this will help.” Bear scooped up a handful of dirt and handed it to her. “It’s just like chocolate. It’ll taste delicious and you’ll feel so good afterwards.”

Alex reached her hand out and Bear passed the dirt over. Part of her was desperate to pour the chocolate-like goodness straight into her mouth, but another part of her was beginning to scream from deep within her subconscious mind. She paused in the act of moving her hand towards her mouth, her thoughts warring with each other.

It’s dirt, Alex thought to herself. *Why would I ever eat dirt? Gross!*

She threw the handful of earth to the ground and then turned to glare at Bear. “What did you just do to me?”

He and Jordan burst out laughing.

“You should see your expression right now!” Jordan gasped between gulps.

She placed her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes further.

“Oh, come on Alex,” Jordan said once he’d calmed somewhat. “Admit it, that was funny!”

She tapped her foot impatiently and asked Bear again, “What did you do?”

“You asked me to charm you, so I did,” he said. “I wanted you to see how it feels when it works, but also how when I press too far, your natural reasoning comes back into play.”

“So, you managed to convince me I was starving, even though I’m actually not?”

He nodded and continued for her, “But when I tried to get you to eat dirt, the suggestion was too different from anything you would normally agree to, so you snapped out of my influence.”

She shook her head in amazement. “That’s... Yeah, I have no words for what that is.”

“I just wanted you to understand that while it’s pretty cool, it’s not a dangerous gift because I can only do so much before you realise you’re being manipulated. So, no freaking out about me becoming some kind of tyrannical ruler bent on world domination, okay?”

“That particular scenario hadn’t actually crossed my mind,” she told him dryly.

“I kind of like the sound of it, though,” Jordan mused.

“Fortunately, it’s me with the gift, then,” Bear said with a grin.

Alex found herself enjoying their easy banter, but her mind was also distracted by the events of the last half hour. It was only just beginning to sink in that she was really, *illogically*, in another world.

“You look like you’re going to pass out, Alex,” Jordan said, gently grasping her elbow to offer support for her swaying body.

“You try looking okay when you’ve just had your entire world turned on its axis—*literally*,” Alex said, rubbing at her temples.

“What am I supposed to do now? How do I get home?”

“Don’t worry about that,” Jordan said. “Marselle will get you home, no problem.”

“Who’s Marselle?” Alex asked.

“He’s our headmaster,” Bear answered. “If anyone can get you back to Freya, it’s Professor Marselle. He can do anything.”

“Sounds like a regular Einstein,” Alex muttered, too low for either of them to hear. Louder, she said, “All right, let’s go see this headmaster of yours.”

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Lynette Noni grew up on a farm in outback Australia until she moved to the beautiful Sunshine Coast and swapped her mud-stained boots for sand-splashed flip-flops. She has always been an avid reader and most of her childhood was spent lost in daydreams of far-off places and magical worlds. She was devastated when her Hogwarts letter didn't arrive, but she consoled herself by looking inside every wardrobe she could find, and she's still determined to find her way to Narnia one day. While waiting for that to happen, she creates her own fantasy worlds and enjoys spending time with the characters she meets along the way.

Akarnae is Lynette's debut novel and it is the first book in her new part series, *The Medoran Chronicles*.

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