

PART 1: EARTHBOUND

Chapter 1

An all too familiar feeling stole over Pauline Marsh. Seated onstage in full view of her Carthage University peers, she went all weak, a useless pile of wet noodles.

The *pulse*. Again.

Damn! I wish this thing came with trigger warnings—or leave me the hell alone!

The first stage of the *pulse* descended as it had for the last dozen years, beginning when Pauline was eleven. First, a light fluttering, like moth wings, beat against the inside of her belly. She stared into the stage lights, hoping that burning eyes would distract from the onslaught headed her way. Blinded by the glare, Pauline nevertheless knew exactly what to expect. Footsteps rang across the stage from the podium. Dean India Nojes, the living legend who'd run Carthage's graduate archaeology program with an iron fist for decades, came towards her, bedecked in a black cap and gown draped with tassels, cradling a gaudy green-and-gold statue.

The moths beat rapidly as stage two of the *pulse* began its assault. Tingly, prickly skin followed by waves of electric shocks shivered along Pauline's arms and legs. The hair at the nape of her neck stood on end. She swallowed hard to control panting breaths as bolts of lightning charged up to shoot out the top of her head.

Keep it together, Marsh. The torture will end soon enough. It always does. At least the rest of them have no clue.

With every muscle clenched in an effort to keep still, Pauline peered through narrowed eyes as the dean, a fuzzy two feet away, began her speech. "It is my great honor to announce that this year's recipient of our university's most prestigious award, the Boniface Prize for outstanding scholarship in the field of archaeology, goes to..."

In stage three, Pauline bit her tongue. The hardwood floor fell away beneath her as she floated up toward the auditorium's rafters, untethered, on the verge of departing the only world she'd ever known and becoming something else. Reality and illusion collided, as Pauline looked down on the tops of heads while, at the same time, she hadn't moved an inch. The dean continued speaking.

"Pauline Marsh!"

Tepid applause. The dean held out the statue, waiting for Pauline to grasp it. She hesitated, then took it. What choice did she have? Pauline forced her gaze upon the audience of her peers—at eye level now. Scores of bored faces, most turned down toward the phones in their laps.

"In all my years at Carthage," the dean continued, "I have never met a graduate student with such an exceptionally gifted grasp of the art, science, and history of archaeology as Pauline. She is also only the second student ever, after yours truly, to achieve and maintain a 4.2 average in each and every semester of our program. Truly a remarkable achievement and Carthage is fortunate to now claim her as an esteemed alumna. Congratulations, Pauline."

When Pauline received the e-mail a week earlier informing her that she was the recipient of Carthage's most coveted academic prize, her first impulse was to delete the message and pretend she never got it. She flirted with leaving campus early to avoid the ceremony entirely, or better yet,

asking the dean to give it to someone else, a student who'd actually busted their butt, studied constantly, and pulled all-nighters.

Pauline knew full well she hadn't done any of that. And they were giving her the damn award, anyway. Thank god her foster parents weren't around to make a fuss—not that they'd come even if she begged them. Which she wouldn't, ever.

As the heavy statue plopped into Pauline's lap, she didn't crack even a polite smile, for the *pulse* was still having its way. A brown, filmy haze masked her vision. A rush of images filled her mind's eye so that all she saw were split-second flashes of seemingly random objects—axes, snuff boxes, buttons, wooden shafts, and countless more. So many images flying by, none of them having anything to do with her. And yet, the objects weren't unfamiliar.

Nothing about the *pulse* made sense. Not now, not ever. Pauline was resigned to enduring it. But only after years spent trying to find a cure. Because one thing was for damn sure: She had no one else to do it for her. At thirteen, she experimented with holding her breath until she nearly passed out. The phases of the *pulse* arrived undeterred. At fifteen, she tried drinking gallons of water to flush out the damn thing, like a nasty virus. Throughout high school and college, she tried lucid dreaming, praying to secular gods, calling upon an exorcist. Well, she didn't get that far with the exorcist. No point dragging somebody into a mess she couldn't explain to herself, let alone a stranger eager to cast out demons. If demons were involved.

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