

# Chapter 1: *The Miserable Failure of a Success*

It had been three years since the war, but what was left of the world still wasn't at peace. People had fled to the remote cities when the chemicals were dropped on the big cities, and they were overpopulated and under-supplied, at least Jade figured any cities left besides Oakfield would also be in bad shape. After the destruction from the world war, the national government was destroyed. The entire capital city was blown to a crater, and the poison made the area outside of the remaining cities still dangerous even to go near. The mayor of Oakfield was literally chased out of office about a year after the bomb. Vicious beasts attacked the city capitol building, and the mayor was forced from office by them. After that, the city went to anarchy with various clans fighting for power. There were riots, and crime surged. It hadn't even been an entire year since the official vote was taken and the governor of the state took over ruling the city. Due to the mess the city was in when he took over, he hadn't been able to entirely get control yet.

One of Jade's biggest fears was for her brother. The city she grew up in was bombed with chemical weapons. She was the only one from her family in the city when it happened. Her family had gone out of town for a few days to visit a relative, and she had to stay because of a project she was working on. Everyone in the city was killed; that was, everyone except her. At least she thought so. Somehow she lived, although she wasn't unaffected. She was left with an unusual ability, one that she kept hidden. Her brother wasn't as fortunate. Her

family was a few cities away. They were fine, except for her little brother, who was playing outside when the bomb dropped. He was affected. He couldn't hear anything except really loud noises since then, and he had an arm that hung rather limply at his side.

She didn't care. He was still a great brother, but AIMS cared. AIMS stood for the "Annihilation of Inferior MutantS." They were hooded men who were determined to kill all "mutants" because they wanted society to be pure to make a good future. Governor Willis Clark kept assuring everyone that he would stop AIMS, but it hadn't stopped yet. Jade had to protect her brother until it was stopped.

She looked out the window and called in a panic, "Mom, they are coming!" She jumped up. Both she and her mother ran to the other room where her brother, Tyler, was playing. He was eleven. Jade was eighteen.

"Take him out the back!" her mother warned. "You must protect him. I'll deal with AIMS."

Jade took Tyler's hand and ran out the back door. They lived near the outskirts of the city, so they had only run a little over a half mile when they reached the fence that had been put up after the war. When the chemical bombs hit, there were some people mutated, such as Jade and her brother; but there were animals too, animals that were turned into hideous beasts. The fence was put up quickly, a wire fence resembling one that might be found around a prison, to keep the beasts out. It didn't always work, but it beat nothing. The southern part of the city had an actual wall because it was there before the war.

There was a rip in the fence. That wasn't a good sign. Jade thought about taking her brother through it. They weren't supposed to ever go past the fence. Not only were there wild beasts, but they didn't have to go far before reaching the chemical residues. She'd better not take him there. They turned right and continued running, looking for a place to hide, but instead found what had ripped the fence. A very large tiger with tusks and horns charged at her. At first, she stood frozen in front of her brother. Then she raised her hand and blasted the beast with a small plasma ball. The beast roared and reared up on its hind legs. She raised her hand again, but suddenly found herself and her brother being picked up and set to the side of the battle. She didn't even see the person who grabbed them come, just a blur. She did see a dark-haired, broad-shouldered guy about her age jump in front of the tiger. He had a staff in his hand, one with dragon heads on each end. He used it to blast a fireball at the tiger before he jumped into combat, using his flaming staff to fight the beast. The blur slowed, so she saw the other guy who had moved her and Tyler. He seemed to be fighting at a very quick speed with balls on the ends of ropes. It was amazing to watch.

She raised her hand, thinking to help, but then lowered it. After all, she might hit one of them instead. She wasn't a fighter.

The battle was tough. "Go! Run!" the fire boy called to her. "Run!"

She wasn't sure what to do at first, but looked over at Tyler. He was terrified. Her first priority was to protect him, so she took his hand and ran back toward home. They hadn't gone far when her mother ran up to her.

“I’m so glad you’re safe!” her mother cried. “We have emergency supplies in the car right over there. She pointed to the street a little way off. “Your dad is driving.”

Unfortunately, the hooded AIMS members saw them and ran toward Jade and Tyler.

“Get in the car!” Jade ordered, signing her words too, so Tyler could understand. “You won’t make it if I don’t stop them.”

Her mother tried to argue, but Jade stepped closer to the AIMS members. There were five of them, not a big group for AIMS. “Stop!” she ordered.

They didn’t stop, so Jade raised her hand and blasted the one in front with a plasma ball. She hadn’t meant to hit hard, but she was panicked. He fell to the earth with severe burns. Hopefully, he was only unconscious.

The other members pulled guns. She wondered if she could melt them, but they might shoot her first, or she might melt their hands too. She didn’t use her powers often, so she wasn’t sure what she could do. She looked over and saw that her family had driven away. That was good. She knew where they were going, and if they’d waited or tried to help, her brother would have been killed. She wasn’t likely to be. Still, she raised her hands to chest level in surrender.

“We’re turning you in,” one of the men insisted.

“Who to?” she asked.

“To the police,” the man answered. They stayed there with guns pointed at her until a police car drove up. She wondered

why they weren't afraid of the police. Weren't the police after AIMS?

The police cuffed her and put her in their car. She was taken to Governor Clark. Walking into his office was intimidating. "You killed a man," he accused.

"I tried not to. He was with AIMS and trying to kill a boy," she explained. "I was defending someone innocent. Is the man really dead?"

"Yes," Governor Clark answered.

She started to cry and asked, "What are you going to do to me? I won't cooperate with being killed."

Governor Clark nodded and replied, "Yes, I understand you have an ability. Do not worry. We will protect you from AIMS, and I will give you community service instead of a death penalty, as it was in defense."

She breathed a sigh of relief and asked, "What type of community service?"

"You are to go to CAMO Academy and work with them for six months."

She cocked her head and asked, "What's that?"

He smiled and answered, "It stands for Cultural Arts Made Obtainable. You know that I have a strong desire to bring arts and culture back into society. There you will be trained to perform."

She nodded and told him, "I have seen them perform. They are amazing. I don't have skills like that."

“They will find some way to use you,” Governor Clark assured her. “Perhaps you can cook for them. Do you cook?”

“Yes,” she answered.

He leaned back and informed her, “Then you can serve somehow. I will have you sent there immediately.”

She timidly asked, “There was a man who fought a beast. He looked like a performer I think I’ve seen. Was he?”

“I have no idea of any beast,” Governor Clark responded. “Now, you will go immediately to the Academy.”

Tears filled her eyes as she stood up. She would spend six months there without being able to contact her family and let them know she was safe or to find out if they were. If she tried to contact them, AIMS might find them. It would be a long six months. “Let’s get this over with,” she conceded.

Governor Clark ordered her to be taken there, so she was taken to a truck.

It was several miles to CAMO Academy. She was put in a truck and escorted by armed guards. She thought of fighting them and fleeing to her family, but she didn’t want to kill anyone. She killed the AIMS member before. That was bad enough. She wasn’t a killer, so she went without a fight.

There was a wall around the Academy, a large wall. There seemed to be some force field by the gate too. She had no idea how that happened. Most technology was destroyed during the war, and that was way more advanced than anything from before the war.

They were let in, and she was escorted to the headmaster. He introduced himself as Fletcher Hunt.

“Everyone calls me Fletch,” he informed her. “Please, have a seat.”

She didn’t feel comfortable around him, but he seemed nice enough. He was probably in his late thirties, but he seemed very fit. He had dark hair and gray eyes which looked friendly enough. Still, he made her nervous.

The guards who brought her in left, and she sat down.

“I hear you have a special gift,” Fletch began. “You shoot plasma?”

“I can produce and control it,” she explained. “I have no idea how. Am I in trouble?”

He smiled knowingly, ignored her question, and instead noted, “This happened in the chemical bombing, I assume.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “What do you want me to do here to serve? I can cook and sew too. We’ve had to make due with little, so I’m good at doing things myself.”

He again smiled, but something about it was very uncomfortable for her. “I want you to perform,” he informed her.

“I’m not a performer,” she argued.

“You will be,” he countered. “This school is not what it claims to be. CAMO doesn’t just stand for Cultural Arts Made Obtainable. It stands for Chemically Altered Magical Oddities. You weren’t the only one altered in the attack.”

Her eyes went wide as she asked, “I wasn’t?”

“There were others,” he explained. “All the performers have gifts. You will learn to use yours for something productive instead of killing. Your gift will make a great performance.”

“How does shooting plasma look good in a performance?” Jade asked. “I’ll hurt people.”

“Don’t worry,” Fletch assured her. “I am assigning one of my students to you who has experience and can teach you everything you need to know.”

“Really?” she asked. She stared at him for a minute and admitted, “I am really overwhelmed.”

“I understand,” Fletch consoled. “We wish to make your adjustment here smooth. How can I help?”

“Maybe I need to sleep,” she suggested. “This is too overwhelming.”

He nodded and suggested, “I will get someone to show you to your dorm soon, but first I want you to meet your mentor.” He stood up, walked over to the door, opened it, and called, “Come in, Jaxon.”

Jade was surprised to see the same guy she’d seen fighting the tiger.

“This is Jaxon,” Fletch introduced, motioning to the dark-haired, broad-shouldered boy in front of her. “He’s twenty-one and has been here for three years, as has almost everyone. His power is fire manipulation. It is similar to yours, so he should be able to help you learn.”

Jaxon nodded to her and offered, “I guess you’re here now. I’ll try to help you make the best of it.”



“I’m only here for six months,” she informed him.

He rolled his eyes and responded, “Got it. Let’s go. I’ll take you to your dorm. Do you have any supplies with you?”

“No,” she answered. “I was picked up by police.”

He smiled and replied, “That should be a story. You can tell it while I take you to get some clothes and basic necessities.” He motioned to the door.

“It’s good meeting you,” she told Fletch before walking through the door. Jaxon followed her.

“I’m Jade,” she told Jaxon. “Jade Bennett. I saw you fighting the tiger earlier. What were you doing there?”

His look softened as he put his hands on her arms, looked her in the eyes, and told her, “Jade, there is so much to explain, and you are already overwhelmed. I can tell you that your family got away safely. I saw that. I can also tell you that this school isn’t what it appears by either acronym.”

“I’m scared,” she admitted. “I’m glad I’m only here for six months.”

He looked straight into her eyes again and warned, “That’s the first lie they told you. You won’t be here six months. You will never be allowed to leave.”