

Chapter 1

Dream and Darkness

Everything starts with a dream.

Karys Kitane lay in bed in her perfectly symmetrical house, which was surrounded by a perfectly manicured lawn, which lay side by side with other displays of perfection, in a perfectly planned neighbourhood. Full of citizens with perfect smiles, Westerly Shore bordered the perfectly wealthy capital city, on the West Indian island of Eryne.

Based on the planning, organization, and the sheer neatness of it all, one may naturally assume that all in Karys Kitane's life was absolutely perfect. And in this regard, you may be surprised to know that all was not at all well.

To the far east, in an indistinct corner of the meticulously mowed lawn, a shoot a shade darker than the other blades sprouted. As this shadowed shoot flourished, it spurned a scar on the face of Father Kitane's imported, bluegrass lawn, which he had purchased in convenient, compact rollout sections from Super Seller's Hardware Store.

For more than eight years Karys played Make-Believe on this perfect lawn. It was she who dribbled circles and gurgled spells into the very gap in the fabric of time. The gap

between that day the wiry shadon beni weed poked up: and the day Father Kitane.
launched his war of annihilation against it.

Somewhere in that break in time, a three year old Karys swam in an ocean of uniform green looking up at a chirping bird. This perfectly vermilion bird, had, unbeknownst to Karys, dropped the droppings which contained the weed's seed, only seven days earlier. And so we see, that while perfection often hides deep flaws, imperfection is, often times - meant to be. Of that you can be sure.

By the time the seed sprouted a flaming bud, and by the time Karys tumbled and toddled upon it she was neither grown up enough to dislike the thing, nor sentimental enough to sniff it and tuck it behind her ear.

Four-year-old Karys was a creature unto herself. She did the most sensible thing she could ponder upon. She devised a course of action that would enable her a practicable investigation and observation of the properties of the specimen and that would indulge her senses to a maximum effect.

She ate the thing.

That bittersweet taste had tickled her tongue, tingled her tonsils, and swirled in her stomach; infusing itself throughout her body. And since then, and for all these years, no one in her perfect world took much notice of her. Had anyone bothered to look young Karys in the eye, they would surely have noticed the scarlet glint. It shone like a distant star.

Of course there was no danger of her sparkle ever being detected, since Adults seldom bother to look into children's eyes. In fact, Karys had as a toddler, imaged her father as a particular pair of brown trousers, and sheer, charcoal stockings as her mother. It took some time to realise that her parents had faces.

When Karys eventually graduated from Boyo and Carla's Primary, and joined the great ranks of Avid Readers everywhere, she likened the experience of eating the shadon beni bud to that of Persephone eating Hades' pomegranate seeds and becoming his captive in the underworld.

The simple childhood experience of eating a harmless morsel of wild salad, lodged its memory deep in her psyche, because after digesting the scarlet bud, Karys discovered Dream and Darkness.

Dream came tapping on her window at night. Dream snuck in through the louvers, and with a single snore, she swallowed it whole. So it was that Dream discovered her; and wrapped her in warmth and solace. Like any cherished memory, Dream was always the same; both in essence and effect. And these are the things that chiefly matter.

The faces of the women were blurred but the bodies were warm. Though their veils shrouded them in mystery, their smiles were strong. The bodies sat around the cauldrons surrounded by dancing flames, while green candle flies cast emerald shadows on their veiled hair.

The magic they mixed had a peculiar smell and Karys noticed it at once because she had never ever smelt anything like it before. It was wild and entrancing and drew you in like the mesmerising charm of a Shaman's flute. Karys felt strange emotions and she noticed these immediately for the same reason she had noticed the smell.

Dream enfolded her and lulled her, and she felt a peace and a joy. And it was just as she was about to cast her wish that Darkness came.

Darkness was a hunter with a heavy hand. While the veiled women sat at open fires with amber flames and smoke curled upwards to the sky to mingle with the moon, Darkness stalked in the shadows.

Singing songs and turning pots, the women danced through the day with not one notion of the danger that was surrounding them in the bush.

They danced and dreamed, and told stories to their children about far off times when they too were young. This continued thorough the day and into the falling sun. Twilight came and brought a calm hush that made all suddenly seem so very still. And one woman wondered why on this evening the great, roaring West Wind was respectful and bowed her head and held her breath as this particular hour on this particular evening came.

The women all stopped what they were doing and drank in this unexpected hour of calm – a time that seemed so seductively peaceful that it sucked you into the safety of its arms. Karys, watching it always as one beholds a play, started to feel the drowsy intoxication herself. The moment began to cradle you and just as her eyes were about to close, the thing happened. There was never any escape.

In an instant, the cradling arms of the night started to choke, as Darkness rode out from hiding into the gleeful glen. Masked men strode pigfaced stallions that grunted and growled almost as much as their jockeys. Their hands were like talons and it was only on a second look that you realised the machetes hanging from their hands, cutting through the night showing no mercy.

Their muscular bodies lunged forward to slash through their victims and their gigantic frames imposed a suffocating fear that one could not hope to outrun. The most

frightening thing about Darkness though were the eyes- fierce eyes that burned and blazed but somehow simultaneously smouldered with empty, vacant stares.

The sound of the stallion hooves pounded the ground, and the Veils fled into the bush cutting tracks with their bare legs through the thorny undergrowth. They were bleeding and badly bruised, and slashed all about, but they were the lucky ones.

The mass of Veils remained trapped, clutching their children and crying out to the moon. They were trod on by hooves and dragged through the streets only to endure the final and ultimate blow of a talon that scratched through your self and took your life and the lives of those you loved.

The last image that these women saw was that of the iron masks that seemed welded to the hunters face. Darkness was an army with emotive eyes that took no mercy as they stared down on a Veil begging for her life or at the very least the life of her child. No lives were spared. No mercy shown. And Darkness washed over the land like a murderous plague with the only intent to destroy and murder, robbing all hope by cutting its way through bodies and strangling souls.

Flashes of sharp silver reflected the Luna glow and cut through skin and hair and flesh and bone until it reached a soul and then it lashed so hard that it made your very spirit scream and all that was the divided landscape, slashed in two by the sight of spirits spiralling to the heavens on one side, and the dead bodies scattered in the ground.

All was placid and all was calm in the aftermath of the blood-hunt, and the sheer quietness it all seemed almost reassuring. It enfolded you with at least the promise of peace and Karys gasping from the horror of this sight, settled herself and steadied her breath. She was lulled back to Dream, reading herself to put Darkness behind her when the most terrifying thing started.

The pounding began.

The sound was always the same. It started as a dull murmur of a pound like the sound of a distant battle of thunder mating lightning in a far away sky.

But the pounding grew progressively louder and louder and louder until it was at once primal and threatening and beyond escape, howling no promise but doom.

Karys could not sense where the pounding was coming from, and she looked and searched in her bed, under her sheets and then all of a sudden it dawned on her, and her pupils eclipsed and her stomach sank as she gasped and gulped at the pounding...the pounding of her own heart echoing the sound of Darkness coming for her.

Chapter Two

No Such Thing as Magic

Dreams continue as time passes but somehow you learn to live with your haunts.

Sometimes you grow wiser. Inevitably you grow older. And you try so very hard to keep the Dream and forget the Darkness that always follows.

Thirteen did not seem particularly ominous for Karys Kitane. She simply deemed it another unlucky year in the life of an unlucky girl. Two months in, and her prophesy seemed to be ringing sadly true.

St. Christopher's Preparatory, home, ballet classes (which she sucked at) – life was nothing but one dull saw sawing back and forth. This could not be denied though she couldn't as yet quite determine what the saw was trying to cut. Perhaps a dead branch, a rotting limb, wormwood or her own head. No matter, the saw kept on sawing – toing and froing in dull days and slow motion embarrassment that seemed destined to accompany the teenage years.

“Karys, breakfast's ready!” her mother's voice rang every morning, so exact in tone and pitch that it may as well have been a recording playing downstairs.

“Coming Mom!” Karys yelled. Her voice travelled down the spiralling staircase, through the spaces between the blue balusters and into the kitchen painted in a precise shade of Deluxe Sultan Spice. But by that time Mother Kitane was far too busy -talking on the phone, sealing the deal, jiggling her briefcase and plucking a stray hair from her perfectly arched brows- to pay Karys much mind.

A Thirteen-year-old stick figure crowned in a mess of mahogany hair entered the room lugging behind a bulk of a bag, far too packed for the last day of school. Karys’ back was eternally overstuffed with myriad books, plenty puzzles, a sandwich, a torch and a couple of books thrown in for good measure. One could accuse Karys Kitane of not being many things. She was no athlete. No beauty queen. No prima ballerina. But no one could ever say she wasn’t prepared.

You reader may assume this was an ordinary day and I would join you in this assumption. The tarts popped out of the toaster, complete with coconut grown in the West Indies and shipped out of the island to a far off land, to be made into neatly packaged rehydrateable blocks, to be shipped back to the island, to be moulded into tarts and things.

Karys ate the tarts like any other day. She drank the juice like any other day. She spilt some juice like any other day. Yes reader we may categorically label this an ordinary day. We easily could, but we would be dead wrong.

Bang Bang. Two beats pounded in tandem in Karys' mind.

Bang. One was to do with a situation that had arisen as Karys stretched out on the sofa the night before to read another instalment of the Shape Shifters Comic Book Series. A crack in the wall whispered for her to come near.

“Great Aunt doesn't live that far off.” coerced Father Kitane.

“Come on Geoffrey, she's up there in the Bush. In the back of Nowhere. Karys will never be comfortable with Snake and Mosquito and all those people and their Black Magic stories.” rang her mother's voice.

“Marla, don't be ridiculous. Great Aunt's a lovely lady. It'll be a change for Kar. She could do with a change. It's only for the Easter holidays” said her father.

By then Karys had heard enough to decide for sure, that nice lady or not, no good could come of this. And if you have ever known or been a thirteen year old, you can tell that this seed would have spurned into a jungle strangling her mind and occupying her thoughts to no end in sight. But Karys had some louder thinking in her head, and this pickle would have to wait for now.

Bang. There was the pressing matter that lay written in blue black ink soaking into a letter buried in her skirt pocket under the jingle of keys.

Walking out the house, she felt a thrill as she slipped her fingers down the pocket hole and fumbled past the New York key-chain to slide her index through the fold of the letter. It made her chest jump a leap. Could this really be happening?

Karys Kitane did not notice the endless repetition of tree, house, and pool as she walked to St. Christopher's. Topiary tree, white and yellow house, turquoise pool so perfectly planned that Karys had once likened it to the sequence of slides in a viewmaster she had had at five. So absolutely planned was Nickerie Landing. In fact it was so symmetrical and faultless in its design that you could easily believe that Sir Thomas Moore had coined Utopia solely on its behalf.

But Karys Kitane did not notice it this morning, nor did she notice the pregnant grey cloud making its way towards her from the horizon. All she could think of was that epistle, lying dormant in her pocket waiting to be summoned.

Not usually one for romanticisms Karys could not help appreciating the letter as a dove that roosted between her notes, chemical equations and bio sketches. And anyone who has ever been in love cannot blame usually sensible Karys for discovering the dove cooing a sweet song that told a tale making her heart flutter like its very wing.

Things were going to get better.

Of course her heart traapezed from sheer delight to utter fear, but this was finally her chance.

She'd watched him for six terms now, from her corner of class and over the covers of her books. And what of she? Well, she was Invisibila, the Transparent from the Shape Shifters series. In fact once she was pretty sure he almost walked right through her.

But now she got the note "*Meet me under the back shed at 2:30.*"

What a shock at first. But the underdog always gets the guy. Look at Cinderella and Snow White. Finally her time had come so she mustered every last drop of courage she had and made her way to the shed.

And so Karys Kitane waited under the square iron shed looking out unto the Savannah, which smelt of freshly cut grass and blushed ever so often as the poui tree blew it a soft yellow kiss and another bloom hit the ground.

Her eyes strained the West Indian Sun, searching the horizon for the figure of a boy. The wind was even gustier now and she held firm to her head tie with a sweaty palm, but she waited.

The cloud had sailed from the other side of the island like a pirate ship on a Westerly wind and now it settled in the once blue sky, but she waited.

And she was still waiting when she heard the heckle which at first she thought was rain and later in a horrible instant realised was laughter from the bevy of girls with the blue black pens who lay in hiding behind the rafters and howled and screeched with giggles and jest.

Karys Kitane was once more the butt of their jokes and almost outright kicked herself for not remembering that Cinderella and Snow White were only fairy tales and there is no such thing as magic, at least for people like her.

She tucked her chin into her chest and fought back tears with all the force of the Jacobin Army.

Karys made her way through the now pounding rain. And anyone who has ever been to the West Indies knows that when it rains here, it quite literally pours.

One foot raced the other to see who could get her home.

There is no such thing as magic.

There is no such thing as magic.

There is no such thing as magic.

This became a mantra she muttered unto herself. Feeling somewhere between Wake and Dream, she tried to flee the laughing girls, only to slip and fall in the mud. More laughter erupted and the girls were now clutching their sides and roly polying about as they mocked her. And just as she was about to let the tears roll free, a lightning bolt so sharp and bright shot across the sky that it silenced everything.

There is no such thing as magic. The words were rolling off her lips just as the flash jolted the sky. Her eyes were drawn upwards to the heavens. And the whole place fell silent as they all stood mesmerised.

Her lips trembled and she swallowed hard. And if you know anything about Karys Kitane you know she's not the sort to be frightened by a mere lightening strike, but Karys was petrified.

You didn't have to be a meteorologist to tell that this was no ordinary bolt.

It lingered and hung in the sky for moment after moment. Like a great criss-crossed, spiralling sign- a series of marks that connected into a crisscross intersection embedded in a circle -distinct pattern; a pattern that Karys Kitane had seen before.

The girls were silent now and the rain seemed hushed and the wind waited to see what would happen next. The blazing pattern just remained there, fixed and unfading, in the silence that followed. Silence hung heavy until it was broken by a loud, primal howl.

It sent such a shiver up your spine that even a deaf man could tell that this was no ordinary thunder. This was the bawl of a beast.

Chapter 3

Journey to the Other Side

Karys attempted to rationalise, almost out loud, that it was just a meteorological phenomenon and she would have probably pulled it off if it hadn't been for the ominous symbol- one giant circle with an intersection in the middle like a treasure hunter's X- etched across the sky. All the girls saw the peculiar flash that seemed to hang suspended in the heavens. They had never seen anything like this before. That was everyone except Karys who had been so intimate with this symbol that it was its very familiarity that frightened her.

When she finally left the other transfixed girls frozen in their stake-out spot, and dragged her way home to the safety of her downy bed, Karys Kitane rolled up her jeans and sure enough there it was. The same wheel with X spokes she had known since she was a child, in the form of a ruddy birthmark on her left ankle.

It left Karys with the strange and doleful feeling of a very still and empty Sunday evening.

The embarrassment of the mocking girls was thrust into the background by the odd and inexplicable events of that last day of school. That is not to say that the utter humiliation did not twinge and pinch Karys' pride. In fact it had the unwelcome aptitude to outline her even more as an outsider.

The line had been drawn and she was on the other side.

In retrospect, it may have seemed a painfully romantic thing, this lonesomeness of a recluse but this is chiefly true in novels and agonisingly untrue in real life. But it was actually this very twist of fate that had lent the first hand in kneading Karys to supplication when broached with the matter of Great Aunt.

It was not without reluctance but Karys easily complied to surprised parents when confronted with the affair of the holiday on the Other Side of the Island. Though she mostly dreaded the idea of some strange hill somewhere, she had to admit that this dread could not outweigh the seduction of escape.

Of course the events that are to follow would not have happened, and a different history would have been told if Karys Kitane had stopped and realised just for an instant that she was now headed in the very direction from which the storm had come.

Mother and Father Kitane had stood speechless- muted by the minimal effort required in cajoling Karys to go. And before she knew it, her bags were packed, her bus ticket bought and she was being dropped off by the driver at the bus station.

Earlier that morning Driver had taken her parents to the airport. Father was always away on business. This was nothing new. But when it occurred to Karys that she was the only Kitane left on the island, she felt both a shiver of fear and tingle of excitement run through her blood.

All the necessary preparations had been made. She had taken one of the buses before on a school outing – a massive, air-conditioned bendy thing. So she now stood on the queue with her ticket ready in hand, feeling very prepared and in control which is how she best liked to feel.

By the time she reached the front the Ticketmaster with the grisly beard shook his head and pointed to the other side of the station. Nothing in all the Western Hemisphere could have prepared Karys for what she was to encounter next.

There was no bus. Instead there was a long line of people spiralling like a colourful coral snake, serpentineing its way round the bend. She approached cautiously as if afraid of its bite.

These were not the people of Nickerie Landing. They were wrapped in headscarves of bright crimson vermillion and teal. The women's broad skirts were patched with flowers and stripes and the men smelt of salt and wood. The people carried baskets- some empty and others loaded with bruised black and yellow bananas.

Though the line stood still there was much movement. Chickens fluttered and banged fighting their way out of acrid crates. The red flowery skirts swung like giant bells chiming some ancient and reverential rhythm. Mesmerised by the vibrancy of the lot, Karys was almost lulled into a faraway trance. Then all of a sudden there was a crickity crackity sound and up pulled a rickety rackity orange and green bus. People started piling in like Noah's ark itself.

The snake grew shorter and quickly disappeared as all squeezed in three to a seat. Karys sat sandwiched between a rotund woman with a belly shaped like a basket and a basket shaped like a belly, and a gangly man who kept hitting his head on the ceiling of the bus.

"Everybody on? Market bus ready to take off," rolled out the voice of the conductor precariously perched on the handlebars in front.

Everyone did a final sweep and the bus was just about to chokingly attempt to hit a gear when a woman in a stained olive skirt cried out "Oh Lord! My kid. Whey Sussie?" She leapt up off her seat and proceeded to the front.

“Open d door. D lady child outside.” shouted a man in haphazardly patched overalls, with dirty fingernails and a concerned look on his face.

The woman was seated quite far back and the bus was so tightly packed that there was no possible passage for her, so everyone had to file out one by one from the bus.

The conductor pulled the lever and the door flung open, and it was but a moment after that the lady returned to her bundles and bags, with a miniature white Billy goat clutching its way onto the bus.

No one seemed to find this unusual except Karys who thought it best to sit tight, clutch here knapsack and pray to get to the other side alive.

And so the journey began.

Who were these strange creatures, heading off from town with their left over produce doubtless back to the rocks crevices and tree trunks from whence they’d come?

The journey proved to be a bumpy one with more pot holes than road. And with every jerk the round woman let out a snore and the tall man bumped his head. Chickens were clucking, feathers flying and the people fanned themselves with folded navy and white bus schedules. Occasionally the roly poly woman would crack open the window to welcome a waft of cool air from outside- air, perfumed with overripe mangoes and

mixing with the sweaty men and the mild scent of the powdered chests of women on the bus. Before long the lady would decide that the gusts were threatening her hairdo and close the window all but for a useless crack.

Karys strained to see the landscape through the slit. She could distinguish houses and hedges and trees, then fewer and fewer houses and hedges and more and more trees- trees like she had never seen before, gigantic, spreading, gnarled things that dominated the landscape and staked their full claim. There was so much green. A landscape of emerald; some may say. But they would be dead wrong because this was not just the emerald but an amalgamation of dozens and dozens of shades splashing over each other and mingling and mating and forming a layered and textured horizon like she had never seen before.

She was stranger to this many greens.

She tried to count the shades and must have fallen asleep because the Veils started coming, and she knew Dream had found her. She relished her appearance like that of a familiar friend and tried very hard not to think about what this mean. Darkness could not be far behind.

Before the heavy sound of terror struck, Karys' sleep was broken and she was awakened suddenly by a blazing bright light streaming her way. As she opened her charcoal eyes, they slowly grew accustomed to the light that bathed the bus in a radiant glow. The round

woman was awake now and Karys peered over her shoulder to see a most magnificent sight.

It was one of those visionary vistas that words could not do justice to. So I may not bother.

But on your account dear reader I will try.

How can I begin? You surely must have seen yellow and orange and red before. Well, it was none of these because it was all of these at once and something more. There was some warmth that was like a nostalgia at its core, and it made Karys exceedingly happy though she did not understand why.

It was the sun. That is to say it must have been the sun, though it was no sun she had ever seen. It was a red ball across the grassy plains. It was like a rosy juicy fruit set on fire by lust. It drew you in and you wanted to be near. Or perhaps it was more of a giant blazing eye that followed her down the road and would not let her escape. It remained there, staring at her as they reached the foot of the overgrown mountain, staring so intently as though it was privy to a secret she did not know.

“Bekano Hill!” The conductor’s voice rang out.

Karys ignored it once and she ignored it a second time but by the third she realised what he had said and thought to herself that this could not possibly be true.

She asked the lanky man next to her, his head now badly bruised from the knocks on the journey, and he confirmed this is indeed was her Bekano Hill, her destination.

Slight in frame she managed to squeeze out of the bus, relatively unharmed to the waiting conductor who explained, “ Dat Mountain is Bekano Hill. Nomally we wud take you right up to it but d bridge down becas of d storm las week. But no scene. All you have to do is take a lil boat ride”

“Of course the bridge was down!” thought Karys to herself. Why would she expect it to be any other way? After all this was the life and times of Karys Kitane.

She turned to spy the canal and a shadowy figure of a man already waiting on a wooden boat, so faded by the sun that you could not quite make out which was its original colour. That was true for both the man and the boat.

They were about to pass her on, like a magic relay race. If she were prettier she might have been a doll, but Karys Kitane was only a stick; a baton to be passed. She was taken by the bus and now she would be taken by the boat, and she wondered if this is what life would be like; a series of journeys that were never of your own design.

The spindly young girl left the bus as it pulled off and headed deeper into a landscape she did not know. She was all alone now in the real sense of the word and anyone who has ever known what it means to be alone knows that you would do anything, anything to escape.

And so it was that Karys Kitane stood on one bank of the river and gazed off into the passage that was meant to take her to the Bekano Hill. The labyrinthine river may have started in the sun but it quickly outran its light and disappeared into a foggy mystery skirted by muddy backwash and overhung with dangling vines like the hair of a mythical woman or the beard of a very old man.

There was no turning back now. Karys Kitane was alone.

She climbed into the raft and when she said “Good day,” the silent Riverboat man simply nodded and began to paddle through the passage taking her deeper and deeper through translucent gossamer spiders web curtains of mist and into the opaque distance whose blackness was only rivalled by the dark of the water itself.

The canal was a darker shade than black but staring intently and wondering at the impending tragedy of her fate Karys’ eyes were drawn to golden shimmers from the now setting sun, whose beauty skipped across the water’s surface to dazzle your eyes like the sequins on your mother’s evening gown.

Karys collapsed at the side, weary from her journey and a growing, gnawing hunger.

Gazing out into the dark mysterious pool she settled herself for her journey to the Other Side. It was likened to a sojourn through Hades itself, or perhaps purgatory. But if it was so Karys tried her best not to think too hard on where she was heading; to heaven or hell.

Distracted by her thoughts and dangling off the side, she slipped her finger into the water and made circles in the unknown. Her mind wondered and she was only brought back to the now by the prick of a bite on her fingertip like that stick of a spindle from an enchanted undersea world. She yelped at the prick and all but fell off her seat.

The sound of a raspy laugh followed, and she shuddered when she realised that it was not her solemn, silent companion but something else; something watching her from the river banks through the deep and cavernous trees.

By the time Karys made it to the Other Side she sighed; grateful to be done with the long passage to Bekano Hill. As she alighted the boat, her eyes lost themselves in the thickness of the Bush and were instantly drawn to a lone, straggly tree that stood at the top of the Hill nestled among various shades of green. So stripped of its leaves it seemed destined for demise, but somehow it survived and mocked death with a brilliant orange plumage and a tilt of its hat.

A Strong Creature of a woman was staring too. She stood at the bottom of the Hill with knotted hair and pursed lips. Before introductions were even made, Karys so mesmerised by the landscape asked “What tree is that?”

And Karys heard the woman in a throaty whisper reply “Immortal.”

They both stood, for how much time they could not tell, staring at the Immortelle tree. And it was quite sometime later that Karys stopped and realised that this woman at her side must have been waiting for her.

She turned and looked at the woman whose gaze did not meet her own and thought to herself, “So this is Great Aunt.”