

Destiny: The beginning

by Junella

This is a novel I'm working on, and intend to publish on completion. It's meant to be the first in a trilogy tentatively named Destiny. Do review! It's my first original fiction, and I need all the help I can get!

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: This is my first ever full-length original fiction. Please, please, please read and review, cos I need to gauge how readers will respond to this when it's published!
Thanks D

Prologue

A nervous look over the shoulder, followed by the quickening of footsteps. In the distance, an owl hooted, readying itself for the night's hunt.

The hunter nodded to itself, increasing its pace to keep up with its prey. It was sure it had her now; her fear was all too obvious. Its master had warned it to be cautious, that the girl was a sly and crafty little thing. It seemed that under the all-encompassing darkness night brought, she reverted to an ordinary child, wary of shadows and whispers on the wind.

Another glance behind, and an abrupt turn that took her off the pavement and into the copse of trees on the swath beside it. It nodded again, secure in the knowledge of its impending victory. Its master had promised to reward it most handsomely when it brought the girl's head back.

It was mildly disappointed that the chase had been so short, having expected it to be much more challenging, thrilling. But then again, why complain when the prize was handed out on a silver platter?

Following her trail through the trees into the backyard of a structure with a decided air of disuse, it found her tugging futilely at the handle of the rectangular wood that covered an opening in the wall.

Raising the device it had been issued, it drew a bolt from the quiver strapped to its back, pressed it into place, and trained it on the girl's back. Its finger curled around the trigger, and pulled.

The tip of the bolt sliced through the air, gleaming with a coat of gelatinous liquid. And thunked into the weathered wood of the door.

Startled, it cast around, searching for its missing target. It couldn't be, she was just...

"Lost something?" She stepped out of the shadows by the side of the structure.

Regaining its bearings, it hefted the crossbow and fired again. This time, she caught it in midair and snapped the bolt, all traces of her terror gone.

If it could grimace, it would have, as the girl advanced on it. But it couldn't. The clouds parted, and the gentle light the half-moon gave off fell on it, revealing its ghastly countenance...or lack thereof. To even call it a 'thing' would have been an insult to the appellation. Things did not possess a visage devoid of eyes, nose and a mouth, and things most certainly did not have the grotesque tattoo of a snarling, vaguely humanoid being with the head of a serpent and ragged outstretched wings covering the space where a face should be. It was an abomination, created for a purpose, and deemed disposable enough that no one had gone to the trouble of constructing the niceties of a face for it.

It tried to reach for a third bolt, groping in the quiver. Just as it felt its fingers close over the polished shaft, the girl moved. Her right foot sent the weapon hurtling across the unkempt yard, and it bent over, keening at the sudden intense pain that assailed its senses, originating from its left arm. Its hand had been torn off with the impact.

Stumbling back, it scabbled at the back of its crude garments, searching for the etched blade the Master had given him to cut the girl's head off. A vicious backhand whipped its head to the side. A loud crunch could be heard as its neck broke.

And then it knew no more.

The assassin sank bonelessly to the grass and dissolved into a puddle of dark viscous goo, which, just as promptly, evaporated. In an eye blink, nothing remained of it save a stain on the grass and a distinct odour of decay. The grass which had been covered with the sticky remains withered immediately.

Wrinkling her nose in distaste, the girl, who looked no more than sixteen, dusted off her hands and retrieved her backpack from the spot she had left it.

A quick sweep of the area with her eyes assured her that there had been no witnesses to the little encounter. Bestowing one last scowl to the now-deceased hunter, she slung her backpack over one shoulder and vaulted over the low fence onto the pavement, continuing on her way home.

Unlatching the low gate, she walked through, feeling the tingle of magick on the edge of her senses as the wards recognised her. From the pavement, the house looked like any one of the other semi-detached stucco houses set into a neat row beside it. Once one got through the layers of wards surrounding the house quite in the manner of a soap bubble without being knocked unconscious and was passed by said enchantments, it was an entirely different story. A postage stamp-sized compound became a much larger garden, the lone tree by the fence multiplied into several, and the house turned from an average nondescript product for mass consumption into a three-storey manor with a barn attached, a relic from a time where people had livestock to house.

One may ask, spells are well and good, but what about the law of physics? There couldn't possibly be so much room.

To the person who stood facing the door, to the right of the house lay an empty space, rather large by the standards of a country where land was as precious as gold. There had been many plans over the years to clear the land beside and behind the house for development projects, but the ideas usually slipped the memories of the people before they could put it across to their superiors. So that was that, and the Hagannan family had been left in peace, which suited them quite well.

A middle-aged woman came out of the kitchen, wiping her hand on a towel when she heard the door opening. "Leander? Oh, it's you, Apolla. Dinner's ready."

"Thanks, Aunt. Uncle isn't home yet?" The girl dropped her backpack on the couch and sniffed the air. "Steamed cod with black bean sauce?"

"Yes. The surgery's overflowing with owners bringing in their dogs with sprained paws and the like." She studied her niece intently and frowned. "Did you have another run-in?"

A grin. "How did you guess?"

"You always had that kind of look after a fight."

"Really? What kind?"

"Happy, excited...oh, off with you to the bath. You smell."

"I most certainly do not!" she protested as she was propelled off towards the stairs.

Pulling a half-serious face at her guardian, Apolla ascended the flight of stairs and down the hallway towards her room. A door opened midway, and her sister Areta poked her head out. "Hi, thought I heard your voice."

"Hi. I'm going for a shower. Dinner's ready. You go ahead."

"I've eaten."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" came the dry reply. "You always beat us to the dining table."

An unrepentant wink and she disappeared behind her door.

Shaking her head, she went into her room to gather things for a shower.

Emerging a short while later, towelling her hair dry, she trotted down the stairs, finding her sister eyeing a steaming dish before her. "Stop it," she ordered, sitting down. "I thought you've eaten?"

"That doesn't mean I can't be hungry still. Aunt wouldn't fix anything for me, said I could jolly well do it myself if I needed it."

"Then go heat up something."

"I don't feel like getting up."

"Sit there and starve then."

She stuck her tongue out. "Meanie."

"Thank you," she said absently as she helped herself to a spoonful of rice and cod.

Areta rested her chin on a fist. "Aunt says you ran into one of those charming fellows on the way home." Getting an affirmative grunt, she continued, "Y'know, they oughta just turn up with a bouquet of roses and a box of chocolates. Expresses their intentions better than ambushing and attacking." At the disbelieving look she received, she raised her hands. "All right, all right, I know. Bad joke. They're really popping up a lot more often these days, aren't they?"

"Maybe it's nearing promotion day."

She half-smiled at the dry rejoinder. "They aren't..."

"No, I don't think so. Besides, if they actually find us, I think we'll be more than able to deal with it."

"Bets?"

Apolla dropped her spoon into her half-eaten dinner and glared at her. "Right little ray of sunshine, aren't you?"

She grinned unrepentantly, but before she could say anything, the jingling of keys forestalled any further conversation and diverted their attention. The mirror image of Areta walked into the dining hall, and halted upon seeing them. Mustering a smile, she nodded tersely at them before hurrying up the stairs.

Both girls watched her disappear into her room and slam the door, and Areta shook her head. "Charming as ever, I see."

Her sister looked at her, not at all fooled by the flippant comment. "You miss her, don't you?"

She heaved a sigh. "I do. And so do you, or I am no Hagannan."

"Both of us do," she reminded her gently. "People change, Areta."

The sisters usually got on in a reasonably amiable manner, with the inevitable tiff every now and then. After all, things could get a little rough with three adolescent females under the same roof, especially around that time of the month. And there was also that little problem about the youngest girl's aversion to the magick that flowed in their blood.

"I know. I just wish she'd come around someday. Remember all the silly antics we got up to, the three of us?"

Apolla cocked her head at her, her spoon idly scraping through the food on the plate. "Don't you have any homework?"

She pulled a face. "Must you remind me? I swear the teachers give us mountains of homework precisely because they know we won't be able to finish everything and give them the excuse to punish us for the sheer sadistic pleasure of it."

She chuckled. "Since you already know there's a conspiracy, don't let them have the opportunity. Off you go."

Scowling, she did as she was told.