

Kids on Mars are disappearing...

Shamira is considered an outcast by most, but little does anyone know that she is on a mission. Kids on Mars are disappearing, but Shamira decides to use the criminals' most unlikely weapons against them—the very kids they have captured.

In order to succeed, she is forced to trust another person, something she is afraid to do. However, Valens, her connection to the underworld of her enemy, proves to be a useful ally. Time is slipping, and so is her control on the power that resides within her. Yet in order to save her brother's life, she is willing to risk everything.

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T H E P A C K

Chapter 1

She often walked this way home, listening for all the familiar sounds. Adjusting the handle of her small bag across her chest, she strolled slowly on the long suburban block that stretched quietly in front of her. It was night out, but it made no difference to Shamira, for she lived in the dark for most her life. She heard the quietness of the evening while she walked a comfortable pace on her journey homeward. There were no birds, no rustling trees, and no one walking the streets. Only the slight hum of the generators could be

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heard in the quiet of the late evening while it pumped fresh oxygen into the air.

Suddenly, out of the stillness, she heard someone approach, and she turned slightly to judge who it was. Shamira could tell the footsteps weren't friendly, but then again, neither was Shamira. A mischievous smile crossed her face that some would mistake for innocence, the furthest thing from her mind. The footsteps continued to fall quickly toward her, and Shamira slowed down to lure them closer. She knew that *he* came. *Only one scum for my trap today.* She had dealt with others before, but tonight, she only had time for one.

He grabbed her by the neck. *Typical. Why do they always go for my neck? This is too easy.* She smiled to herself again, and figuring she wouldn't work too hard to bring him down, she swallowed in preparation for the attack. Restlessness rose in her in anticipation of the fight. Time was slipping away, and she had to get home before her mother did. *This has to go quickly,* she thought regrettably, for she hated to rush things. She waited to see what her captor had planned for her, and she stood seemingly docile with his thick arm circled around her neck.

"So, what do I have here? Ooh, I've hit the jackpot tonight, baby!" He shoved his nose in her hair and sniffed, "A pretty, sweet-smelling girl all alone. You have no choice, you know. You're coming with me. I have got plans for you, sweet thing," he growled in her ear. She inhaled the smell of his putrid breath. The coarse hair on his arms scratched her neck. She squirmed away from him a bit, and his

bulging belly pushed against her back.

“Hey! Stop, dude! Let her go!” She heard a voice in the distance. *Shoot!* she said to herself, knowing she would have to play helpless now. She had traced this creep for weeks, and now some goofball would-be hero would mess it up for her. *Dang it! No one must know*, she reminded herself, for no one could know what she did when she was alone. *Great, I won't get any information out of this creep tonight*, she grimaced.

She felt her attacker slack up just a little, but couldn't resist the urge to hurt him, like she knew he had hurt others. She lifted her leg high and stomped down on his foot with all her might, cracking his bones on impact. He instantly let up his tight hold. She turned precisely enough to step out of his reach. He yanked her long braid, a move she didn't anticipate, but she smiled at his obvious feeling of superiority over a girl he knew was blind and helpless. A smile slipped to her face at the knowledge that he'd been tracking her for sometime. She thought to herself, *I may be blind, but I'm definitely not helpless, you filthy son of a bastard*. Letting him think he had the upper hand, she allowed him to pull her back into his grasp by her hair. Her back was bent back like a bow, and she sensed his jaw was unprotected just above her nose. *Not surprising. It's always this way. They all get cocky in the end*. She braced herself to head-butt her captor in the chin, hopeful that he would bite off his hanging tongue that dripped a disgusting stream of spittle on her nose.

Then, she heard it. The guy that yelled out in hopes of

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stopping the attack had run up behind the oaf that was too dumb to realize that the gig was up. Just then, her self-appointed savior stepped in to save the day and snatched her target away by his neck. She heard him drag the scum slightly away. There was a grunt and rustling, and with a *thump*, the fat, smelly attacker was dealt a kick to his head after he crashed to the pavement. *Hum, that sounds familiar, only I kick harder. It appears the kid has some skill. He's sloppy, of course, but skillful enough to do the deed.* She heard the boy land one last kick for good measure, and her self-imposed hero walked over to her rescue. "Great. Now I have to play grateful," she muttered to herself.

"Thanks," she spat out most unconvincingly. She couldn't help it. This was her only set-up for the night, and now she had to find another way to control the rage inside her and solve the mystery of the missing kids on Mars. *It looks like another night in the training room. So freaking unfulfilling.* She rolled her eyes.

"I guess you're welcome," the boy said, "but you don't really sound too grateful." He tried to take her hand just like all the others who thought she was a poor, blind, invalid little girl. Disgusted, Shamira jerked away. She didn't need his help or want him there. He'd disrupted her planned attack, and the last thing she needed was for him to touch or pity her.

"I had it handled," she said and then started to walk toward home. As she headed off, the temperature changed. It was getting late. She could always tell. She tried to ignore him and hoped he

would get the message. The last thing she needed was a nosey tagalong.

“You could’ve fooled me,” the boy pressed. “He had his arm around your neck!” He made the fatal mistake of touching her again. She didn’t think, only reacted as she grabbed his hand and held it steady, yet firmly before he made more than a whisper of contact. Shamira did not like to be touched. It angered her immensely. Many people touched her freely, like they had a right to simply because her eyes appeared unseeing. They always assumed she needed their help, but they were all mistaken; she didn’t need anyone’s help. Shamira always fought her own battles—some of which she even created because she hungered to fight. There was an urge inside her, something she barely controlled. She breathed deeply and tried to hold it back, but it was barely at bay.

Nevertheless, he wouldn’t stop. He didn’t get the message and decided to stick around. He moved a distance away, but she knew exactly where he was. She had to breathe deeply to avoid doing something they’d both regret. She was getting angry again, just like she always did when someone treated her like she was helpless. They didn’t know about this rage inside of her, this burning, this constant hunger for a challenge, someone deserving of justice—something she could barely hold in. She stood down, calmed down, and waited, relaxing enough to drop his hand. She knew exactly how this was going to go. First, there would be his concern, then pity, and then his hand again as he tried to help. *I don’t have time for this*

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today. I'm already late.

"Look, don't touch me, okay? I don't like it, and you don't have the right." She moved past him to walk home.

"Hey, I'm sorry, but it's obvious that you need somebody to walk you home," he said then reached out to touch her shoulder just like she knew he would.

That's it! The dam inside her broke. *I was angry before, but now I've had enough playing with this self-righteous imitation hero!* She slid out from under his outstretched hand, smoothly ducked, and then turned around to land a solid punch to the boy's face. She didn't stop, either, but instead punched him again and again in the chest to make him backoff.

He took the battering, but yelled, "I won't fight you back! I don't hit girls."

"Err! Leave me alone! Go away! I can take care of myself! I will hurt you, so just leave! Leave!" Dismissing him, she turned away and ran all the way home. She ran quickly and smelled the sweet aroma of manufactured air and the quiet *hum* that was Mars.

Whoever he was, she would remember him—his voice, his smell, and her dislike for him. *He dares to pity me.* She would teach him to pity alright. They would meet again, and when they did, she would not hold back. She'd make him stay out of her way.

Chapter 2

Shamira's run home was warmer than usual. The Martian summer day that marked the end of school made a smile slip quietly across her face while her light jacket flapped behind her. *I hate school!* It only brought her grief and greatly tested the control of her temper, which could cause terrible things to happen if she were to ever let it go unchecked. The wind blew with the smell of dirt and dryness. She loved the smells here. They weren't overpowering and allowed her time to ponder over them. The smell of that boy had

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been somewhat musky with a touch of spice, like he had recently washed. *Unfortunately, my captor smelled like he hadn't had a bath in weeks*, she reflected, cringing a bit when the memory filled her nostrils.

On her run home, she took time to calm down and put out the fire of power that threatened to spill over inside her, to go deep, deep inside. She didn't want her parents to know this part of her. They tried so hard to help her control it, but even they didn't know she had her own ways.

She hated being late. When her mom got home from work with her younger brother in tow, she liked to start on dinner right away. She knew her mom's job was demanding and took a lot of the kindness out of her, but Shamira didn't care. Her mom was perfect to her. But Shamira's mom didn't feel the same about her. It was clear that Shamira's brother was the favorite. Her mom adored her brother, and Shamira admitted to herself that she adored him too. He was the only one she truly loved to touch. He loved her just the way she was, even with her imperfections.

Her dad wouldn't be home until late. He was working an extra shift because one of the Elite members of the Security Force had disappeared. This troubled both her parents since they were part of the Elite team. The Security Force kept law and order on Mars, and Shamira's parents worked so hard to accomplish this feat that she couldn't help wanting to help them. It was what drove her out into the night. She had her ways of investigating, and it was easy because

most people ignored, pitied or deemed her harmless and helpless. She had heard that there were thugs kidnapping the children of Security Force workers, and she wanted to put a stop to it.

With Shamira's imperfection, it was easy to remain hidden and to collect a lot of information that her parents might never want her to know. She had her ways of investigating, and it was easy because most people ignored or discounted her while thinking her an invalid. She didn't mind, really, because in the end, it made her stronger, or so she liked to think.

She slowed when she approached the house, and the dust and dirt of Mars kicked up when she skidded to a stop at the front door. She took a whiff. *Spaghetti. Mom must have had a good day today.* Her mom only made spaghetti on the good days. The days that Shamira wasn't home to start dinner, her mom always cooked. On the bad days, her mom would order takeout. The pizza delivery driver knew them pretty well, since most days lately were bad ones. Also, lately Shamira was always late. It just seemed to be taking longer to control the burning within.

Her dad used her lack of control for this power within her as an excuse to teach her so much. Everything he taught her, she thirsted for and obsessed to make it perfection. She loved it mostly because it was his gift to her, something that only they did together. Although the raging beast within her was mostly caged, the gift of time and skills her dad gave her were only tools to help her control it. She had gone so far beyond what he had taught her that she had to

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dummy it down when she was with him. She didn't want them to fully know this side of her, this hunter that she had become. When she was with them, she would always be the daughter they wished for. She refused to lose their love by revealing her innermost raging urges.

The door opened, and she smelled the garlic bread and her brother's unique, sweet smell. She was now at peace, for the beast was caged, and she was home. David met her at the door. She reached out her hand and tousled his warm, silky head. He laughed, then stood up and said, "I'm getting too old for that, Meera!"

"You're never too old for your big sis to do this," she said and tickled him. He doubled up and almost fell to the floor.

Then her mom came to the door. Shamira could feel her contempt as it hung deeply in the air. She could feel her mom size her up before she fussed, "Hmm, I wondered when you'd show up. Do you have a death wish? Do you *want* to get hurt? Mars is not safe, yet you roam around aimlessly like you are in some carefree garden. Shamira, I called you on the earlink. Why didn't you answer me?"

"Mom, can I come in please? You're in the doorway, and I really have to go to the bathroom," said Shamira. She started to move side to side like she really had to go badly.

"Yeah, right. That isn't working this time. Get in here. Now," said her mom. She pulled Shamira into the house, and then quickly closed the door. Shamira figured she'd tried this tactic too many times now. Her mom had already figured out that she didn't have to

go to the bathroom. She wondered if she should play her story out or just deal with the argument with her mom.

“Mom, you know I hate wearing the earlink. It interferes with my hearing, the one thing that helps me stay balanced and know when someone approaches. If you interfere with that, then I have to concentrate harder just to get around,” Shamira responded. She gave up the bathroom pretense and stood still in front of her mom. She felt David’s hand grab hers. He always sided with her in a fight with her parents, and she loved him for that. It was the two of them against the world.

“By the way, where are you coming from? School had no extracurricular activities today. Where do you keep going every night? I’m sick of this. I’m sick of you worrying us to death. It ends tonight. No more side trips from school! No more. Do you hear me?” Shamira knew her mom would be angry. She also knew that she wasn’t going to stop what she was doing, at least not until she could find those kids—all of them. So she stood there, bowed her head like she was sorry, and took a deep, soothing breath.

“I’m sorry, Mother. It won’t happen again,” Shamira said in the small voice she used when her mom got this way. She kept her head bowed since she didn’t want her mom to see the rage within her.

“I’ve heard that before! It’s not working anymore. You will get tagged! That way, we won’t have any problems finding you on your long walks home!” her mother added with a pointing finger. Shamira held still when her mother’s strong finger pushed against her

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shoulder. It hurt a bit with its heaviness and sharpness.

“Mom, I don’t want to be tagged like a dog. I promise! Just give me another chance, please? I promise, Mom. I promise,” Shamira said with a broken voice, on the verge of tears. If they tagged her, she would have to stop what she was doing. It was the first time she’d ever felt useful, needed, and free. *Please don’t take that away from me, Mom*, she pleaded in her head.

“Fine, but this is the last time. I promise you with every bit of my being that if you get lost or show up late again, no begging or pleading will stop this. You will get tagged if I have to drag you to the doctor myself. Your father won’t save you this time. You brought this on yourself.” She turned and walked back toward the kitchen.

“Shamira, why don’t you want to get tagged? Mom and Dad are. They couldn’t be part of the Security Force if they weren’t. I thought you wanted to be on the Force when you grow up? You’ll have to get tagged sometime if you want to work for them,” David reasoned while he absently rubbed her arm.

“I’ll never get tagged, even if that means not joining the Security Force. I just can’t, you hear me? You don’t ever let them do it to you either. I’ll always find you, and I don’t need a tag to do it,” she said and lifted her arm up to rub down the silkiness of his hair.

“I told you, I’m too old for that,” David said, then hugged her. He then tickled her sweet spot under her arm, and she instantly came out of her melancholy. Only David could do this for her. Her baby brother was the most perfect boy of all.

“When you’re finished sulking, get in here and eat this great spaghetti I made. I was happy when I got home until I didn’t see my little girl,” her mom yelled from the kitchen. *Of course she rubs it in*, Shamira thought with a smile. Besides, she hadn’t been a “little girl” for a while now. She was sixteen and felt even older from all the secrets she kept. She headed to the table, knowing that was her cue to eat. In spite of everything, she was still hungry.

She sat down and waited for her mom to prepare her plate. Comforted by this little thing her mom loved to do for her, the only thing, in fact, that her mom did for her. Shamira was sure her mom did this for David, too, but it still felt nice to be so loved sometimes.

“So, how was work today?” Shamira asked. She grabbed her fork and twirled the spaghetti around slowly, teasing her hunger with the smell of the sauce and cheese.

“Today was better than the rest of the week. We got a lead on Lieutenant McCann. It looks like we’re dealing with a new secret organization. How they managed to form it without us knowing is beyond me. Well the good part is we now can figure out who the players are and crush them before they get any momentum.” Her mom smiled, and then said, “We’re also close to finding McCann. Although there is some interference with the location devices, we’re confident he will be home with his family before this coming Monday,” her mom said excitedly. Her mom loved being the key Detective and Agent of the Security Force. She was a hunter just like Shamira; only she got paid for it. Her mom’s work was also

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something they both liked to share, and Shamira couldn't help but consider her mother's gift of information.

"Well, do you think they hurt McCann? I like him." Shamira said. She started to think of a way to track him. She decided then and there that she would give the Security Force just two days before she would attempt to find him herself. Her main focus had been on finding the kids, but she didn't like it at all that McCann was now a victim as well. Kids of various Security Force Elite members and the Mars Planet Police were sporadically kidnapped over the years, never to turn up again. Shamira swore she would find them and bring pain to those that took them. As she sat there daydreaming of what she would do to those who hurt the missing kids and Officer McCann, she heard a *crack*. Without realizing she was doing it, she'd pressed her fork so hard onto her plate that the plate snapped in two. She gulped and turned toward her mother, knowing she wouldn't be pleased.

"Shamira! Look at what you did! How did you do that? Oh, never mind. Just clean it up, will you?" her mom said. She knew her mom was disgusted with her now. It was usual for her mom to get angry with her when she appeared clumsy. *Well, it can't be helped now*. She was a bit angry with herself, too, because she was still really hungry. She got up, gathered the mess, and threw it all in the trash. She didn't miss a single piece of glass when she wiped the table clean.

"Shamira, I'll make you another plate," David said. He got up quickly and scooped a big fresh helping of spaghetti on her new plate.

She heard the heavy metal spoon slide against the glass plate and sat down. She liked letting David feel like he could take care of her.

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About the Author

LM. Preston was born and raised in Washington, DC. An avid reader, she loved to create poetry and short-stories as a young girl. With a thirst for knowledge she attended college at Bowie State University, and worked in the IT field as a Techie and Educator for over sixteen years. She started writing science fiction under the encouragement of her husband who was a Sci-Fi buff and her four kids. Her first published novel, Explorer X - Alpha was the beginning of her obsessive desire to write and create stories of young people who overcome unbelievable odds. She loves to write while on the porch watching her kids play or when she is traveling, which is another passion that encouraged her writing.



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