



THE DARE LEGACY SERIES

GALIGE

DREAMS UNVEILED

SERENA SIMPSON

Gaige

Dreams Unveiled

Serena Simpson

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Warning

Death and mental illness are hard to talk about as well as being hard to write about. If you know someone who suffers with mental illness, please treat them with compassion and get them help.

It will be mentioned briefly in this book. Remember this is a book. There is no way to show the anguish and the years some have to go through to be free. Enjoy it as a book and not a commentary on real life.



Dedication

This for my number one fan who is my daughter. I love to write, and I love the readers who anxiously await the next book. This one is for you. A big thankyou to my beta reader and my cover designer. I honestly don't know what I'd so without either of you. Of course, thinking about it is what nightmares are made of.

CHAPTER ONE

Lita scanned both sides of the road as she drove into town. She'd been staying with Sable and her mate Xander, with no plans to leave. Sable had taken her mate and their adopted son Haru to the fair several counties over. Sable asked Lita to go with her, when Lita said no, Sable resorted to puppy eyes. Lita held firm. She wanted Sable to have time with her immediate family, and Haru to spend time with his new parents. That left her alone at night, driving down the highway between Sable and Xander's home and Rakes Forth. The other reason she was alone was that she was going to meet the two women she and Sable spent their college years with. They had an apartment in Rakes Forth that they used as a base to come and go from. No one, not even her or Sable, knew what they did.

Lita tried to stare harder into the deep shadows while biting her bottom lip. The back of her neck was tingling and she could swear she was catching movement out of the corner of one eye. Nothing happened. There wasn't an explosion or some

animal dripping saliva attacking her car. She expelled a breath of relief as her shoulders slumped, no longer on high alert, and her grip on the steering wheel loosened. That was an uncalled-for action, but with everything that had been happening in the town, she half expected to be targeted next. Rakes Forth was a small town and not much happened after dark, until lately.

Aelita was heading one county over. Two of her and Sable's friends had been spotted there, and she was hoping to get in touch with them. The more people around that she could trust, the better she would feel.

Her eyes lifted to the rearview mirror when she thought she caught the sound of an engine revving. There was nothing there. She shook her head. Obviously, she needed more sleep. Paranoia was walking hand in hand with her. It was probably the way the human residents of her town had been acting lately. The human element of the town didn't know about the paranormals who lived and worked amongst them. If they suspected something, they convinced themselves that it was all their imagination.

She wasn't putting the people down. She had been in the same boat until everything with Sable happened. Aelita was one of those normal humans who had been given a glimpse of the paranormal community and unfortunately for her, there was no going back. Not that she belabored that fact. She loved being part of this new family. She would always say she was dare adjacent.

Her eyes went back to the rearview mirror. There was no way she imagined that sound. The shadows behind her seemed to be moving too fast. There was a car driving without headlights. She couldn't be sure, but it had to be painted black. She could feel them speed up as if they were connected to her.

She pushed her foot onto the gas, going faster but not wanting an accident on a rural road where she couldn't see into the dark shadows. The car was gaining on her and they didn't seem to be slowing down. She sped up. If she could make it two miles down the road, it would open up to become more of a highway and there would be other cars on the road. Now, all she had to do was make it.

She could do this...

The car coming directly at her was a surprise she didn't see until they turned their headlights on, blinding her. Then the car behind her turned on their headlights as they double teamed her, cutting her off from the side of the road with the trees. On the other side of the road there was a short expanse for cars with issues to stop safely. They were forcing her to that side of the road.

Her hands tightened on the steering wheel. She could feel the sweat on her hands making her want to rub them against her jeans. Deep breaths, she told herself when she started to see black fuzzies. She was panting, terrified of what could happen. Shivers of dread ran down her back. Maybe they only wanted to talk to her and forcing her to stop was their friendly way of

saying hello. Nope, she didn't believe that. What did she have in the car to defend herself?

It was the third vehicle that came from the side of the road aimed directly at her car that shouted; we want you dead. It looked like one of those monster trucks that could take a crash and shake it off like it was nothing. The truck from hell slammed into the side of her door. She stomped on the brakes, but her car was moving sideways.

One desperate look out her side window told her what her primal brain was screaming. The nice little cut to pull over was gone and there was nothing but the guardrails on the side of the road indicating the steep cliff behind them.

Lita cursed up a storm as she did her best to try to steer her small putt-putt car away from the cars and truck targeting her. Her car started spinning do a 360 that had her head pounding as while she tried to focus on one point and keep the car from tumbling over the side of the road.

The surrounding vehicles slowed down, leaving nothing but her and her out-of-control car. The brakes were getting that soft feeling, as if they were no longer engaging. Aim for the trees. Her brain was shouting. Get away from the death trap. It might have worked; it was a good plan. Then the monster truck from hell hit her at an angle that spun her car towards the guardrails and, with a terrifying screech that could have also been a scream from her, her putt-putt was flying like a bird in the sky. Then it was dropping like a boulder, intent on killing everything in its way or, in this case, everything inside of it.

Her life flashed before her eyes, along with the strange things happening in town. Was it too late to remind Sable, she loved her like a sister? Well, next life. Her car came to an abrupt stop. It was clinging to the hillside like a strangely shaped monkey that didn't know when to give up.

Lita was stiff as a board, afraid to move her head, much less her body. When this car crashed, it was bye-bye Lita. It took all the courage she had, which was precious little to turn her head enough to look at the side window. She couldn't see what the car was caught on from where she was sitting, but it was clear that the weight of the car was slowly moving towards completing its fall.

Thank God for seatbelts and the presence of mind to wear one. All of those seatbelts saved lives lectures from when she took drivers ed in school had paid off. She might owe a teacher a meal out if she came out of this alive.

Alright Lita girl, no more stalling. You have to undo the seatbelt, open the door, and jump out at the same time. Her sudden shift in weight was going to be the last straw.

Count down from ten. Three is not enough time to prepare for death. Ten, nine, eight...you got this. Seven, six...take a breath. Five, four... say your last prayer. Three, two... please let me go to heaven. One!

It all happened at once. One hand disengaged the seatbelt latch that fortunately hadn't been damaged. The other hand swung the door open, and she rolled out the car. The cars airbags decided to discharge, catching her shoulder and hip as

she tried to get out of the car. Her foot caught against the baseboard, dragging her body down the hillside with the car until she could wrench it enough to get free.

The car hit the ground in a crash of twisted metal and fire. Lita was pressed to the hillside under an overhang that she never knew was there. She could hear the slide of a body against the hillside and rocks showering over the overhang.

“There’s no way she could have survived that crash,” A male voice called out. She could hear him reversing as he made his way up the mountain.

“Damn, she won’t be happy. I think she wanted to drain her before she died.” That voice was a little too androgynous to tell if it was a male or female.

“She can’t win them all.” The deep male voice climbing up the mountains said.

“Let’s get out of here. Someone will notice the crash site soon enough.”

Lita stayed pressed against the side of the mountain until she heard the cars above her take off and all their engine noises fade out. She had a reason to be paranoid, and that didn’t make her feel any better. Some wanted her dead and actively worked towards that happening. She was also right. If they could have, they would have taken her alive so the mysterious ‘she’ could have drained her. What did she have that was worth being drained of? Her life force? Then wouldn’t anyone do if that’s what they wanted?

That was future Lita's problem to deal with. Right now, she had to make it to the top of the hillside if she wanted to live. One look down told her there was no way in hell she wanted to be down there. Carefully, she moved her feet and hands, trying to find a spot to cling onto as she moved from under the overhang. Pressure placed on one foot said that either her ankle was sprained or broken. A shocked cry from her lips made her bite her tongue. Were they really gone? She couldn't make noise and draw attention to herself. Using one foot and her hands, she managed to shimmy her body from under the overhang.

How was she going to get up the hillside? It was steep. Lita was curvy and a little on the thick side and she liked it that way, thank you. She was also strong, but not strong enough to do a dead body lift. That's what she would have to do to gain enough purchase to make it up the hillside. It was no gentle slide to get down the hill. Damned if you do and damned if you don't. That's how her life had been feeling for the past couple of weeks. She should have known it was the eye of the hurricane where everything looked good, but death was a breath away.

She didn't want to go the way of her car. Better to try to shimmy up. It was a perfectly bad idea, or so she thought. One shimmy to the left had the ground underneath her crumbling and the slender tree trunk she was clinging to came undone from its fragile grip on the earth. A scream was torn from her as her hands let go and her body was cast against the hillside

in a rolling mass of agony as she began to plummet to what she was sure was her death.

CHAPTER TWO

A muffled cry came from Lita as she woke and tried to move. There was no telling how long she had been on the ground. She was awake and not dead. She wasn't going to resent the time she spent passed out. Was anything broken? She tried to move only to realize her whole body was a ball of agony, but the only thing that might have broken was her ankle.

What was the chance that her cell phone survived the fall in better condition than she did? Reaching for her cell phone that she hoped was in the back pocket of her jeans and not crispy in the burning car, she spotted two green eyes looking at her. A predator had her in its sights. Was it licking its lips, thinking of the different ways to eat her? None of which would be enjoyable.

Her life was going to hell, and she wanted a do over. Please.

“Yeah, you don't want any of this. I'm not good enough to eat. You should look elsewhere for a nice, juicy steak. Hell, if you let me go, I'll get you the biggest, juiciest steak you ever

had. All you have to do is back away and don't let any of your friends know where I am. Deal? Steak for the win?"

She had officially lost it. Wild animals couldn't understand English, or humans for that matter. Even if he could, what would keep him from eating her? Because she said please and traded a steak for her life? Yep, she was losing it.

She screamed and closed her eyes as whatever was in the shadows started running at her. A prayer left her lips as she felt the animal jump onto her stomach, making her cry out in more pain.

"Please make it fast." She trembled when she felt the first lick of a coarse tongue along her cheek. It's tasting me. Any minute she'd feel her blood pouring out of her body along with muscle and nerves that were shattered by sharp teeth.

A head snuggled between her neck and chin. One that was smaller than she anticipated. Lita opened her eyes to find there was a cat on her chest. Not any cat, but a Maine Coon. One of the larger sized cats. That's why she felt it when it jumped on her.

"You're a sweet baby." She wasn't sure she believed that at this juncture, but didn't want to give it any reason to change its mind about her.

Shit! This might be a harmless cat, but she knew a fox when she saw one. This one was standing on the edge of the clearing, watching her and the cat.

“We don’t want any trouble, Mister Fox. All I want to do is get home, sorry I didn’t mean to intrude into your solitude.”

Were foxes in to solitude? She didn’t know and really didn’t care. When the fox turned around and slipped back into the darkness, she was good with that. As long as he didn’t bring other predators to her.

“I need to move before that fox comes back.” The cat on her chest gave her a large meow of protest before it began to stick its nails into Lita. It felt like the cat was trying to keep her there. It wouldn’t budge from its place on her chest. Could Lita carry the cat? Main Coons were bigger than most cats, and she wasn’t going to try to carry this one.

The cat snuggled into her body, sucking up her warmth and making herself at home. Lita knew better, she really did, but her eyes closed and soon she was out cold.



“Haru!” Sable was out of her mind. She went to check on her son, who was exhausted when they got back from the fair. He could hardly keep his eyes open, and he wasn’t in the room.

Xander was up in arms, and his dragon was puffing smoke out of his nostrils. They hit the backdoor at the same time getting tangled as they tried to call for Haru. His window was open, and they were hoping and praying that he crawled through it, hoping to sneak a swim in the pool.

“Haru!” they screamed, desperately looking for him. They stopped in stunned silence as they spotted a small red fox with a white chest and black socks.

“I’ve seen that fox before,” Xander said quietly.

“So have I.” They watched as the fox darted away. “Do you think?” Sable asked Xander.

“Couldn’t be, but maybe,” he answered quietly. “Let’s go in,” he raised his voice.

“Haru must be in the house playing hide-n-seek.” They deliberately turned their back on the fox and walked into the kitchen.

“Come out wherever you are, little fox,” Xander called.

It didn’t take three minutes before Haru ran into the kitchen, scrambling to a stop.

“Lita was in an accident. She’s lying on the side of the road.” Haru started talking fast and loud before his parents could say anything.

“Let’s go.” Xander grabbed the car keys he put up when they walked through the door. He drove what he affectionately called a tank. It could town any terrain because it was badass like that.

Once they were on their way and Haru told them where to go, they sat silently for a while. The only thing Sable could hear was the breathing of the two males she loved. One could turn into a motherfucking huge dragon and the other one... could turn into the cutest fox?

And she thought her life was getting strange before she met Xander. Now her life was so far off the chain she didn't recognize it, and honestly loved it.

“You can tell us anything, Haru.” She ran her fingers through his black hair. How was his hair black and his fox red? just another thing she didn't know about him. She was 99% sure he was the fox they had seen.

“I know,” he said quietly before sinking into her side. The rode the rest of the way in silence.

Xander turned off the main road for a small dirt lane that was hardly big enough for a bike, much less his tank of an SUV. They bumped along the road, taking out some small shrubs along the way until they reached a site with black smoke curling up in the air. The lazy tendrils hid the scene behind them.

“Lita!” Sable screamed, fighting with the seatbelt and then throwing herself out of the SUV. She fell to her knees. Sometimes she forgot how high it was.

Sable stopped short when she got a look at the main Coon cat sitting on Lita's chest. It hissed when she tried to approach.

“Hi, wanna play?” There were times when Haru seemed older than his years. Then there were times like this when she realized he was a young boy who was trying to grow into his gangly arms and legs. His voice might be cracking, but he was still a child.

“Lita is my best friend. All I want to do is help her.” Why was she talking to a cat like it could understand her? Because if her son the fox thought the cat had intelligence, there was no way she was going to argue with him.

The cat turned its head and stared at Xander.

“That’s my father,” Haru said before Sable could say anything. Carefully, the cat left Lita and went over to Haru, rubbing against his legs. His laughed cracked from high to low and then back again.

Sable took a minute to smile at him, nothing but love sparking in her eyes before she fell to her knees next to Lita’s side.

“How the hell did she and her car get over the embankment?” She was muttering more to herself than Xander. “Should we call an ambulance?”

Xander took a good look at the car walking around it. He was having a hard time picturing the damage because the fire had managed to burn most of the car. There was only one fender that didn’t suffer from fire damage, but it was damaged. It could have happened when she went over the embankment, but...

“No.” He pulled out his phone and called his cousin. “Were you asleep?” Xander asked when his cousin answered with a small snarl.

“You’re an asshole. What do you want?” Dominic asked, not sounding any more awake.

“Love you too, coz. I need to get Lita to the house. She was in an accident, and I don’t think advertising she’s still alive is something we want to do.”

“Damn!” Dominic started cursing in one of the non-human native languages that he knew. “I’m bringing Gaige. Don’t ask and do not ruffle his feathers.” Dominic stressed every word before he hung up.

“Dom’s coming. He’ll get Lita back to our place?”

“Dom not Vale?” Vale had the ability to open a corridor or something to get you from one place to another.

“Vale’s off planet. He can move large groups of people. Dom works a little differently. He calls it shadow walking, but he can take several people through the shadows with him. He’ll have Gaige with him. Don’t ask me why. Together they will get Lita to the house without anyone being aware. We’ll go the old-fashioned way.”

The shadows opened, and Dom and Gaige walked out. Gaige went to Lita’s side, running his hands over her, looking for breaks.

“She’s safe to move, but we’ll need a healer.”

“Get going, call our cousin and have him text me where to pick him up.” Dom went to Lita and Gaige, doing his own check to make sure he could safely move her.

Xander, Sable, Haru, and the cat got into his tank and took off, leaving the three to get the job done.

“Haile?” Xander wasn’t sure. The phone connected, but there was only breathing on the other end.

“Who died that you want me to resurrect?” Haile’s sick sense of humor was coming out.

“Wait...can you do that?”

“Aww, forget I said that. What’s happening?” It was the middle of the night. His coz hadn’t called for fun and games, right?

“Lita, Sable’s best friend, was in an accident, and we need a healer. Will you text Dom and let him know where to get you?”

“Yep, let me grab a bag and some clothes and I’m on the way. Xan, I don’t care who it is. If you ask, I’ll be there.” He hung up the phone and Xan choked turning it into a cough. There was something about his crazy coz that he loved.

“Haile will be at the house before we will. She’s in good hands.” To Haile, healing someone was a calling that he wouldn’t or couldn’t refuse. He loved to see the hurt well and healthy, to the point it was almost an obsession.

Xander had a feeling Lita was going to need all of Haile’s obsessive concentration.

CHAPTER THREE

Lita opened her eyes to see a male standing over her with his hands pressed against her stomach and a stethoscope hanging from his neck.

“Don’t move you have some internal damage. I’m almost done healing it. How’s that head?”

“Ugh, it hurts. What happened and who are you?”

“I’m Haile Xan’s cousin. You might not remember me. You had a severe head trauma. I healed it, but there’s nothing I can do about the residual pain. You’ll have to deal with that, maybe pop a few pain pills. They may help you feel better.”

Haile had been around a little, but not that much, if she remembered correctly. She tried to look down her body by lifting her head and shoulders. Yeah, that was a mistake, but she caught a glimpse of the light coming from Haile’s hands. He was a healer, the mystical kind. Why was she surprised?

“Bed rest for the next 24 hours or until tomorrow morning if you feel up to moving. There’s a house full of people who are

waiting to find out what happened to you. Do you feel like talking?”

Lita’s hand went to her head as she slowly turned to look at the bedroom door. “No.” The thought of having whoever was out there in her private domain hurt more than her head.

“They will have to wait until tomorrow. Here.” He pulled two blue pills out of the doctor’s bag that was sitting on her nightstand. He handed her the pills and a bottle of water.

“What is this?”

“Our version of your Ibuprofen. My uncles Nicholas and Damen came up with them when they realized their children would be part human. They didn’t want us taking medicine that had some dangerous side effects just to get rid of pain. The wonderful thing about them is that they work for our aunts and our mates if we are blessed with one. Which means it’s the best thing you can take for pain.”

“Thanks.” She downed the two pills. A wide yawn escaped her.

“Did I mention the blue ones will put you to sleep?”

“No, no, you didn’t.” She snuggled into the covers and closed her eyes as he packed up.

Could she get stock in these? They were working well.



“Who forgot to close the blinds?” Lita growled, rolling over in bed with the cover over her head. wait...the blinds?

She peeked out of her man made cocoon to open one eye enough for the shine of the sun to make her glare. She always thought of herself as a morning person, but the sun wasn't playing nice.

How did she get to bed? Yesterday was a black hole, and she wasn't sure if she couldn't remember or didn't want to remember. That did the trick. She hadn't wanted to remember, but now it was all pouring back in.

Now that she remembered, she moved her head gingerly, waiting for the pain. When there was no pain, she wanted a bottle of those pills and stock in the company. Maybe if she treated Haile really nicely, he'd put in a good word for her.

The knock at her bedroom door stopped all those thoughts.

“Lita?”

“Come In Sable.” Lita immediately felt like an asshole for not seeing her best friend before she passed out.

“Sable, come in. I'm sorry,” she said as soon as she saw Sable's face.

“Don't you dare apologize and I have no idea what you're apologizing for.” Sable sat on the edge of the bed after Lita moved over.

“I should have gone to the fair with you.”

“Why didn’t you.” Sable was still a little hurt, but was doing her best to move on.

“I really thought you needed time to spend with your family. I feel like the fifth wheel, at times. It was more than that tho. I heard Zena and Zuri were one town over and I wanted to talk to them. They’ve been more secretive than we like, but they are also trustworthy. Two more friends to watch your back would put me at ease.”

“I understand, but I wish you had told me. I would have gone with you.”

“Which is why I didn’t tell you.” First her crazy ex wanted to kill her, more like sacrifice her to some dark god. Then the people in town started acting strange and then there was her adopted son Haru, who looked like he was Asian, but Lita was willing to bet good money that he wasn’t. Sable needed a break, not another thing on her plate.

“How did you drive your car over an embankment?” That was Sable’s polite way of saying bitch, are you crazy?

“Xander is going to want to hear this. Let me take a quick shower and change, then I’ll be out. I’d go faster with the promise of breakfast.”

“I should make you cook your own breakfast. Sable tapped her foot impatiently before breaking down and giving Lita a smile. “Hurry up but be forewarned that three of Xander’s cousins are waiting to find out what happened, as well.”

Hell, she had hoped it was a dream. She swore she heard Gaige. Sexy Gaige, who got under her skin probably because she wanted to do the horizontal tango with him.

You can do this. Pep talk over, she went to take a shower. Somebody wanted her dead. No, they wanted her alive to torture and then wanted her dead. What had she walked into, and why? Maybe one of Xander's cousins would have an answer.

Was she paying extra attention to her appearance? Of course not. Why do you ask? Can't a woman spend extra time in the mirror and put on a bit of makeup even though she's not leaving the house? Oh, these old jeans, the ones that cup her hips and ass and emphasized her curves. They were the thing she found. Wait...why was she justifying her clothes to herself? Ugh, she was hungry.

She marched, okay...okay she sashayed out of the room. Everyone was in the kitchen when she walked in and yep, he looked better today than he did the last time she saw him.

His short black hair flopped into his face, giving him a boyish look. And his smile that liked to crook up on one side always made her want to trace it with her fingers. In the end, it was his blue-green eyes that captivated her. They looked old and deep, like the wisdom of the galaxies resided in them. His tall, muscular body was nothing to scoff at. She'd like to lick that all night long, please. Gaige thought he was god's gift to women and seriously, she couldn't argue with that. She thought he was a gift anyway, as long as he stayed quiet.

“Lita.” Why did he have to spoil a good thing by talking?

“What happened to you?” He hadn’t moved, but she could feel his essence pressing against her like a pair of invisible hands checking to make sure she was alright.

She swallowed before trying to talk. There was something about feeling him close to her even when he wasn’t that she liked. It felt like they were connected on a deeper level.

She slid onto the barstool at the island before saying anything. “I think someone tried to kill me.” Her hand went up to interrupt everyone trying to talk at the same time. “I know someone tried to kill me.” She took her time and walked them through everything that had happened.

“This is different, but it feels like what happened to me,” Sable said. She put the spatula down and had Lita in her arms. “I honestly hoped it was over when Xander killed Roger. I guess that would have been too easy. Why are they going after you when Roger came after me?”

“I don’t want to be in the line of fire, but I’m happy they aren’t going after you. Whoever they are. The men who tried to kill me referenced a female, which could mean anything.”

“I think we all have to be careful. They could be going after any combination of us,” Xander said, focusing on Sable and Lita before he included his cousins and Haru with a look. “No running off Haru. You can’t assume you’re safe because of your age.”

Haru nodded before lowering his eyes.

“That wasn’t a suggestion, young man.” Xander hit him with a stern glare.

“Yes, sir.”

One hand went through his hair. It took more willpower than he thought to keep from pulling it out at the roots. How do parents do it? “Sable, do you see any gray hair?”

The entire table started to laugh, and Sable finished breakfast.

“There’s nothing we can do now, except wait,” Gaige said as they finished breakfast. Small jokes went back and forth as if they agreed silently not to talk about death and destruction while they ate. it was good for the digestive track.

“As much as I hate to admit it, he has a point.” Lita raised an eyebrow at him and then blinked when both eyebrows raise. Why the hell couldn’t she raise only one like the cool kids?

Gaige looked right at her and raised one eyebrow. She wanted to smack that smirk off his lips, or you know kiss it. It was all the same thing, right?

“Are you feeding the cat under the table?” Xander asked.

“No!” Haru jumped in his chair, dropping the bacon on the floor.

“Cats don’t eat bacon.”

Sable slid her hand up into the air. “I actually looked it up and cats can eat bacon, just not all the time.”

Xander pulled at his hair while he glared at Sable before turning to Lita. “They’re ganging up on me. Is this what happened when you have a mate and a child? I thought the boy child would be on my side.”

“Mwahahaha.” Lita made strange noises while Sable and Haru laughed until tears flowed.

“No worries, we love you.” Sable hugged him and Haru joined in.

“Sweet,” Gaige muttered. Lita couldn’t tell if he meant it or if he was just being a sarcastic asshole. Wait, that might be her.

“So, we’re just going to wait?”

“What else can we do?” Sable asked her.

“Nothing.” Lita started taking the dishes to the sink. She filled in at her aunt and uncle’s diner when one of the waitresses couldn’t make it. She was handy in the kitchen and quick to wash a dish.

A lone howl seemed to come from all directions. “Did someone lose a dog?” Lita asked as they went to the kitchen door to look out.



“What’s happening here?” Casper, the deputy sheriff, asked as he walked out of his office. There were voices talking over each other, each demanding to go first. The crowd around the

desk all turned to look at him at once. Hands reached out imploring he help them. He took an involuntary step back.

“Parker, get out here and help.” The poor officer at the front desk looked like he had been caught by headlights and couldn’t move.

“What the...” Parker asked. “I was just out here ten minutes ago. Everything was silent.”

Casper nodded but said nothing. Everything had been eerily silent since the attempted sacrifice of Sable Grant. Not that he had a chance to talk to her or even tell her what they knew. What would he say? We were watching as that deranged person tried to kill you. We didn’t interfere because we wanted to see how it played out didn’t sound good coming from the Rakes Forth police department. Especially not the deputy. Her boyfriend, mate, or maybe lover saved her life and turned into a huge, ferocious dragon. Nope, scratch that. He turned into an alien dragon. yeah, he was still wrapping his head around that one. Considering he knew more than the average human, that was saying a lot.

Now wasn’t the time. Parker found a whistle that shut everyone up. Then he turned the floor over to Casper, taking out a small notebook.

“Would one person tell me what’s happening?”

They looked amongst themselves before Beverly Smith, the matriarch of the town, stepped forward.

“Coco is gone. I left her in the yard for a minute to get some cookies to go with my coffee and she was gone. Someone stole her. My Coco would never leave me.” She glared at Casper, daring him to dispute her word.

“Muffin Chops is gone.” Another voice shouted.

One voice after another started shouting about a missing pet. He was sure he heard a few cat names mixed in with the litany of dog names. One thing he was sure about was that Coco, the poodle, whose actual name was Coco the Magnificent, the sixth was as old as Mrs. Smith. She wasn't going anywhere that someone didn't carry her.

“Whose pet was outside? Raise your hands?” Every single hand went up.

What was going on here?

CHAPTER FOUR

Casper wished Rakes forth had a dog catcher. He caught Parker's eye because he wanted everyone out before the sheriff came in. The sheriff getting wind of this was the last thing he needed.

“Parker, get Jones and Wallaby on the case. That many animals can't go missing without someone seeing something.” Parker took off to the back, where there was a small squad room. “Everyone give your name, phone number, and all the information you have about your pet to Officer Anderson at the desk. We'll call you once we find them. Mrs. Smith, I know how to reach you and I know all about Coco. We'll do our best to find her and all the other animals. This is not a time to worry.”

He walked Mrs. Smith out and then waited for Parker.

“What are we going to do?” That's one of the reasons he kept Parker around. He was unflappable. There were other reasons, but he wasn't ready to let the other male know them.

“They’re not running the streets. There’d be calls about how the animals are taking over the town. The other place they could be is in the surrounding woods.”

“You don’t think...”

“That some crazy person took them for animal sacrifices. There were about Seventy-five people squeezed together in that foyer. Probably a world record and I’m sure more than one was missing two or more animals. I get animal sacrifice. Nope, I don’t get it, but sacrificing that many animals at one time?”

“Good point. I hate to say it. After what we saw in the woods, nothing would surprise me if it happened in this town.”

Casper agreed. it was supposed to be a nice quiet town where he could get some down time and not have to deal with street thugs, mobsters, and drug addicts and so on. It was not living up to its name.

“Jones and Wallaby are covering the streets. We’re going to cover the woods?”

“We are and we’re going to start at Mrs. Smith’s house. Poor Coco has a distinct limp.”

“Oh my God!” Parker started laughing so hard he tripped down several of the steps to get to street level. “I’d never thought I’d see the day when the deputy was tracking a poodle.”

Casper stopped, his mouth opening wide in shock before he began laughing. “Only in Rakes Forth.”

They got into the deputy's SUV and started towards Mrs. Smith's house.

"Coffee?" Parker asked, giving him a side eye.

Casper's coffee was sitting on his desk, getting cold. He'd only been able to take one sip before all the noise alerted him to a problem.

"Hell, yes. Coffee is life." he pulled up through the drive thru.

"Hallelujah," Parker said like a prayer.

They ordered breakfast sandwiches, along with a large cup of coffee. This was where you went if you didn't have the time to stop in the vintage and sit down and chat for a while.

They drank coffee and ate in silence, each of the planning a point of attack to find the animals and hold whoever the culprit was responsible.

Mrs. Smith lived in a large, old Victorian house. It was a family house, and she refused to be parted from it. The only good thing was that she came from old money, so there was no hardship having maids to come clean and help take care of her. She never had any children, as far as Casper knew.

They parked in front of the house it was light blue with white trim and from the outside looked like it was in excellent condition.

"Mrs. Smith might be old with a slightly sharp tongue, but she has all her wits about her," Parker said.

That she did, which made Casper wonder on more than one occasion if she was something besides a run of the mill human. If she was, she hid it well.

“Where do we start?” Parker looked around the well manicure land.

“She has a side porch that she loves to sit on. Coco has a bed back there as well as toys, and whatever else a wealthy poodle may need.”

“I swear when that woman dies, she’s going to leave everything to Coco.”

“You might be right, but we have to find her first.” That ended Parker’s smile as he followed Casper to the side.

“That’s not right, is it?” Parker asked.

“You mean this open gate that I have never seen open before? It’s definitely not right.” The open gate led to a flat expanse of grass and then to some trees beyond it. Parker cocked his head to find Mrs. Smith looking out the window at them. She nodded, then closed the curtain. He was willing to bet she wasn’t human.

They went through the gate looking for any signs of coco. They went about three feet before they spotted signs of her limp. Why now and not from the start? Could someone have taken her and then put her down to do her own thing? It could have been a teen playing tricks, but with all the pets in the neighborhood.

“Ideas?” Parker asked Casper.

“More like a working theory. Did you see all the vehicles parked out front of the police station?”

“I did, high class, impressive. I also noticed that everyone in the station was dressed a little nicer than the average man.”

“They all looked like they came from this area, say, a four-block radius. So, they didn’t target just the average cat or dog but ones that have wealthy caretakers. Why?” There couldn’t have been a massive amount of people, dog and cat napping in the neighborhood without anyone seeing unknown cars or people. “How many people do you think saw us pull up to Mrs. Smith’s house?”

“I’d say at least eight, but I noticed that some curtains moved when we drove down the other streets.”

“Are we agreed that a random number of pet nappers would not have gone unnoticed?” Parker nodded in agreement. “Let’s assume Coco couldn’t run away from her captors, but I’ve heard her bark. Mrs. Smith would have heard it; she lives for that poodle.”

“Good point. I know there were several pit bulls and rottweilers in the missing animals. No one was just walking up on them and getting out unscathed.”

Casper caught Parker by the arm, stopping him. He kneeled down and showed Parker the new tracks.

“Dogs, and not wild dogs. The nails aren’t jagged and sharp. Other animals met up with Coco here, but there was no blood or fighting. They were definitely going somewhere.



“You have got to be kidding me,” Lita said when she walked outside. A second howl joined the first and then another until the air was filled with the howls and yips and yaps of animals. Hell, she could swear she could hear at least one cat, but that must have been her imagination.

Have all the animals around here gone batshit crazy?” Sable asked.

Lita was sure that was a perfectly good question as she joined the procession that was moving to the gates that protected Xander and Sable’s land. Xander infused his land with magic to keep anyone intent on harming him or his away. Not just his magic, but he had paid for a witch to come and reinforce whatever he had done. Witches, and aliens, and who the hell else knew what was walking on this earth.

Lita collided with Gaige when he stopped short. When had she started following him and why did she feel a sense of safety around him?

“What?” She stepped around Gaige to see what everyone was looking at. There are animals, domestic pets and wild, all howling and trying desperately to get through the gate and fence.

“I’m still lying at the bottom of that ravine, right?”

“Not unless I’m lying next to you,” Sable said, trying to get a little closer to the fence. Xander snagged her arm and pulled her close to him.

“I swear I recognize a few of those pets. Come on, what harm can they do that’s a poodle!”

The poodle bared its little teeth and growled for all it was worth, like it knew Sable was talking about it.

“Forget about the poodle. Is that a wolf?” Lita asked.

“There are no wolves in these woods...” Xander came to an abrupt halt.

“No, no way,” Gaige said.

“It could happen,” Haile said.

“How?” Gaige challenged.

“Enthralled?” Xander said.

“Okay, can we stop with the secret alien dialect and let the rest of us in on the secret?” Lita asked, frustration bubbling in every word.

Gaige looked both ways before he finally said, “shifters.”

“A who and a what?” Lita looked at him, resisting the urge to feel his forehead.

“Xan can turn into an alien dragon. That’s not what he is but it translates well to human. I can dream-walk and Haile can heal along with our other features, and you scoff over shifters?”

Gaige, Xan, And Haile were aliens. That made sense, right? He was talking about people who were born human or almost human on this planet, being able to slip their skin for a second one. Lita's eyes flitted to Sable, who now could do more with plant life than any human could. Was she human and were the shifters human or had they been planted on the earth to cause chaos?

“But you're alien,” she finally stuttered.

“And they're not. You need to get comfortable with that fact real fast because the training wheels just came off.”

She nodded, because Gaige was right. It was time for her to let go of her ‘this can't happen thoughts’, and deal with the fact that the world she knew changed overnight and she was now part of a new one.

“Okay, somebody explain the attack of the pets without making reference to Stephen King's Pet Cemetery.” She didn't do spooky kill her.

“Later on, the shifter talk,” Xan said. “Right now, we—”

“What the hell!” Lita called out. “She looked up to see several birds flying overhead. “They just pooped on me! I swear they targeted me.” The look of disgust on her face had Gaige smirking. He ran his finger over her forehead.

“Yep, looks like bird poop to me.”

“That's disgusting.” Sable pushed Gaige out of the way and then thrust a wet wipe at him.

“All the parental forums say don’t leave the house without them.” She handed Lita several wipes and made motions for her to clean up.

“Xan, I thought the house and the sky were protected.” More birds were coming. They looked like a black wave clouding out the sun.

“I have a concealment ward over the property. That stops both satellite and aircraft from getting a look at what’s happening. It also conceals my dragon when I decide to go for a flight. It doesn’t stop birds or planes from flying through. I’d need to get a no-fly zone permission, and that would defeat the purpose of concealing what I am.”

“What do we do about the animals and the birds?” Sable asked.

Xander stood back and his body elongated. He moved away from the fence before leaping into the air.

“Sable, please tell me that’s not a murder of crows.” How else could she put it when hundreds of them came at the same time? They were nothing but black spots and ruby red eyes that looked glazed. Xander tried to scare them away, but they attacked, all sharp beaks and talons and then they started dive bombing Lita.

She screamed and ran as they chased her. Gaige took off after her, picking her up as he ran, stepping through one dream into another before getting them back to the house.

“What the hell just happened?”

CHAPTER FIVE

The sound of rushing wings had Lita and Gaige rolling over the living room floor. Two the birds had managed to hitch a ride with them. Gaige stood, making himself a shield for Lita, fighting the birds off. Lita ran into the kitchen closet and pulled out a broom.

“This is why the old-fashioned stuff never goes out of fashion,” she shouted as she battered up and knocked a bird into the wall. “Get it out, get it out.” She was hopping around like a cat crossing hot coals.

Gaige laughed at her but picked the bird up and flung it out the door while she played batter up with the second one. When it was down, and Gaige had taken care of it, she sank to the floor.

She wanted to pray she was dreaming, but she refrained. There was no way her subconscious could make this up.

“What’s happening here?” Gaige joined her on the living room floor, back against the solid couch.

“That attack, the birds and the pets, even the forest animals and the one shifter. It was aimed at you. There must be something about you that they want or don’t want to get out.”

“Should we go help them?” What was happening to her? She was nothing out of the ordinary. A woman with parental issues, not as bad as Sable’s, but she got it. Her parents hadn’t been loving, but she also hadn’t been shipped to other people’s house to raise her as a child. Her aunt and uncle, on the other hand, treated her like she was their baby. They had kept her when she was growing up and gave her all the love a young child needed and kept it up as she grew into a woman.

“No, they’ll take care of the animals and I have a feeling now that you’re no longer out there, that they will go back to where they belong. Xander will try to figure out who the teen is and warn his parents.”

This was a mistake it had to be. They were targeting her for no reason. Had they mixed her up with someone else in town? She slumped against the couch, sliding against Gaige’s shoulder.

“I want to kiss you.”

It was a simple statement. One she might have scoffed at a week ago. Now, she was wondering what was stopping him. There might not be a tomorrow for her, but that’s not why she wanted the kiss. The first time she saw him, she was enthralled with his masculinity. The way his muscles flowed in his clothes. Those damn blue-green eyes did it to her every time.

It was like he could look through her into her soul. She wanted to kiss him come hell or high water.

“What are you waiting for?” She asked a little breathlessly.

“Consent. It’s a beautiful thing.” He leaned a little closer, his lips so close she could feel the heat from them.

“Yes.” That was all it took. He pressed his lips against her in a gentle get to know you kiss. It was soft and sweet, and she could feel her heart stutter. When his tongue came out to lick her lips, asking permission to enter. She responded, opening wide and meeting his tongue in a playful duet as they got the first taste of each other. The lick of his tongue sent fire cruising through her. She wanted to forget everything except the magic she was feeling at his hands. He pulled her closer, and she was moaning when the back door flew open and little feet stomped through the kitchen to the living room.

“Get off my aunt Lita!” Little hands were plummeting against Gaige’s back.

“Calm down little man, I’m not hurting her I swear.” Lita reached over and pulled Haru into her arms.

“My protector, thank you. I promise your uncle Gaige was not hurting me.”

Haru looked at Gaige, who gave him an innocent smile. The backdoor opened and again and everyone else came in.

“What happened?” Lita asked, setting Haru down beside her.

“When Xander decided to stop playing with the crows,” Sable laughed.

Xander walked behind her and gave her a tight hug. “I was not playing with the crows.” He kissed her cheek before smiling at Lita and Gaige.

“He gave them a few puffs of fire and the crows were like scary dragon one murder of crows zero and they left. I think, in part because you were no longer outside to terrorize.”

“I wouldn’t say I was terrorized.” No, she wouldn’t say it, but she wouldn’t be watching any Alfred Hitchcock or going to a bird sanctuary either. There were no birds in her foreseeable future. “What about the rest of the animals?”

“It’s amazing the plants life under the ground. I called on some of them to tie the animals up and then I found a plant that I bet has been extinct for a thousand years or more and I put them to sleep.” Sable pulled away from Xander and took a seat in one of the chairs surrounding the couch. She winked at her mate, and he came to join her.

“How are you going to explain to the local PD that there are hundreds of animals in front of your place?”

“Did you stop living here, and I didn’t know?” Xander asked.

Lita felt her face flush. She had moved in when Sable was having all that trouble with her ex and never moved out. Part of her thought it was time to go home, but the other part clung to the new life she had been given. Hearing Xander confirm what she already knew. That she was home made her want to tear up.

“That’s where I come in,” Dom said, walking through the door. “Moving people is harder than animals. I took the pets and placed them around the town. They’ll wake up and their calls for their humans will alert everyone of where to find them.”

“The wolf?” Lita asked, still shaken up about shifters but concerned for the teen.

“They were passing through and decided to stay a few days and camp. Their campsite was packed and as soon as they got their son back, they left vowing never to set foot in this town again.”

“I can’t blame them. If I had somewhere to go, I’d leave as well.” Lita got up and resettled on the couch. Rakes forth was the only place she knew, and this was where her friends and family were. She didn’t want to leave them alone and unprotected, and she didn’t want to face whatever was coming next without them by her side.

“I don’t understand. It makes no sense.” She jumped up and started pacing. She worked part time for her aunt and uncle more like a fill in and with a day scheduled on the weekend to help out, when they needed help. Other than that, she did accounting work from home. Which was perfect because as long as she had her laptop and the cloud she could work from anywhere.

“Please don’t take this the wrong way. I love myself, but in the grand scheme of time I’m nothing but one more cog. I’ll

live and die and well hopefully leave children behind. Why would someone want to kill me?"

Her life had been mapped out for her from the time she was a child. She would grow up, get a degree, spend time with friends. Then she'd meet that special someone, they would get married and have kids and live to be nice and old and in love. It was the in-love part that she focused the most on as she grew up. Her parents didn't seem to love each other or her. Theirs was an arranged marriage, each of them getting something out of it. For her father, it was an heir. She had no idea what her mother got. All she knew was that she was the oops second child. They treated her just like that.

"I wouldn't be so quick to discount your worth to the grand scheme of things," Gaige said.

"What he said," Sable seconded Gaige.

"You're a beautiful woman in your own right and you don't have to be able to do magic or be a paranormal to be special. I've watched you with Haru and Sable. You have a talent to love. Heck, you even put up with me." He flashed her a sexy smile and a wink.

"I was going to disagree with you and then you added in the part about being able to deal with you and yeah, it's hard to disagree with that." Lita gave him an innocent smile while their friends and family laughed.

Friends and family, the thought caught her off guard. The list of people she loved and trusted had always been a small one. Her uncle, Sable, and a few good friends they made at college.

That was it and now, she was sitting here with friends? No, they were becoming more like family every day. Haru called her aunt Lita. God, hearing him say that made her heart leap for joy.

“Gaige, I believe you were going somewhere when you got sidetracked by how beautiful Lita is,” Xander said. Lita could hear the sarcasm in his voice. Sable punched in the stomach, and he bent over like that little love tap hurt. Smart male.

“I feel under appreciated. Lita, you did something you shouldn’t have been able to do. Did you know I’m a dream walker?” There are so many categories of dream walkers that most people have no idea what one could do.

“You found where Roger was holding Sable through her dreams and then you were able to tell everyone where to go to rescue her.”

“Yes, that’s one of my skills. Here’s another one. Let’s say I want to go to Hong Kong to hang out for a few hours before coming back home to have dinner. I’ll find a person in Hong Kong who is sleeping. Doesn’t matter the time of day, there is always someone asleep could be a child or adult doesn’t matter. I can literally use that person’s dream and access his location. Here’s the catch. I can’t take anyone with me.”

She stared at him wide eyed before she remembered that blinking was recommended.

“I honestly don’t know if I should be in awe or shiver in fear. It sounds marvelous and creepy at the same time. What if someone wakes up and you’re in their bedroom?”

“No one can see me until I exit the dream world. I don’t do that in a person’s bedroom and remember, I didn’t have to be where they were sleeping to hijack their dream.”

“You can go anywhere in the world you want to?”

“Yes, but only if I want to go alone.”

Where would she have gone if she had the power? Would she have gone to Europe or what about seeing the pyramids and the sphinx? It might be just sand, but it would be crazy awesome to say I was standing right here. There were a thousand things she could do. Wasn’t she lonely enough without adding that to her life?

“It sounds great, but also lonely.”

“It is, and that’s why what you did surprised me.” Gaige looked at his cousins. They shook their heads not having seen what he was talking about.

“What are you talking about?” She was ready for this day to be over. One day was beginning to blend into another, and there was nothing good about that. She also wanted to spend some time with Gaige because there might not be another chance.

“I’m waiting.” Her words came out sharp and impatient. “Part of it was sexual frustration. Then there was the fact that he could annoy her like no one she had ever met.

“How did we get inside?”

“You carried me.” She remembered being held in his thick, muscular arms. Either she liked him and wanted to jump his

bones, or he annoyed her. It couldn't be both, right?

“I did, through two dreams.”

CHAPTER SIX

“**W**hat?” Lita stared at him before wandering to the floor to ceiling windows that were in the living room. Had she traveled through two dreams without realizing it? The memory of the crows attacking her was terrifyingly clear. The horror of the moment, and the understanding that together those crows could kill her. It was worse than going over the embankment. A part of her was always aware that there could be a car accident. Death by crow wasn’t on her horizon.

The feel of Gaige’s muscular arms lifting her as she ran had broken the cold fear that held her in its grip. She had buried herself in his arms, seeking security. Her head went to his shoulder, her mouth pressed against the side of his neck. Was there more to the memory? She looked deeper at the flash of memory that she’d pushed away in an attempt to forget it.

There were flashing lights. Looking closer, she realized there were patterns like sun bursts against the dark sky. Fireworks. She had been seeing fireworks, but the memory was short as if

it was only seconds long, although it felt like an eternity when she was in it.

Then she was a cat playing with a ball of yarn. She knew this cat; it was the blue Maine Coon that had come home with her. Haru seemed to have taken a shine to her. She hadn't known the gender of her newly acquired cat, but in the dream, the cat was a female. Out of the corner of one eye, she was sure she saw her mother. Something about the scene bothered her, but it was gone so quickly she couldn't pinpoint what was off with what she was feeling. That explains how they got back into the house. Izzy had been asleep; it was short for Isadora.

“Did you jump into Izzy's dream?” Haru asked, proving that he was paying attention and not just playing with the cat.

“How did you know her name?” She was still trying to figure out how she knew the cat's name.

Haru shrugged. “I just did.” Lita could tell by the stubborn tilt of his chin; they weren't getting any more out of him.

“Thanks for confirming her name for me. I thought it was Izzy, but I don't dream walk all that often. I wonder what cool places I could visit.” She didn't think she wanted to do that, but now that she knew there lied the possibility within her, maybe.

“No where, at least not without me.” Gaige gave her that smile that irritated her and made her heart beat faster at the same time. Could irritation do that to you while making you want to get naked? Probably not.

“Why would that be? Do you think you’re the only one who should be allowed to dream walk?” She gritted her teeth, not because she was angry, but to keep from showing how turned on she was. A love and hate relationship was something she wasn’t made for. It simply wasn’t part of her DNA. She was going to have to take a stance and then stick with it.

Gaige walked over to her and placed his mouth against her ear. “Do you think there can only be one dream walker at a time? Or perhaps I simply want you in the dreams I infiltrate.

The feel of his warm breath on the shell of her ear made caused her to shiver. This male was too much for any ordinary female. Good thing she was more than she thought she was.

“Gaige!” Xander’s sharp bark stopped him.

“Jealous much?” He moved around Lita until he was meeting her eyes. “I’ve met several dream walkers in my lifetime and I’m sure there are even more out there. That’s not why you can’t go dream walking on your own. Simply put, you’re not a dream walker.”

She blinked, confused. “You said...” He was shaking his head, and she petered out.

“I said you were special because you were able to enter dreams with me. That doesn’t mean you can walk into them on your own.”

She was confused. After looking around the room, she wasn’t the only one. Her eyes went back to Gage’s as she waited for an explanation. “I’m waiting.” The words were

softer this time to antagonistic. She wanted to know what he knew, but also, she was tired of her shields always on the offensive, only to lower because of the mixed feelings she had about Gaige. Then it would start all over when she decided not to trust him.

“I don’t know what you are. I do know what I saw you do and as far as I know, you’re the only one with the ability to do it. We thought, the dream community, that they were hunted to extinction for their abilities.” He shot her a piercing look, as if waiting for her to make that leap.

She jerked away from him, shaking her head. He was implying that someone wanted to kill her or drain her for an ability she didn’t know she had and then kill her. No, mankind wasn’t that kind of evil. Yeah, they were. As long as it benefited them, they didn’t care about the other person. Not everyone, but enough to send three cars to end her life. Someone wanted her dead. She felt like she was on a huge ship in the middle of the ocean that was slowly sinking. At first, you denied the evidence in front of you. As inch after inch of unrelenting water filled the boat, you began to accept your fate. It wasn’t until the last minute when you realized that you were totally helpless and a watery grave awaited you until it finally sank in. She wasn’t sure she was at the end yet, but still the knowledge that someone wanted her dead, smarted.

Someone wants me dead. She told herself that several times, feeling the knife cutting deeper each time. Her hand involuntarily went to her stomach, where there should have been blood pouring out.

“Lita!” Sable ran to her, catching her shoulders and shaking her before pulling Lita into the tightest hug she’d ever felt. “We’re not going to let them get you!” Sable screamed at her best friend.

Lita started to cry, and Sable joined her. The pressure needed a valve to release it and tears it was. They stood there hugging each other and rocking back and forth.

“God, is this what you were going through when Roger was trying to kill you?”

“Probably, except more intense, because I love you more than you love me.” They looked at each other and dissolved into laughter. That was an old argument who loved the other more. In the end, they decided it was a draw.

“I don’t know what we’re going to do or how we’re going to do it, but we will.” Lita gave her a shaky smile and then wiped her eyes.

“Sometimes you need to cry.”

“Amen, sister,” Sable said, directing Lita to the couch to sit.

“Okay, I’m ready. If I’m not a dream walker, what do you think I am?”

“I think you’re a dream weaver.” Gaige sat next to Lita and took her hand while Xander and Haile looked like they were choking.

“What’s a dream weaver?” There was something in the way he said dream weaver that made her sit back and take the

enormity of it in. She was still waiting for clarification, but knew this was big news.

“I didn’t think dream weavers existed on earth,” Xander said.

“They haven’t for the last one thousand years or longer. Those who wanted their abilities hunted them like it was a sport. Lita, do you remember the first dream we stepped into?”

The first dream was the shortest, but she remembered the beautiful colors of the fireworks going off.

“There were magnificent fireworks everywhere.”

“You’re right, but can you remember when we first stepped into the dream?”

She frowned, thinking hard. What was it about that dream that made her uncomfortable? She got the impression of a bright light and heat. The fireworks had happened at night. The memories didn’t go together. It was a warm night but not overly hot. The closer she got to the beginning of the dream, the more she felt hot and flustered. Something wasn’t right.

“Fire!” The word came out in a burst of panic as she held her hands up, trying to repel it.

“It was a child’s dream, and they were being tortured by the image of their house going up in flames and their dog whimpering. The firefighters were too late to save the pet. You gave them a different dream, not just a different one, but a new one. You weaved it using the fire as a base. Now when that child dreams of the fire, they will remember the warm day

they spent with their pet watching fireworks. The power of a dream weaver can heal or kill. In the wrong hands, it's lethal. That's what I believe you can do and what whoever came after you wanted."

A dream weaver? Kill her now. How could she have lived her whole life without knowing this about herself?

"How?" She was stunned and amazed. It was like waking up one day to be told you're Wonder Woman. Had Sable felt this way when she realized she had a talent that no one else had. "How?" She had lived her whole life without knowing. She opened her mouth again to ask how, but Gaige beat her to it.

"You must be able to enter a dream to do any serious weaving. If you told me to sleep well and then I did, we wouldn't know if your suggestion of sleeping well affected my dreams or if I just had a good night's sleep. It could be either, depending on how powerful your ability to dream weave is. Now, if you told me dream about you and I did, then I'd say your ability to weave was playing a part in my dreams. Then again, I may just want to dream about you."

"The only way to know how powerful I am is for me to enter a dream?" It made sense. How could she claim to be the sandman without spending time in dreams and refining her craft? Eventually, she could try to affect dreams without entering them." Wow, I should say something that sounds super smart, but I'm amazed at what you told me. Not only that, but you also think I can weave dreams. This is something that was never on my horizon. One day I'm going to be the

weaver of dreams. I never said or thought that. How is that child?" She knew that Gaige would know who she was talking about.

"He is going to be okay." Gaige walked dreams all the time it was second nature to him to know whose dream he was in.

"Excuse me, I need to..." She flung her arm around before she got up. She needed air and space. With a shake of her head, she was outside wondering around the yard. This was where her best friend laid, and they didn't know if she was alive or dead and now Lita was like sable. Not exactly alike, but she was more than her human DNA claimed her to be.

Did she want this? Could she give it back? Then her mind would go to that young child. She hadn't stuck around long enough to know if it was a boy or a girl. No child should be tortured by the sight and sound of their pet dying. Seriously, universe, you're disappointing me. What would happen if what she could do fell into the wrong hands? This may be about her, but it was also about who had the right to yield the power she was born with. It was given to her, and she'd be dead before she allowed another to steal from her.

Could she have the power to affect more than one dream at a time? What happened to all those animals that they decided to send her way? Could someone have seduced them in their dreams and set them on her trail? Did that mean the woman after her had the same ability as she had, but stronger or weaker? There were no answers, just more questions.

The ringing of her phone startled her. Huh, it survived her drop into hell. The number was unknown, and it sent a chill down her spine.

CHAPTER SEVEN

*D*on't answer. It was a shout from Lita's soul. She had to. If the shiver of dread crawling over her skin meant something. Whoever was on that phone was connected to what had been happening.

"Hello?" She walked back into the house, needing the support of friends and family.

"Your're alive, good. I have plans for you." The voice was cultured and female.

"Who are you?"

"Do you think you can find me if I give you my name, Aelita?" Very few people called her Aelita. She was willing to bet most had forgotten the origin of her nickname. She had stopped using it except for government forms and the occasional interview if she was taking on new clients.

"What do you want from me?"

"Surely, you've worked it out by now. I saw what happened when I sent the animals after you. There's a dream walker

among you. I can only imagine his surprise when he was able to take you with him. The shock would have been delicious to see.”

“How...how do you know or think I am more than human?” There was no use playing the dumb card, right? The woman targeted her once. Denying that she had an ability wasn't going to make her play nice now.

“I've been watching you since you were a teen. It takes time for weavers of dreams to mature. It's almost like the magic doesn't think teens are responsible.”

Was that like some shifters that didn't begin to shift until a certain age? That way, they didn't alert teachers or non-shifter friends. Now you think I've matured enough?”

“Don't you?” There was silence on the line, followed by a melodic laugh. Whoever was taunting her was having a good time.

Should Lita tell her to go fuck herself or keep her on the line talking... for what? Gaige placed his head against the phone after placing his finger in front of his mouth.

“What do you want? I don't think you called to say hi.” She could feel the last of her reserves of energy start to drain. Between the car accident, the animals and the birds, and now this. All she wanted was to lie down and sleep for a week.

“My men got overzealous, and I owe you an apology for their behavior. They were to collect you and bring you to me.”

“Apology not accepted, not that you thought it would be. Again, why are you calling me?” How did you get my number was what she wanted to know, not that she was going to ask that question?

“I wanted to give you a chance to do this the easy way. I’m quite reasonable, you see. You have something I want. I will get it. The question is, will you hand it over or will I take it by force?”

Lita opened her mouth to cuss the woman out, but Gaige stopped her. She rolled her neck and popped her shoulders before speaking.

“Why would I be willing to come to you?”

“Excellent question. If you come willingly, there’s a chance you may survive the process. If I must collect you, I can guarantee you’ll die, painfully.” The silence was heavy.

“Your generosity knows no bounds,” Lita finally said, the sarcasm thick in her voice.

“I hoped you would see it that way. Meet me tomorrow at 3:30pm at the Rose just outside of town. If you are not there, I will know you decided to do it the hard way. Don’t be late, toodles.” The phone went dead.

“Did she say toodles. What is she, a French woman?” Her grip tightened on the cell phone to throw it.

Gaige caught her wrist with one hand and then took her phone with the other. “Do you really want to replace this?”

She looked at the wall and then at the phone. “No, I really don’t want that hassle.” He handed her the phone back.

“Gaige.” She looked up to find that Sable, Xander, and Haile surrounded her.

“She’s playing games, like we are playing Dungeons and Dragons. Some L.A.R.P. with witches and wizards. I swear that woman thinks it’s funny. Like it’s a joke.” Her shoulders dropped and Gaige wrapped a hand around her, leading her to the living room. She stopped in the kitchen where he met her.

“She wants me to meet her tomorrow to hand myself over to her. That way she can try to drain my abilities and maybe... maybe I’ll live through it. According to her, this is the reasonable thing for me to do.” She went to jump off the couch and start pacing, but Gaige’s warm hand on her leg kept her immobile.

“Then we meet her tomorrow.” Gaige’s smile was all teeth. She didn’t want to meet him in a dark alley.

“What?” Maybe he needed sleep more than she did? There could be a good reason to meet her. If the woman showed up, at least she would know who was after her. Gaige said we and not her, meaning she wouldn’t be alone. Would all their family and friends help? Since when had she thrown her lot in with Gaige?

She looked at him, getting caught in his blue-green eyes. She could see herself drowning in him as she kissed and touched in a way that hadn’t happened in years. It wasn’t like she was going through a dry spell, more like nothing in town caught

her attention. Gaige did. He was all male, and she was here for that.

“You know she was lying. I’m sure it will be a trap.”

“It wouldn’t be fun if it were anything less than a trap,” Gaige told her. His eyes were sparkling, and she was a goner for sure.

“I wish I had your enthusiasm.” She needed to lie down and forget about yesterday and today. She felt a tear roll down her cheek and she knew that soon she was either going to be hysterical or asleep.

Gaige picked her up. It was one thing to do in the middle of a crisis, and she could ignore that. There was no crisis now, and he was carrying her like she was special to him.

“Haile?” Gaige’s deep voice held an unanswered question.

“I told her she needed to spend the day in bed. Her body is still recovering, and that includes her brain.” She groaned when the healer threw her under the bus.

“I’ll take care of it.” She felt when he moved from the living room. “Are you hungry?”

Was she? What time was it? They had eaten breakfast around 9am and then everything had gone to hell.

“A little.” The growl of her stomach was making a liar out of her. “I could eat.”

He laid her gently on her bed. “Take a shower, put on your nightclothes and get into bed,” he said. “I’ll bring you lunch

and then we're going to sleep."

She had to swallow the lump in her throat before she could talk. "We're?"

"Unless you kick me out." He placed a kiss on her forehead and then left the room.

The thought of him in bed with her gave her enough energy to fly into the bathroom and step into the shower. She was already trying to decide what she should wear to bed. A laugh escaped. She hadn't had this type of distraction in a while, and it was welcome.

After, a lengthy debate she settled on a pair of silky night shorts and a cami. It wasn't like she had plans to sex him up, but she still wanted her assets to be shown off to their best. Whenever she had a chance to have a sexy man in bed, which wasn't often, she did not pull out the granny nightgown.

Lita was almost asleep when Gaige came in with a platter of sandwiches and chips along with two bottles of water.

"You don't need caffeine while your brain is recovering," he said, correctly interpreting her look at the water bottles.

She shrugged. He was right, and she didn't have the stamina to fight about it.

"Thanks, everything looks good."

He flashed that sexy smile at her. "I made it all with my two hands."

She laughed while reaching for the platter of food. He looked so smug that he made sandwiches and opened a bag of chips that she couldn't help but feel the happiness that filled the room.

“My hero. Please tell me that some of this is for you.”

“The created have a big appetite, if you haven't noticed.”

She'd noticed. She'd been cooking for them along with Sable. Those boys could eat. Gaige set up two trays and then sat on the edge of her bed, divvying up food and then eating in silence. Once it was all gone, he placed everything to the side and watched as she laid down snuggling under the cover.

His hip hit hers, and he slowly moved her to the other side of the bed. “Nothing is going to happen here, but I'd feel more confident if anything coming through that door had to go through me first.”

She choked up. That was one of those things you dreamed about your man saying to you. She moved over silently. If she said anything, it was going to come out in snot and tears. Gaige wasn't hers. She needed to remember that, but maybe she could borrow him for a little while.

The only two relationships she knew that were love matches were her aunt and uncles and Sable's and Xander's. Could she have something like what they have? Was love in the cards for her or was her future to be killed by a deranged woman who thought life was a game? She watched too many movies.

“You’re thinking too hard.” Gaige ran a hand down the side of her arm.

Lita turned over and snuggled into his arms. She had no idea what she was doing, but decided that borrowing Gaige for a while made lots of sense. She fell asleep with her head on his chest and his scent wrapping around her.



What the hell was he doing? Hadn’t he made fun of Xander when he got all caught up in Sable? Yes, he had. Now this slip of a woman with grass green eyes and hair as black as the crows that attacked was trying to curl herself around his heart.

He knew when he first laid eyes on her she’d be trouble. That’s why he went out of his way to antagonize her. His plan was working perfectly. He didn’t want a mate. Dream walking wasn’t easy, but he didn’t have a choice. It was something he had to do to stay sane. How was he going to explain that to a human? Even if she understood, it wasn’t like he could take her with him. That was only one of his issues. Like his cousin’s, he was more created than human. Sergey and Lorali, his parents, hadn’t conceived anything except the best of the best when it came to being created. To think, there was a time the scientists on the old planet thought the created could only be made. They never conceived of the fact that a created could be born of the Frankenstein experiments they were doing. Not that they had ever read the Frankenstein novel.

He could feel the pull of her inside of him. ‘Mate?’

Is this what he wanted?

He watched as she snuggled a little closer, a bit of drool dripping onto his chest.

How could he deny the beast within and his heart, his mate?



CHAPTER EIGHT

Parker knocked on Deputy Casper's door. "Sherriff," he said as the sheriff stopped to look at him.

"Is Casper in?" The sheriff asked.

"I think so," Parker said. He had to forcibly refrain himself from shivering. There was something about sheriff Branson lately that set his nerves on edge.

"Sheriff, come in," Casper said, answering his door. "Is this private?" he looked at parker and then the sheriff.

"No, he can come in. I heard that there was a problem with some of the pets disappearing in Whispering Glade."

Whispering Glade was the more affluent neighborhoods of Rakes Forth.

"That's what I was coming to tell deputy Damo," Parker said addressing Casper by his last name. All the animals have been recovered. They were found in different grassy areas throughout the town. None of them were hurt."

“Who found them, and how did they get there?” The sheriff’s voice was sharp as he addressed Parker.

“The animals alerted neighbors or people walking by with their barks and meows. Yes, several cats had gone missing as well. They have all been claimed by their people and are being pampered at home. Deputy Damon, Mrs. Smith would like to talk to you,” Parker said, running out of steam.

“Good job to everyone who participated in finding the animals. I need to go. Give my apologies to Mrs. Smith.” The sheriff left in a hurry.

Casper waited until he was sure the sheriff was out of hearing range before closing his door and sitting.

“What was that about?” Parker asked, sitting on the edge of the chair.

“The sheriff and Mrs. Smith get along like oil and water. It’s best not to get them into the same room.”

Parker nodded, digesting the new information. “Do you want to see what Mrs. Smith wants?”

“Bring her to my office. I don’t want to talk to her out front and Lord knows I can’t place her in an interrogation room.”

Parker shivered at the thought of the regal Mrs. Smith ever taken to a room like that.

“I’ll go get her.”

Casper got a cold bottle of water from the mini fridge he kept in his office.

“Mrs. Smith,” he greeted her as she came through the door. “Please have a seat. Would you like a cold bottle of water?”

She toddled into his office carefully carrying Coco, who perched on her chest like the pampered pet she was.

“No, thank you.” She sat like standing wasn’t the best idea.

“Come in, boy, I don’t bite,” she said to Parker.

“How can I help you? I see you have Coco back. I’m glad the two of you have been reunited.”

“Deputy Damon,” her frail but surprisingly sharp voice called out. “May I call you Casper?”

“I’d be honored if you did, ma’am” Mrs. Smith didn’t bother with most people and she sure as hell didn’t stand on formality. Her asking to use his first name meant he had gone up in her estimation.

“Casper then. Someone enthralled my Coco.” Casper met Parker’s stare. His moth opening and closing to what Mrs. Smith said.

Mrs. Smith stood, and that was when the room was flooded by a bright emerald light. “I don’t think you boys are hearing me.” The old frail woman was gone. In her place was a woman of indeterminable age. Her face was smooth and her once auburn hair that was gray was now a vibrant auburn teaming with life.

Casper could feel the weight of her years pressing on him. She was older than he and he was considerably old.

Coco stood, and she looked like a young poodle full of life and vitality. Someone has been keeping one hell of a secret. Casper wasn't sure what she was, although he could feel the power coming from her.

“Some child and she could only be a child to mess with what belongs to me. Entered Coco's dream and programmed her with a word and the direction of where to go. She was about to kill that young woman. I'm sure the other animals were given the same directive. I took the liberty of examining several of them.” Without their owner's permission went unsaid, but it was heard.

“They may have killed the poor woman if they could get close. Coco could kill her without getting close. This young lady is still alive because Coco knows I frown on killing if I'm not involved. The family that kills together.”

Parker gulped like a fish on dry land.

“Thank you, Coco, for refraining. I and the young lady in question are grateful. Would either of you feel inclined to tell me her name or where I can find her?” Casper asked knowing the answer before he finished speaking.

“No.” Mrs. Smith sat down once again, becoming an old fragile woman.

“Thank you for coming. Before you leave, I have one last question. The female in question wouldn't be Sable Grant, would it?”

“You’re as intelligent as I thought you were. No, it’s not sable, but if you find her, you’ll answer your own questions.” She stood to leave and slowly moved towards the door with Coco once again resting on her chest. “Can I be assured that everything that was discussed or seen today will be held in the strictest of confidences?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Parker and Casper said at the same time.

“The games afoot, boys, and the plot is multifaceted.” She left before Casper could ask her another question.



Lita opened her eyes to the scent of pot roast mixed with the scent of heady dreams that teased you when you were on the edge of sleep. The pot roast satisfied her senses for dinner, but the heady dreams made her hunger for the male who could walk through them. The dream world belonged to him, and she ached to spend time with him there.

“Would you like to take a mini vacation while dinner cooks?” The look he gave her was sheer devilment, and she wanted to lose herself in it.

“Don’t we have to be asleep?”

“No, just allow yourself to come with me.”

One minute she was in bed, the next she was standing in a dim corner watching people laugh and talk as they walked by.

Gaige dressed her in a green cami with a pair of blue jean shorts on.

“It brings out your eyes,” Gaige said in an off-handed way.

Lita kept the smile to herself and hugged the pleasant feeling close to her chest. Where are we? I’ve never seen anything like this. It looked like there were businesses and residential places to live, all on the same street.

“This is Bourbon St.” He hung a row of beads around her neck even though it wasn’t Marti Gras.

“This is amazing.” She turned around in circles looking at everything until she got dizzy. “I could have never pictured this. I swear I thought Bourbon St. was some highly commercialized place.”

“Oh, it is.”

The red brick of the sidewalk surprised her as well as the parklike area where people were congregating. Gaige took her hand and led her to a door she didn’t see until they got close.

“No humans allowed unless they are in the know. They won’t see the door if they aren’t.”

They went in. It was small, dim, and cool. Lita hadn’t realized how hot it was standing on the street. The walls were painted a dark color to go with the atmosphere, and the ceiling had some strange paneling on them that she’d never seen before. There were pictures on the wall of famous people who were obviously paranormal. It was like a wakeup call for her

senses. Paranormals were in every walk of life, just like normal humans.

The D.J started playing Lyfe Jennings 'Must Be Nice.' "Dance?" Lita asked, leading Gaige to the small dance floor.

He took her into his arms. Their bodies fit together like the last two pieces of a puzzle to form one beautiful picture. They moved around the dance floor as must be nice played in their ears. She hummed the song, feeling jealous of Sable and Xander because she knew they had what Lyfe Jennings was singing about. It wasn't until that minute, held in Gaige's arms with him rubbing against her body, that she realized she wanted that with him.

'Must be nice having someone who loves you, despite your faults. Must be nice having someone who talks the talk but also walks the walk.'

She peered at Gaige, unaware that her defenses were down, and her eyes were saying everything she was scared to say.

Gaige leaned in close, his lips hovering over hers, giving her the opportunity to deny him. She lifted her head until their lips pressed together. He took control of the kiss, licking her lips with a demand to open. She answered, welcoming him into her mouth. He took his time getting to know her mouth before the kiss deepened. The kiss was scorching. She could feel it down to her toes. Her breasts started tingling and her nipples pebbled up. He rubbed against her, and she could feel the thickening in his pants. She wasn't in this by herself and that gave her a feeling of freedom that she hadn't realized was missing.

He pulled back when they were both panting.

“Loving and kind with a passion that’s hotter than hell.”

She laughed, couldn’t help herself. He had gone from trying to irritate her to showing her that she was a desirable woman. She didn’t want to do anything but stay on the dance floor with him, but they needed to talk.

“Let’s talk.” He took her to a two-seater high top table with high back chairs.

“Can I take your order?” the waiter asked. Lita looked at him trying to decide if he was a human in the know or paranormal.

“I’ll have a whiskey neat,” Gaige said. “Lita?”

“I’ll have a cosmopolitan.” The waiter smiled and left them alone.

Gaige gave her a slightly judgmental look.

“You might not have noticed, but there isn’t a huge nightlife in Rakes Forth. There are two places to go and honestly, they aren’t all that great.”

“I’ll take you to the paranormal bar one night. You’ll enjoy it.”

“There’s a paranormal bar?” She could feel her nose wrinkle and her eyes slit. Shit! She was trying to look her best. His finger went to her nose as he gave her that smile. The one that said he found her beautiful and slightly kookie.

“Yes, there’s a paranormal bar in Rakes Forth. Half of the people in the town are some type of paranormal.”

“Sable said something like that, but I was sure she had gotten that wrong.” They took their drinks from the waiter. Lita took a drink as she waited for Gaige to start talking.

“Well?” He looked at her drink and then at her.

“It’s good. Not all I thought it would be, but I’d drink this again and be happy. Also, I would drink a wine cooler and be happy. So, I shouldn’t be considered the authority on alcohol.”

Lita found herself relaxing, taking small sips of her drink as people came over to greet Gaige. He introduced her to all of them and even threatened one of his friends, who tried to get too friendly.

“She’s taken,” Gaige growled.

“I don’t see a ring,” his friend said. “Besides, the lady can talk for herself.”

What a way to put her on the spot. They were asking her to decide what she wanted when she was just getting used to not being upset with Gaige.

A pair of blue-green eyes looked at her, along with a pair of dark brown eyes. Those eyes were so dark they could be black. What did she want? It really shouldn’t be that hard, and it wasn’t. She was having a problem saying she wanted to give Gaige and herself a chance. There was a small voice inside of her saying that she wasn’t meant for anything serious. Soon, she was going to die.

She tripped getting down from the chair. Gaige caught her. “You, I want to spend time with you.”

She looked around the room. Someone had tried to influence her.

CHAPTER NINE

Lita caught Gaige's blue-green eyes and watched them spark with concern for her. She knew her eyes had gone from grass green to hunter green. That happened when she felt this level of fear. Someone was placing thoughts in her head that she thought were her own. How long? It was a cry from her soul. What had she thought or done because someone had directed her without her knowledge? Did her desire for Gaige come from someone else, or was it truly hers?

The faint laughter she could hear made her shiver as her eyes widened in horror. She felt the minute she went from reality to the dreamscape. Unlike the first two times, she felt the smooth transition with every atom in her body.

The voice was louder here. She could feel it whispering into her ear as it battered against her head, looking for access to her brain. Lita tensed, preparing for a battle.

“Lita?” Gaige stood in front of her, looking around. He was in a battle mode.

No, her brain supplied briefly. She cared for Gaige because of who he was. No outside influence needed. She didn't have time to pursue the thought. She tucked it away as she stepped closer to Gaige, needing to feel safe.

Wherever they were didn't feel like a dream. It was a long corridor with dim light. There was a fog rolling around their ankles, and that voice was taunting her.

"Can you hear it?" She needed him to be able to hear what it was saying to her. "*Death comes to all of us and yours will be sooner than you thought.*" That sadistic laugh chilled her to her bones.

She reached out to touch Gauge and could feel his bones shifting. An ear disappeared, becoming nothing more than a slit as his body grew taller. A tail came from the base of his spine. It reached the ground, giving him more stability. His body gained mass as his human flesh disappeared and was covered with a mass of light-colored stone and razor-sharp bards down the sides of his arms.

When he turned his head, she saw that his face had morphed into a creature she'd never seen before. In the place of each eye were two slits that were lit by an inner light. There was no nose, and the mouth was a slit until he opened it. Then his mouth became a large gapping maw.

"I can hear the voice." His voice was deeper, guttural, as if it were forcing itself up from the bottom of his body.

His voice bypassed her ears and infiltrated her brain directly. Huh, she didn't feel violated when it was Gaige. He also

wasn't trying to manipulate her.

She knew that Xander was a mixture of pure alien from his father and human from his mother. Since Gaige was Xander's cousin and their fathers were brothers, it stood to reason that Gaige would also be alien and human. Mentally, she was prepared for it. It stood to reason. Her mental gymnastics has nothing on reality. She didn't expect this. At least they could say Xander was an alien dragon that made sense, righty? She'd never seen anything like Gaige before. Maybe in a scary movie? Except even though he was totally different; she was afraid of him. No, the wide maw gave her pause. Still, Gaige would never hurt her.

This was the part where she accepted him for what he was, or she rejected him. Did he feel tense as he waited for her to pass judgement on him? She reached out and placed her hand on his arm.

"Looks like I have bragging rights. I can say my man is stronger than yours and know it's true."

A deep chuckle came from him. "You continue to amaze me, dreamer."

"Later, you can explain all that. Now, back to the problem at hand." She couldn't see an easy way to get out of here. Her stomach dropped at the thought of staying trapped in this place of darkness indefinitely.

"Come to me. I grow tired of waiting for you." The voice had a seductive quality that played with Lita's brain, making her stop and start as she tried to answer the call.

Gaige moved in front of her, anchoring her hand against his back. A tendril from his tail emerged and held her wrist carefully. She pulled against it but got nowhere. That was fine with her.

“The female after you has some minor power over dreams. She created this corridor. Think of it as a walkway between dreams.”

“Kind of like the space between molecules or atoms?”

“Exactly.”

Lita nodded like she understood, but physics and advanced science were always a bit beyond her. She did understand that there were spaces between things that either were empty or filled with the smallest of particles. This space was one of those things. She imagined people dreaming all over the world and those dreams being interconnected by something she couldn't see or comprehend. Empty corridors that could be used to connect one dream to another sounded right to her.

“How do we get out?” There was always a way out. She believed that with her whole heart and anyway, pot roast was waiting for them.

Gaige walked down the corridor, looking for a door with Lita following behind him.

“How long have we've been here?”

“There's no telling. This place is outside of time. It could be minutes, hours, or days.”

“Is that why I’m so tired?” She could feel her legs weakening. They were starting to feel like Jello, and all she wanted to do was sit down.

“Don’t stop moving.” Gaige’s sharp bark made her stiffen her legs and stand up straight.

“She is using the corridor to drain your energy. If you stop, she’ll be able to overcome you and drain you before leaving you here to die a slow death.”

Lita placed her forehead against his back but kept walking.

“We are searching for the Eternal Dreamcatcher and the Hourglass of time. The first will give us a way out, the second will provide what we need to combat the one who trapped us here.”

“What and what?” It was getting a little harder to think as they walked the corridor, her gaze and her mind were centered on Gaige. It was the only way she could tune the other female out, who was getting louder the further they walked into the unknown.

“The Eternal Dreamcatcher and the Hourglass of Time are kept in a mythical place in the dreamworld. No one has ever received permission to be in their presence. They send miniature images of themselves to corridors like this. No one knows why. They allow you to have not only protection against anyone coming against you but a way home.”

“How do we find them?” She wanted to find them quickly and get out of the corridors because she could hear something

that sounded like the patter of animal feet following them.

“Not us, you. As a weaver, you can call to them without me having to hunt them down. Be careful, other things reside in these corridors. Evil we don’t want to encounter.”

Like whatever was calling them. “It can’t be taught. It’s instinctive.”

Like the urge to swim for a small child thrown into a pool before 5 or 6 months old. Not that she would ever try that with her child, but she understood.

“Protect me.” She needed to stop to do this. Gaige’s tail wrapped around her waist, keeping her steady and on her feet. She laid her cheek against his back and closed her eyes. There was a 3-D view of the entire corridor end to end behind her closed eyelids. She turned slowly, taking it all in looking for the hourglass first. They needed the weapon and the accidental defense it would provide for them.

Everything was dark, but she expected it to be. There were nightmare images trying to distract her.

“This way lays death.” Several of the images hissed at her.

“Follow me to freedom,” one said, giving her a smile that could kill.

She ignored the voices and worked on connecting with the ability that sat in the center of soul. It was bright and beautiful, but every time she tried to touch it it moved. Her frustration grew. This is taking too long. After what felt like a year of striving for something she couldn’t touch, she blew out a

breath and centered herself. With both her mental and physical eyes closed, she opened herself up.

“There are times in this life after you have done your part. You must trust the other to do its part.” She didn’t know who that voice belonged to, but it wasn’t the woman trying to kill her.

Her eyes flew open to see a miniature hourglass in her hand. It wasn’t any bigger than her thumb. The sand in it looked like small pearls. It was beautiful.

“The hourglass, my mate, my mentor, and my Shepard.” She presented the hourglass to Gaige. The words were old and instinctual.

“You honor me with your trust, my mate, my heart, and my trainee. With this, together, we will fight the evil that thinks to trap us.”

There was wild laughter that bounced around the corridor. *“You think you can stop me with old wives tales and words that mean nothing, except to mystic’s that have passed away into the ether? I will not be defeated!”*

Lita wasted no time. She once again put herself into a mode of receiving as she waited for the dreamcatcher to reveal itself. When she felt pressure against her chest, she opened her eyes to find that it was almost hugging her. She pressed it close to her heart. The dreamcatcher was made from a circle that glowed and had feathers made from nothing but light. When held closer to her heart, it shimmered before merging with her skin until it was no more.

“We’re ready, I hope.”

Gaige held the hourglass in one hand and ran the other over it. The hourglass grew to the size of his fist and then it shimmered, becoming two. He handed one to her and kept the other. With a twist of his wrist, it morphed into a smaller hourglass that could be held without cracking, with a sword on each side.

“The sands of time are fickle and must be catered to. With one wrong slash, you could wipe a family from existence or a world.” He crouched and his tail pulled on her to do the same. He moved away from her until his tail was tense. “I never want you any further away than this. Understand?”

“Yes,” she hissed. The nightmares she glimpsed with her eyes close were becoming glaringly real. Each one was a little uglier than the one before it. There was something wrong with them. They weren’t only ugly and ghoulish looking, but they were shaped wrong. Her mind shied away from the thought, not wanting to look at them. A sense of madness descended on her as she tried to take them in. Lita scooted back until she was pressed against Gaige. There was safety in his shadow.

She was going to be able to fight the grotesque nightmares as long as she didn’t try to understand what was wrong with them. Had her enemy done this deliberately to keep them from defending themselves? The nightmares attacked, jumping at them. She held on tightly to the hourglass as it elongated at the sides, giving her two deadly knives to work with. She slashed

at the enemy, but it did nothing every time she got close. They seemed to dissolve and appear elsewhere.

“Move your hourglass to your heart and do nothing,” Gaige shouted over the insane laughter coming from the woman and the creatures.

She did as he directed, staying silent and still as several of the creatures clawed at her. One clawed at her hamstrings, hoping to take her down. The fog that played at her feet wanted her. It would suck the remaining energy from her body.

The hourglass in her hand shone and a bright light pulsed from it, lighting the corridor like it was noon. When the light ended, the nightmares coming for her didn't seem to be able to dissolve into nothing and reappear.

“Now!” Gaige said, jumping to his feet. She followed suit and twirled the hourglass the way she used to do as a child with a baton. Those were happy memories, and they flooded her, giving the energy inside a boost. She slashed at the nightmares as they got closer and took several down. They couldn't dissolve and it was a game changer.

“The sands of time are timeless,” Gaige said, answering her unspoken question. He sliced the head off a nightmare and moved them slowly into the center of the corridor.

Lita rolled herself up in Gaige's tail while the nightmares pursued. When they got close enough for the tip of her blade to touch them, she went into a spiral spin like a ballerina who'd practice for it her whole life. There were several

beheaded and disemboweled nightmares at her feet. She was fascinated by the ones she had cut in half.

There was blood and guts clinging to her. Maybe they were dream guts and would disappear once they were out?

They stood panting, leaning against each other to keep from falling into the fog that was playing around their ankles. When no other nightmares attacked, Lita forced herself to stand upright.

“Come out!” she screamed. “I have defeated your pets and now I have a little something-something for you.”

The silence was maddening as she stood defiant against Gaige’s back.

“You have not won. Today, you signed your death certificate.” There was a cackle of mad laughter before the dreamcatcher within her exploded into brilliant colors, making her world fade to black.

CHAPTER TEN

Lita jerked awake with a gasp as a bright light tried to blind her. She screwed her eyes closed as she adjusted to the light, trying to dig its way into her closed eyelids.

“You can open your eyes now,” Haile said to her.

How did she get here? The last thing she remembered was being in a dark corridor fighting nightmares that even Hollywood hadn’t thought of yet. Now that her life wasn’t in danger, she could admit that those things weren’t 3 dimensional. Were they from the fourth or fifth dimension? She didn’t know, but she was still sane and seeing them had almost driven her insane. It was like seeing something she was never created to see.

Lita opened her eyes to see Haile was still standing over her. “How am I, doc?”

“You’ll live.”

“Best report I’ve ever heard. Where’s Gaige?” Great, she would live, but not without the pain in her ass, and the male

that she was coming to want.

“He’s not in as good of shape as you’re in, but he’ll live to.” That was concerning because she felt one step away from death. If she felt like this, she could only imagine what he was feeling like.

“Where is he?” She licked her lips, trying to wet them. Haile held a cup with a straw in it in front of her face. He directed the straw to her mouth, and she was sipping gloriously cold water. It was times like this that she remembered that water was life. He took the water away as she protested.

“Not too much. I want to make sure you can hold it down.” He didn’t want her retching all over the place. She could understand that.

“Gaige?” Her voice was still strained from her dry throat and what she went through.

“Turn your head.”

It was a painful process, but she did it. Gaige was lying next to her in her bed. His head was on the pillow, and she wanted to touch him, but he looked like death warmed over.

“He’s going to make it?” She wanted to cry, tears tried to form, but she was that dehydrated. Nothing came but choked sobs. He was here, like this, because she pulled him into her drama.

There was a knock at the door. “I’m coming in,” Sable said, opening the door with her ‘take no prisoners’ look.

“Lita,” Sable came over to the bed, bending down to hug her.

“I’ve been a mess lately, not exactly what you were looking for in a friend.” She was filled with regret for what happened and how she was keeping everyone from their happy ever after.

“I went to the friend website earlier looking for a new best friend.” Lita sniffled against her shoulder.

“Did you find a replacement?”

“I found one that could make cherry pie and was guaranteed to always be chipper when you’re down.”

“Ugh, I hate her already,” Lita said.

“There was the one who could sing like a Disney Princess and may have rats cleaning your house and hers.”

“Keep her away from me.” She hated rats and if they had been in the corridor, there might have been a different outcome than them winning.

“I considered her. I mean cleaning rats. You have to see it to believe it.”

“Any others?”

“I grew tired of looking, so I hit that special button that said let us recommend a best friend.”

“Who did they recommend?” Lita asked breathlessly.

“They said that Aelita Mintz would make the best best-friend I could ever ask for. So, I’m sorry to say, you’re stuck with me.”

“This is exactly where I want to be, even if I have been acting whiney and child-like.” She would thank Sable for her friendship. Except Sable might forget she was sick and smack her.

“I asked Haile if you could eat pot roast in bed. I know how much you love it. He said if you can keep water down and lay still for an hour. So, it’s up to you. Pot roast in bed or passing out in the kitchen?”

“While the thought of passing out on the kitchen floor truly intrigues me, I’m going to have to pass on that.” She pushed against Sable who was still holding her in a death grip. She must have been afraid that if she let go, Lita would disappear again.

“How long were we gone?” It felt like they had been gone for years, but Sable was talking like dinner was just getting done.

“No Idea. I sent Haru to the door to get you and he came back into the kitchen saying you didn’t answer.” She stopped to take a deep breath. Her eyes darkened and shoulders tensed. The fear was easy for Lita to read.

“I knocked and gave you a warning I was coming in. The room was empty and then it looked like you were falling from the ceiling onto the bed.”

“We’re here now.” Lita was sorry for doing this to Sable, especially since she knew what it was to be on the other side.

Sable discretely wiped at her eyes. “I need to sit with my pot roast. I’ll see you in an hour.” She left Lita to laugh as she pictured her friend petting the pot roast and talking to it.

Lita turned her head to find Haile looking over Gaige. “He should wake up soon. Let’s get a little more water in you and then I’ll let you rest.”

Once she drank a few more sips of water, Haile left her alone with Gaige. Her hand slipped across the bed to entwine in his. She needed to touch him and be close.

“Cleaning rats?” His voice was rough, and she wanted to offer him water but doubted her ability to pick up the cup.

“You heard that?”

“I wasn’t quite awake and thought I was in the hell dimension where they torture you.”

“Rats, not your favorite thing, either?”

“Nooo.” He drew the word out, hoping to get a smile from her.

“There’s water...” She tried to shift to reach for it.

“Stay still, please. I need you close to me. Haile will be in soon. He’ll bring me something to drink that will taste foul but will help both my human and alien sides. Then I’ll be able to eat pot roast with you.”

“We’re really fixated on tonight’s dinner.”

“We used it as a touch point. I will make it home for pot roast,” Gaige said.

“Nobody ruins pot roast!” Lita said in her best militant voice.

“You said it.” They both laughed, lightening the tension that was in the room.

Gaige took the hand Lita wasn’t holding out to caress her cheek. “I want you closer to me, but I can’t move yet.”

Lita tried to inch her body over. Every bruise she had and that’s when she discovered her ribs were bruised, and screaming.

“What part of lay still for an hour didn’t you understand?” Haile walked into the room to catch her trying to move. “Xander, I need your help. Lay still, Lita.”

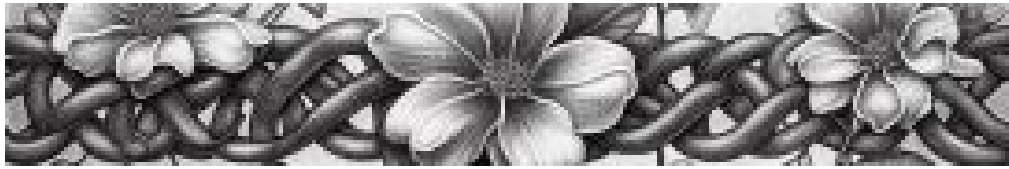
Haile walked over to Gaige, carrying a cup. “I know it’s foul tasting. Drink it all.”

“Sometimes I think you use your ability to heal to torture me.” Gaige looked like he was sucking on a 6 month spoiled egg that had been left to sit in the sun, but he got every bit of it down.

“If this is what finding your mate and falling in love is all about, I’ll pass. Xander, help me move him closer to Lita or he’ll undo all my work. If I have to heal you again, I’m charging.” They picked up Gaige and slid him the few inches that separated him from Lita.

“Don’t talk, sleep. I’ll be back an hour from now. If you want to heal, you need to allow your body’s space to work.” Haile left with Xander on his heels.

Lita went to say something, but Gaige shook his head. “I may love to tease my cousin, but he knows what he’s doing. Sleep, we’ll talk later.”



“Damn.” Lavina stomped through the house, throwing a hissy fit. “I had her. She was right there, in my hands and then...” The dreamcatcher took her somewhere along with the male, most likely home. If only she could find the original, she could rule the corridors and the dreamworld. Then she wouldn’t need the elusive male she was working with. Although, truth be known, he could rock a mattress.

“Mistress Lavina?” One of her men called from outside the door. She smiled because she loved being addressed that way.

“What do you want? I’m busy.” Cursing up a storm about the one who got away. It didn’t matter. Lita would come tomorrow thinking of outsmarting her again. This time, she would win.

“There’s an old woman out here with a poodle.” The man said, desperation lacing his voice.

“Tell her to leave or throw her out. She’s an old woman. What can she do?”

“I don’t think that’s wise.”

Lavina closed her eyes, blocking out the bright white walls with the gray trim. She muttered something to herself before

replying. "I'll take care of it. Go away."

Why did she keep him and the other three men around? They were useless, bumbling idiots. Oh right, when she couldn't get her itch scratched by that fool plotting world domination, those four knew their way around a vagina. She glanced at the large king size bed with the flower cover that she wouldn't be using anytime soon and sighed. Maybe kicking an old woman's ass would cheer her up.

She left her room and went downstairs to one wide open room. Just the way she liked it. It was great for orgies.

There was a very small elderly female sitting on a chair talking to a decrepit poodle.

"Why are you in my house? Get the hell out." She considered herself a reasonable person until you breached her sanctuary. If she did not invite you, you were already walking the thin line between life and death. "Did you hear me granny?"

She stalked over to the woman, drawing dark power around her that would scare the piss out of her. She was going to need a new couch.

"My name is Mrs. Beverley Smith."

"As if I care. Why are you still sitting there?" She should be having a heart attack by now. It was a worthy way for her to die, scared of the power Lavina wielded.

"You tried to compel my Coco to kill." Her hand wrinkled with age spots slowly petted the poodle that was on her lap. "I

stopped by to warn you. You don't want to try again."

Lavina laughed, flabbergasted that this old crone had the nerve to try to chastise her.

"I'm going to kill you and your dog too!" She reached for Coco and found herself thrown against the living room wall. The gray wall had a smear of blood on it as she slid down.

"Children today. I don't think you heard me." Mrs. Smith stood. Her old facade slid away and there stood a woman surrounded by power. Coco stood next to her. Coco's eyes were shining with something inhuman.

With a flick of Mrs. Smith's hand, Lavina was hovering in the air before being brought in front of Mrs. Smith.

"Now that I have your attention. You tried to compel Coco to kill for you. Fortunately for you, Coco doesn't kill without my permission. If you ever come around her again or allow me to catch sight of you in the street she will kill, but you will be the victim."

Mrs. Smith raised her hand and closed her fist. Lavina's hand went to her throat as she struggled to breathe. Her feet kicked in the air and her eyes bulged as her face turned blue.

"You're nothing but a baby at her mother's teat. Learn your manners. You're not ready to play with the grownups." Mrs. Smith looked her up and down, disgust plainly written on her face by the way her eyes narrowed and her mouth pulled. She hated warning pups, but even they needed a chance to grow up.

“Be careful. The person who decided to challenge that group ended up...well, let’s just say no one has heard from him.”

She dropped Lavina and kicked at her with a sniff. Coco jumped onto her shoulder and their appearance changed. Coco’s eyes lost that brilliant shine, and they toddled out the room.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“I want pot roast.” Lita was sitting at the island with her bottom lip poked out and her arms crossed. Yes, it did bring back memories of being six, but she didn’t care. She slept all night long snuggled into Gaige’s side, and no one woke her for dinner.

“Some best friend you are,” Lita mumbled.

Sable cackled and started heating the pot roast for her friend. “I saved some for the two of you. Why? because the males in this house can eat their weight in food.” She nailed Xander for a look before sliding her gaze to Haru.

“I swear, I wonder where they put it. I’m thinking hollow leg.” She muttered on as she made plates of pot roast for everyone. Suddenly, they all wanted dinner for breakfast.

“When you’re all lying around unable to work because you’re too full, I don’t want to hear it. Where’s Izzy, and why am I making special food for her? Haru, that question is for you.”

“She needs it, mom. I asked, and she told me.” Sable stopped listening after he said mom. It still melted her insides and surprised her how much she could love him. She’d kill for him. More importantly, she’d die for him and almost did.

“Food,” Lita exaggerated, getting Sable’s attention.

“You’re not starving, woman.” She handed Lita a plate of pot roast and then handed one to Gaige and her guys. Izzy came into the kitchen and sat politely, waiting for her breakfast.

“You better be happy you’re cute, or it would be dried meow mix for you.” Sable filled her bowl.

Lita looked at everyone eating and gave a deep sigh. They had made it through another day and her loved ones were well and whole.

“Are we going to Rose?” Lita asked halfway through breakfast. Gaige and Xander groaned.

“I don’t think she’ll be there after we defeated her yesterday. I would like to get a look at her,” Gaige said.

“Do you think your aunt and uncle would watch Haru? I want to come, but I don’t want him anywhere around there,” Sable asked Lita.

“They’ll watch and spoil him and then give him back sugared up and running wild.”

“Hey! I’m not a baby. I love Aunt Mae and Uncle Bob.”

“I’m sure you do, kiddo,” Lita said, trying to repress a laugh.

“So we’re going?” Lita waited until after breakfast was over and the dishes were washed. Now they were all sitting around sipping coffee, tea, or in Haru’s case, hot chocolate.

“We’re going,” Gaige said. On the off chance, she shows up. “You won’t be sitting there looking like an offering. We’ll all be there. That may chase her away, but I’m not risking your life just to get a look at her and possibly a name.” He gave her a hard look, challenging her to disagree.

“I have to say since the life in question is mine, I agree with you wholeheartedly.” She gave him a wink.

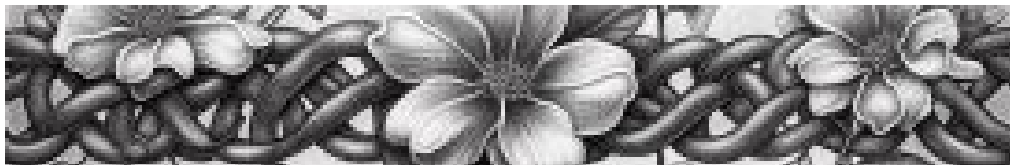
“Haru, get dressed and get whatever you need for Izzy. We’ll drop you guys at Aunt Mae’s house, Xander said, getting everyone going.

“What are you smiling about?” Sable asked Lita.

“I love the way they just opened their arms and adopted everyone.”

“I do too. There’s something strange about them, but I’ve been telling you that for years.”

“I know. After all, we’ve been through, I’m not sure I want to know what it is. All I really care about is how fiercely they love.”



The Rose was a beautiful coffee shop that someone had put a lot of time in effort into. Beautiful red and white roses flanked the outside of the shop. Love and friendship. Lita couldn't stop smiling when she looked at the roses. There was a wide window that allowed you to see customers as they sipped coffee. They painted the building red and white, and the name of the shop was above the door in exquisite calligraphy.

It made you want to come in and spend some time there. Lita slipped her hand into Gaige's, and they walked in. The plan was to come in separately in pairs of two. Lita and Gaige came straight to the coffee house while Sable and Xander stopped to drop Haru off. They would be about ten minutes behind them. Dom and Haile would arrive ten minutes after that with Dom shadow walking.

Reinforcements slowly dripping in hopefully wouldn't tip their hand.

"Let's get something to drink and maybe a sandwich," Lita led Gaige to the counter. "Look, they have specialty sandwiches and desserts. I have to try at least one of each since we don't get this way that often." Was she over doing I'm an innocent tourist out for some fun with my man? Probably. She gave a mental shrug.

After ordering, they sat down and discreetly looked around the coffee shop. There were a few teenagers and some older folks enjoying their coffee. In one corner there were old men. It reminded her of the older adults corners she'd see in McDonalds when she was going to college and that was the

only early morning coffee she could afford. Those were the days when no one was trying to kill her. All she had to do was step out with her girls, trying to see who could attract the cutest guy. Meh, there was school work and test, but why remember that part of college?

“Gauge.” The barista called his name. “Order up.”

A twenty-something young man walked in. He looked like he played for the local college football team. He gave her another quick flash of her college years. It didn't last long. He wasn't approaching the front counter. Instead, he was walking through the small seating area coming her way. An itch started in the back of her brain. One of those strange things that scream at you to be careful. She tensed, ready to move at a moment's notice.

He was walking almost like he was being pulled by a string. When he got close, his legs went out from under him. Lita was already jumping to the side. Every human instinct she had was saying to help the poor kid. A deeper primal instinct was telling her not to touch him. Several of the teens raced over and she moved to a different table with no fuss.

“Bro, are you alright?” One teen asked as she shamelessly listened in. They had helped him to sit down.

“How did I get here?”

“You walked in the front door. I watched you come in.”

“But why?”

“Did you hit your head?”

“Maybe. I had no plans to come here, and I can’t remember walking or driving here.”

“You should see a doctor.”

“I’ll see the nurse on campus. Thanks for your help. I’m going to call my girlfriend to come get me.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, think I’ll get a cup of coffee while I wait.” The teens waved at him and left, and the jock did what he said, ordering coffee and calling his girlfriend.

Her games have already begun,” Lita said to Gaige, who had already returned and was watching that little exchange with her. “She’s doing all this, isn’t she? From the animals and the attacking birds to a young man who has no idea why he’s in a coffee shop.”

“It looks that way.”

Lita reached for her coffee and stared at the table. It was a small four seater, but it felt like it was old and not the modern tables you found in most places like this. There were some large comfy chairs where you could kickback like you were getting coffee at home and not in a shop. This place was cozy and if it weren’t so far away, she might stop in more often.

They sipped their coffee in silence, noticing when Xander and Sable walked in and ordered coffee. There was no sign of the woman who ordered her to be here. Lita looked at her friend like she was checking for messages. The woman was

ten minutes late, but she seemed the type to want to make an appearance.

She was eating her dessert when Dom and Haile came in. They looked around and went to order coffee. It was about five minutes after they arrived, she noticed the sky growing darker.

“Gaige?”

“I noticed. There’s a possibility that we haven’t discussed.”

“Which is?”

“She could be borrowing or siphoning power from someone more powerful than she is.”

“This was a lousy time to float that theory.”

“I agree, coz.” Xander and Sable were at the table to the right of them and Haile and Dom were on their left.

“What Xander said,” Dom chimed in.

The darker it got, the more ominous it seemed. “I think we need to get the humans out of here.” The humans were sitting with shoulders tensed, holding cups they had forgotten to drink.

“Xander and Sable clear the coffee shop,” Gaige directed them.

“Why us?” Sable grumped.

“Because you have Haru to raise along with a strange blue cat.” Lita’s words were flat and filled with urgency.

“She’s right.” Xander pulled Sable up.

“She is my friend,” Sable said emphasizing her words.

“Then you trust her and Gaige the same way they trusted me to save you.” Xander turned around and raised his voice. “There’s a storm coming. Seek shelter at home.”

There was a stampede of customers leaving the shop. Sable and Xander made sure they were out safely. When they turned around, the shop was gone.



“Did everyone get out safely?” Lita couldn’t worry about where they were until she knew there were no unsuspecting innocents to protect.

“They did.” Dom and Haile had gone to check the shop to make sure they were the only four there.

“I never expected this,” Lita said, finally looking out the windows of the coffee shop. “Did she move the entire building to a different plane?”

“It’s more likely that we are in someone’s dream world. One that is very defined and visited often.”

She didn’t like the sound of that. She had some beautiful dreams and ached to get back to them, but it rarely happened. Dreams that tortured awake and asleep. Those were easy to slip into and they plagued you continually, making their world almost as real as reality itself.

“Did she create this world as punishment, or did it happen naturally?”

“Either is possible. I wouldn’t put this past her,” Gaige shrugged.

“We have two trespassers that I didn’t invite. Luckily for them, I’m in a good mood.” A human size fly swatter came out. “If you come back, I’ll kill you.” They were hit with the swatter and blinked out.

“And then there was two. Unfortunately, for the two of you, I am not in a good mood.”

“You sound kind of rough. What happened? Somebody stole your teddy bear?” Lita taunted as she looked around, trying to find her. “I need to return the building before anyone misses it.”

They were thrown up in the air and landed in a barren landscape. “This place isn’t giving me good vibes.”

A woman ran by her hair was wild and tangled as it flowed about her head. She was screaming about being chased. Her body was gaunt, her bones were sticking out. The longer she talked, the more garbled her words became.

Yet, the word help was alive and real.

“Gaige?” Lita was holding herself back from chasing after the woman.

“We have to find a way out of here. The longer we’re here, the less chance we have of leaving.” He held her still to make sure she was listening.

“I heard you. You find us a way out and I’ll go after the woman.” She couldn’t leave her in this hell if there was a chance she could help her. Before Gaige could talk reason into her, she took off running after the woman.

She stopped when she came to what could only be an insane asylum from two hundred years ago or so. How could someone live that long trapped in a place like this? She was a witch. It was the only thing that made sense.

She stopped at the threshold of the place. A cold breeze wrapped itself around her.

“Hi,” she called out loudly. “My name is Lita and I’m coming in.” The door slammed in her face, making her jump back. Well, no one was rolling out the welcome wagon for her.

“You don’t belong here.” Not one horror movie voice could do justice to the voice of this woman.

“I don’t, an evil witch trapped me in here with you.”

The door creaked open, and Lita walked in, regretting every decision that led her here. She could have stayed home, spent the day in bed with Gaige, showing him her sexy underwear collection. They could be kissing and sweating. Instead, she was walking into some place she might never leave.

CHAPTER TWELVE

There was spooky, and then there was this place. It had all the prerequisites for a horror story. The gray walls that dripped with water and the cobwebs that had taken over the place as a home to millions of spiders. There was an eerie scream to the wind blowing through. Those things were enough to make Lita want to turn tail and run. In the end it was the very atmosphere that clung to her like a dead lover imploring her to join him. That was something she never felt before. Goosebumps covered her body, and her primal instincts were calling her a fool for not running.

Then there was the scent. It was old and decayed, but the scent of fear and death lingered in the air. Torture happened here and experiments she didn't want to envision.

A man walked out of a wall. He was wearing a long white jacket and gloves that were covered in blood. A smile crossed his lips the minute he saw her. Several minions came from the walls, and he pointed at Lita.

She didn't think so. She took off running, going deeper into the asylum. The walls twisted and turned back on themselves as if even the design of the place was meant to make you mentally weaker.

“Over here” She recognized the voice and moved cautiously through the room she was in. It was littered with debris that seemed to span several centuries. There was a large old-fashion wardrobe across the room and that's where she found the woman who was nothing more than a teenager. She was what fourteen? How could they have done this to her?

“Hi.” Lita crawled behind the wardrobe, where the young girl was hiding. Her heart hurt for the young girl. Her blue eyes were wide and the whites of them were red, as if she had been constantly crying or rubbing her eyes. Every rib in her thin chest was on stark display. Her leg bones were bowing from lack of a proper diet and her hair was dry like straw. She might have been beautiful, but there was no guarantee she would ever live up to the potential she used to have.

“Hi,” her voice was a soft whisper. The kind that broke you when you looked at a child who you knew might never be okay.

One of Lita's hands flew to her heart trying to protect it, while the other flew to her mouth to stop the sob that was threatening to be torn from her.

“This is the best place to hide. They'll find us, but not at first.”

Lita nodded, looking around. Why was she here and how long? “How long since you’ve been here?”

“Forever.” Lita turned to look at the girl. “It’s a long story.”

“We have time.” They didn’t, but this child didn’t need to know this.

“The story goes that my mother was a powerful witch. She was more than that, but no one ever told me what. The only time she was vulnerable was during childbirth. The doctor gave her a potion that took away her ability to know what was happening and someone switched out the child in her womb. They took me and gave her a dead infant. Someone kept me here for hundreds of years as a tortured infant. They say they used my screams to plague my mother by allowing her to hear her dead child cry.” She looked at Lita and the pain in her eyes were backed by tears she wouldn’t allow to fall. “Please don’t ask me who they are. There are days I think I know and others when I’m clueless.

“You’re more lucid that I was counting on.”

The young girl’s blue eyes glowed as she stared at Lita. “This is all I’ve ever known, but I am my mother’s daughter and I never forget that. They think to break me the way they tried to break her. I will never give in. When I die, it will be defiantly. That does not mean that what they do to me hasn’t broken me. I refused to allow them to see the cracks and the scars.”

Lita gave a decisive nod. “How about leaving this place? I have someone who is looking for the way out.”

“I know where the door to leave is, but getting it open is the problem.” The girl looked at her with the first signs of hope.” Lita wondered if the child’s soul would be flayed beyond repair if that hope died.

“What’s your name? I can’t keep thinking of you as the girl.”

“I think it’s Amanda. When I sleep, I hear it.”

“Beloved. I believe your mother loved you very much.” Lita stepped from behind the wardrobe to find the doctor in the white coat waiting for her.

“Nobody leaves this place alive.” He grabbed her wrist and Lita realized he was very much alive despite the fact that he could walk through walls.

“I refuse to stay here.” She started fighting, but the hold on her wrist became painful. She looked down to find spikes that grew from his hand and pierced her wrist. There were droplets of blood spilling along those spikes.

When she looked back up, the doctor was a monster with tentacles where his head and body should have been, along with several rows of eyes. His tentacled body hovered in the air. He pulled on her wrist, and she rose to meet him.

“Amanda Run! Find Gaige. He’ll free me and lead us home.” She was wavering between consciousness and unconsciousness. Had she told Amanda, or had it all been a dream? She passed out, hoping this was all a dream.

She woke with a scream on her lips. The monster pretending to be a doctor was running a scalpel down her thigh, watching

it bleed.

“Pain is a beautiful thing and humans try so hard to avoid it. Think of what your life would be like if you let yourself experience pain. How much more glorious would the small bouts of pleasure be? Instead, you whimper when something is too hard or it hurts. Stop, stop, it hurts. As if you don’t understand that pain is the aphrodisiac that allows pleasure to swamp you.” He licked the knife covered in her blood and then let out an obscene moan before changing back into his humanoid form.

“You taste good enough to eat.”

Did he mean that same way she ate pot roast? She had a feeling he did.

“I don’t indulge often, but I’m do for a good feeding. Not before what is going to happen next. You think my playhouse was where the torture began? Silly human. The best torture is the one you can’t escape from.”

With the flick of his hand, she was gone. Logically, she knew her body was in the same place, but as she retraced a half memory from youth, it didn’t matter where her physical body was. She was walking home from school and had been cornered by the school bully who hated her. Her name was Eloise and her mother let her cut her hair short and wear leather jackets to school like she was some biker chick. Eloise was ten and one grade above hers. She hated Lita with a passion that knew no bounds. To this day, she didn’t know why that girl hated her so hard.

“They left you,” Eloise taunted. Her brown eyes were cruel, and her red hair was pulled into a high ponytail on top of her head. “Not even your parents love you enough to stick around.”

Her house looked deserted, and the front door was half open. Her parents may not love her, but they wouldn't leave her, would they? She knew they would take her brother. They loved him, but her... would they leave her behind like yesterday's trash?

“They told my parents that they hated you. Everything about you disgust them.” Eloise laughed.

Her heart broke because she couldn't accuse her of lying. How many times had she thought her parents hated her and wished she'd never been born? She was their daughter. How could they leave her?

“Go inside. They aren't there,” Eloise taunted as she turned in circles.

Lita gathered all the courage she had and ran inside. She dropped to her knees just inside the door. The living room furniture was gone and there was nothing but marks on the rug to show where everything had been. A sound left her lips. “No,” she moaned.

“I told you,” Eloise said, kicking at Lita before jumping away. “No one loves you, but you knew that.”

They just forgot to tell her where they moved. She bet there was a note in her old room. Jumping up, she ran into her room

to find all of her furniture there. She desperately searched the room, but there was no note left for her. She ran to all the other rooms, and they were empty. Her family left her alone. Tears came as she fell to her knees. There was no one to dry them or hold her. Her parents hated her.

“No one loves you.” Eloise was in her room. “The kids at school hate you, even your friends. They all talk about you behind your back.”

“No! You’re lying.” Lita lunged at her, but she was gone.

“Over here, slow poke. You’re worthless can’t even fight. No wonder your parents hate you. My mother loves me.” She preened while Lita sank back to her knees.

Time flowed, and she was in front of her parents on her knees.

“Please,” she begged let me come home. “I’ll do anything and be extra good.”

“Who is that child again?” Her mother asked her father.

Lita’s world broke with those words. She was floating in utter darkness and despair. The urge to die was riding her hard. Images of her parents rejecting her as they embraced her brother taunted her pulling at her soul and sense of self as they grew claws. She could feel herself being torn apart, and she wanted to give in. Why fight? But then she heard a tiny voice say, ‘That does not mean that what they do to me hasn’t broken me. I refused to allow them to see the cracks and the scars.’

To be rejected by her parents tore her apart, but she would show them and rise. She stood in the darkness that was projecting fear into a nine-year-old's mind. There had to be a way out. She'd find it and then...she didn't know what came next. Tears streamed down her face as words meant to kill went through her mind. Would the feeling of being hated ever go away? With nothing but darkness to hold on to, she began to walk.

She wasn't prepared for the jolt of being back in her body. The physical anchor to her mental self almost threw her into shock.

"You're back." The doctor, whose name she hadn't cared enough to inquire after, said.

"What you do to people is horrific and you will die." Lita had never killed another person, but he was a monster, a nightmare just like those she had to protect herself from in the dream corridor.

"Not by your hand."

"You'll die by mine." Gaige looked like a knight in shining armor to Lita.

She watched as he changed his body, becoming the same monster as the doctor.

"I can see you for what you are." Gaige's voice sounded like he swallowed knives and was now talking.

"No!" the doctor screamed, his body changing quickly as he met Gaige with a scalpel in his tentacles.

The fight was intense. They clashed, tentacles flying and gripping as they pulled at each other. Blood was spurting across the floor while Amanda crept around them to reach Lita. She undid the binds holding her.

“We have to leave.” Amanda was tugging on her arm.

“I will never leave him.” She meant it. Together they would court a path into tomorrow, but whether it was through death or a lifetime lived together, the future would have to reveal. She would never leave him.

The doctor had Gaige down. He was nothing but a spiral of tentacles. She didn't know if he was on his back or face.

“Death has been hunting you for a long time. Today, it found you.” Gaige's tentacles changed, the spikes becoming razor sharp.

The doctor howled as Gaige cut off his tentacles before rising from the floor. A blue cord that sizzled came from Gaige and wrapped around the doctor. His body went stiff as it floated into the air, and then it dissolved into nothingness. Darkness crept into the already dim room and all she could hear was Gaige saying, “He was always the door.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lita came too in a tangle of limbs on the kitchen floor, with Sable and Haru hovering over her.

“Dom went to get Haile and Xander is making sure our perimeter is secured. I’d help you up, but it might be better to wait for Haile.” Sable ran her hand through her hair, pacing a four by four square as she waited.

“What the hell happened Lita, and who’s the stray you brought home?”

Lita tuned her bestie out and concentrated on untangling her limbs from Gaige’s and Amanda’s. They were both out, and it was worrying her.

“No, don’t get up.”

Lita growled, not that she was making progress in getting up. She allowed her tense shoulder muscles to relax, because it was all she could do. “Sable.”

When Sable didn’t say anything, she knew her attempt to talk had been a failure. She was one long, miserable ache.

Everything ached, including the roots of her hair. She felt like there was a burning poison going through her blood and it was tainting everything inside her body. Huh, this was how she died. That theme was beginning to show up too often in her life.

Haile walked into the kitchen and sniffed. “Everyone out of the kitchen now. I said now! Dom, I need you to grab two Iso suits and the Iso tent and get it back here pronto. Stop and put on a suit.”

Lita saw Haile move away from her and she knew that they were in deep trouble. He moved away, making his voice harder to hear, but she heard enough when he said, “Xander, get the cleaners in here now. Lita’s room will become room zero and I will make sure they are contained within.”

Dying was becoming less farfetched and closer to reality than she liked. The mystery chick, whoever she was, had played a card from the bottom of the deck.



Gaige woke up screaming and fighting. Someone chained him. “Who chained me show your face I’ll take you apart and your brother too.”

“At least he’s not cussing up a blue storm this time,” Dom said.

“I wish I could say he’s getting better, but he hasn’t reached the halfway point.”

“Xyronium Crystals. Dom took several deep breathes before continuing. Haile, somebody used it on them. I thought they outlawed it throughout the galaxy.”

“It’s like any other banned substance. If you want it bad enough, someone is selling it. It’s worse this wasn’t injected into their systems, or they weren’t made to drink it. This substance was forced into their bodies all at once. If I had to guess, I’d say they went through a door, a portal, hell, even a corridor, but the price of admission was this. There was no way they could have known.”

Dom slumped into one of the chairs they had brought in. “I’m going to fuck up whoever did this to them. I don’t believe in harming females, but I just found my exception.”

“Wait in line, I think Sable has first shot at her. That is, if Lita doesn’t beat us all to her.” Haile put on the face piece of his Iso suit and entered the tent. He took his sensor and checked them. Their temperatures were spiking as they each seeped blood out of their pores. There was nothing he could do for them. They had to make it through that trial on their own.”

Dom looked at him when he came out. Haile shook his head. “You might want to leave. The screaming is about to start now.”

“I’ll sit with them for a little while. You need to take a break before they need you again.” Haile shook his head. “This is non-negotiable. Go outside, get that damn suit off, and get

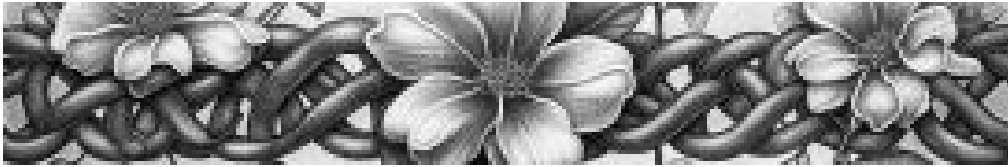
some fresh air. See what's cooking in the kitchen. All Sable and Aunt Mae have been doing is cooking up a storm. Out.”

“If anything happens...”

“I'll shadow walk to you.”

“Thanks Dom, I don't say it enough—”

“Stop right there. You're getting maudlin. Go.” Haile chuckled and did as his coz said.



Wherever she was, it was dark. Lita was stumbling around, afraid to walk because there could be anything in front of her and she wouldn't see it.

“Lita?”

“Amanda? Where are you? Do you know where we are?” She had a feeling, but her mind was avoiding thinking about it.

“Stay still, I'm coming to you,” Amanda called.

“How did you find me?” Lita asked when she felt Amanda's hand in hers.

“I've been here before and I can see in this darkness better than you can.”

Since Lita couldn't see anything, she found that amazing and worrisome. Who or what was Amanda's mother?

“Where are we?”

“I don’t know for sure. I think we’re at death’s door. They used to do this to me, take me to the edge where I was so sure I was going to die and then pull me back. This is different, though. I feel like my blood is knives. There are cuts inside of me with blood seeping out of them.”

“Xyronium Crystals,” Gaige said. He sounds like he just woke. “The creature that was holding us prisoner in an Anallah.” He said it slowly so they could understand the alien name. It lives on Xyronium Crystals. His is the only planet in the galaxy where it is not outlawed. Their people need it the way we need air on earth. When he exploded, exposing the doorway, he pushed it into our system. His last defense was to take us out with him. It was twisted and diabolical, but so was he.”

“How do you know all of this?” Lita asked.

“One form I can take is the Anallah. When I was born, my father, Sergey, had to obtain some Xyronium Crystals and feed them to me in small doses until I was able to live without them. That’s what took me so long to wake up. My body was flushing the harmful toxins out because my human side and the other alien side of me couldn’t handle it.”

“What do we do now?” Lita was looking around, and all she saw was an unrelenting darkness.

“This a shared dream weaved together by you, love. We each have to fight the drug in our body. Either we expelled it our we die.”

“By we you mean Amanda and me. You’ve already cleaned your body of the toxin.”

“I have, but I won’t leave you behind.” Lita wanted to dance when he called her love and the ‘I won’t leave you behind’ made her want to swoon.

She got it, though. There wasn’t going to be any slow build up between her and Gaige. No moonlit walks and making sweet love on the beach. Okay, they may find time for that one. No, they were going to walk through hell together and come out a powerful couple or not come out at all. As much as she wanted moonlight sonnets and kisses on her hand, or Gaige taking a knee and declaring his undying love. She much preferred this. There was no question about who she was or who he was.

“Any hint on how to expel Xyronium Crystals from our bodies?” Amanda was still holding her hand, although she was silent.

“We have to die,” Amanda said before Gaige could answer. “It’s the only way. The longer we allow it to linger inside of us, the weaker we get.”

“No!” Gaige screamed, lunging for Amanda.

“Kill me!” Amanda screamed as she plunged a knife into Lita’s heart.

“Lita,” Gaige screamed as he tore out Amanda’s throat.



“What the hell?” Dom screamed before he traced to Haile and brought him back.

“They’re flat lining,” Haile said, running into the tent with an AED. He worked fast, channeling his natural healing ability into all of them.

Dom pulled him away from the Iso tent and secured it as red mist seeped out of their pores.

“Gaige,” Haile screamed fighting Dom and Xander who were holding him back.

“There’s nothing you can do for him now,” Dom said. His voice was dead.

“No, I went to medical school. I went off planet to study under some of the best healers. Don’t tell me there’s nothing I can do to save the life of my cousin and the female he is obviously besotted with.”

Haile started beating on Dom’s and Xander’s chest, refusing to accept what he knew to be true.

“I’ll call Uncle Nicholas and Daman.” His cousins were just shaking their heads. The flat line said it all.

“It’s over Haile. This female, whoever she is, won.” Xander’s voice was a mere whisper. “Now, I have to tell Sable and Haru, as well as Lita’s aunt and uncle.”

“And we have to tell our family.” They left the room, shutting the door softly to show respect for the ones they would never laugh with again.

The wail of pain that came from the house would never be forgotten.



The sky became dark as night while lightning, with no threat of rain, crackled in the sky. The blazing white trails had people running to their homes and hiding under the beds and in their closets.

Beverly sat outside, stroking Coco’s white coat. “Lavina wants to play,” she told Coco. “Some children never learn until it’s too late.”

Coco whined, her eyes glowing brightly. “Don’t sass me, young lady. I have faith in her, in both of them. I won’t interfere unless I have to.” Coco laid back and went to sleep, ignoring the lightning that threatened to cause havoc to the earth.



“What the hell?” Sheriff Branson said. “Casper.”

“Sheriff.” Casper went to the door at the front of the station to look outside. “I have nothing to do with the weather, sheriff. You need to call that forecaster and ask him what the fuck is going on.”

It wasn't in Caspers' job description to tell the sheriff that it wasn't normal lightning. Someone was playing with life and death, heaven and hell, and the grave. It was anyone's guess what was happening, and he didn't like putting money on things that weren't a sure bet.

“This isn't natural,” the sheriff said. “Send a few men out to patrol the streets. We don't want the teenagers to loot while everyone is hiding at home.”

Casper called out three names. They reluctantly fled the station to start patrolling the streets.

“Parker, you're with me,” Casper said. “We'll be back, sheriff.” Casper walked past the sheriff down to his patrol car.

“Where are we going?” Parker asked when they were on their way.

“We are still missing a set of twins.” Several weeks ago, the brother of twin sisters came into the police station. They had managed to find them. Before the incident with the missing pets, he received a phone call from one of his contacts in the FBI's secret bureau that dealt with incidents they didn't want the average citizen to know about. They had a set of twins missing that they called classified. The FBI wanted them found this was the perfect time to do it. It seemed someone

had been impersonating them hoping no one would know that they were missing.

“How long have they been missing?”

“Two months.”

“They have to be dead by now.” That statement sat like a rock in Parker’s stomach. “Why are we going to the graveyard?” A missing person had never turned up in one of Rakes Forths graveyard.

“That lightning isn’t natural.” To put it plainly. “There are things that can be uncovered when the dead walk the earth.”

“You’re beginning to freak me out.” Parker shivered and turned up the heat. He liked Casper. There was something about the male that appealed to him. Not that he spent a lot of time thinking about it. Then there was this side of him that seemed different, like he wasn’t as in touch with his humanity as he should be.

“Let me get this straight. We’re going to the graveyard. The one that’s hundreds of years old. To look for two young women who have been missing for at least two months in the hope that they’re still alive because there’s unnatural lightning in the sky?”

“That about sums it up.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lita opened her mouth, trying to gasp, breathe, and scream at the same time. Her hands flew to her chest, where there was a knife sticking out of her heart. She yanked on it, feeling her heart throb before she could feel the knitting together of tissue and the veins pulling together. Nauseousness from the feeling in her chest and the knowledge of what was happening plagued her to the point she couldn't think. She turned over and dry heaved.

Amanda woke, her hands going to her neck that were slowly weaving itself back together.

They were being watched by a monster. It was a combination of tentacles and crystals. They looked like ice crystals, but Lita didn't think they would be cold if she touched them.

"Where the hell are we?" She couldn't take her eyes off the strange being that she knew was Gaige.

"I think hell sums it up nicely," Amanda said.

Lita wanted to chastise her, but the reality was that Amanda was older than she was, maybe older than Gaige. Her body was young because she hadn't been allowed to grow up. Lita cringed. Amanda was a being that was centuries old in the body of a just budding teen who had never been kissed and was bound to go through teen angst. If they managed to make it out of this hell, would the world be prepared for her?

“Gaige, can you change forms? What are you even doing here?” She waited, but he just hovered in the air. They had gone through hell together. She giggled. Lord God, she had it bad if she was giggling. They were in hell right now together because he refused to leave her. His fate was hers and vice versa. This was some commitment, and he hadn't rocked her world yet horizontally, vertically, hmm could they do it on their heads? Okay, that was a daydream for another day.

She went to him and wrapped her arms around his tentacles and crystalline body as best as she could. Standing there, she closed her eyes and leaned into him. Allowing him to take some of the weight off her shoulders. Finally, his tentacles wrapped around her, stroking her back and arms.

“I don't care what form you take. I'm going to be here for you. Although, I really doubt we can do the horizontal mamba with you in that form.”

“What's the horizontal mamba?” Amanda asked, looking at them. Right, the concept of a hug was strange to her.

“Ask me when you're seventeen.”

“That seems like a long time to wait, but okay? Will I start to age normally when I get out of here?”

“I know a great healer. He’ll look you over and we’ll get some answers.” Gaige used his tentacles to move Lita back before his body began to morph into the form she knew.

“Why are you here?” One hand went to her hip while the other was pointing at him. “This place.” She flung her hands wide. “Is not where you should be.”

“Why do you ask questions you know the answers to?”

He wasn’t leaving her. It was a good thing she was planning to stick with him, too.

“So, we’re dead?”

“Kind of sort of,” Amanda said.

Lita tried to understand that as she looked around. There was literally nothing. It felt like she was standing on something, but when she looked down, there was nothing there. She crouched down to prove her mind wrong, but her hand went lower than her feet, which made her stop. There were no walls, no scents, no feel of air and no other sounds besides the ones coming from them. They were literally in a place that didn’t exist.

“If a dream weaver doesn’t have a dream, what does she do?” Gaige pulled her into his arms, holding her tight and then he slid his fingers over Amanda’s cheek, inviting her in to experience what it feels like to be loved. It was her first taste of what a family was like, and she drank it up like a sponge.

“I did this? I made the construct for a dream even though I didn’t have a dream to hang on it?”

“You did, and I walked us into it.”

“I’m going to give myself kudos for thinking on my feet. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life or non-life here. What do we do next?”

“Can’t we go back to our bodies?” Amanda was starting to look wispy as she floated in the air. Gaige grabbed her by the hand and pulled her down.

“Stay with us, young lady. That’s an order.”

“Yes, sir,” she smiled.

“Our bodies are dead,” Lita said, wanting to be back in her body and laughing with Sable and hugging Haru while she watched Gaige and wished they were making love.

“They aren’t dead, not yet.”

Lita and Amanda turned to stare at Gaige. “What do you mean?” Amanda said.

Gaige crouched literally on nothing before he ran his hand through his hair. “This isn’t widely known, and I want to keep it that way.”

Lita and Amanda nodded and then crouched so they were all in a circle. “My family knows. They may even understand what could be happening right now. Sometimes dream walkers go on what I call a journey. It could be to find themselves or someone else, but they can only leave their bodies for so long.

Bodies, need food, and water etc... Powerful dream walkers can put their body in stasis. It mimics death, but they aren't dead. Not yet. No matter how powerful the dream walker, there is only so long they can keep their body like that. I'm not only a dream walker, as you have both seen. I put all three of us in stasis. There is no telling how much longer I can hold it." Gaige stopped and stared at Lita.

"Amanda, close your eyes and turn around,' Gaige said

"What? Why?"

"Just do it. One day, you'll be telling someone to turn around and close their eyes."

"I used to daydream about being all grown up or meeting nice adults. How was I supposed to know that the older you get, the stranger you get?" She shivered as she turned around. "Okay, do your secretive adult stuff."

Lita snickered, trying not to laugh. Having Amanda live with them with Haru and Izzy was going to be fun.

Gaige pulled Lita close, looking deep into her eyes. "I should have done this a long time ago. When we get home, I'm going to rectify a few things." He pressed his lips to hers, just reaffirming the connection they felt before he demanded entrance. This wasn't nice, Gaige. This was asshole Gaige and bad boy Gaige wrapped in one, and he knew what he wanted. He nipped at her lips until she opened her mouth with a gasp. Then he stroked his tongue, wrapping around hers dominating her mouth the way he planned to dominate her body.

Lita could feel him down to her toes. Gaige could kiss, and he was teaching her things with his tongue that she thought was impossible. He went to the side of her mouth and then kissed down her neck, where he started nipping and sucking. Yeah, he was going to leave a ‘she belongs to me’ mark there, and she was okay with that.

“More where that came from later.” He pulled back and looked into her eyes. He gave her a cocky grin and a wink. “You can turn around now.”

Amanda turned around, giving them a confused look. Her eyes went to Lita’s neck.

“Don’t ask, I’ll explain later.” Amanda nodded, but kept looking at them like they were some strange species she just discovered.

“How do we get out of here?” Lita asked, putting them back on task. She could stay here forever if it meant more kisses like that from Gaige and him making love to her. It always seems there wasn’t enough time for them. She was ready to beg and plead that the bad guys take twenty-four hours off and give her some alone time with Gaige.

“That’s on you, mate.” He wasn’t pulling any punches. They had come close to death too many times, and it wasn’t guaranteed they would escape it this time.

Lita felt her heart dance. Which honestly was scary and for a moment, she was sure she was having a heart attack until the song ‘Must be nice’ started playing in her head. Yes! She wanted to scream, but right now, they needed to get home.

“You brought us here. You have to create the door to go home. I’ll walk us through it. Consider it a team effort.”

“I don’t know how. it’s one thing to oops onto a solution, like I did to get up here. You’re asking me to deliberately build a doorway when I have no experience doing that.”

“You’re right, but you’ve been thrown into the deep end, and you keep swimming. I need you to think about how you felt when you brought us here. We were dying, and you managed to take us out of our bodies and then when Amanda killed you, there was still a part of you that was able to bring us here to this dream construct.” Gaige pulled her into his arms and began a low murmur in her ear. “Come with me, my mate. We’ll make mad love on the beach and dare the sand to enter places it shouldn’t be.”

She laughed, but she could see them on the beach, taste the salty air and feel the sand whip around their faces. The waves were crashing through and all she wanted to do was make love to Gaige.

Something in her head, or was it in her heart, and soul, shifted? She couldn’t give it a name because there were no words to describe it. At best, it was will and intent. Now that she felt that shift, she followed it. There was a place inside of her, like a secret lair that she never experienced before. Was this the source of her power? Maybe? This was what that witch wanted. It had to be. She could see how the ability to dream weave seeped into her bones and blood. There would be

no way to sever it without killing her. She depended on this ability as much as she depended on her blood and air.

“I see you.” She spoke to it in her head. *“Take us home.”* Like a puzzle that she had been working on for years. It unfolded before her. The section she needed was clear to her eyesight, but the rest was folded up tighter than a Christmas present.

Building the door to go home wasn't easy. She knew instinctively that if she had hung a dream on the construct she built, that it would be easier. The pieces of the door kept escaping from her and when she started building, they would fade away, only to show up somewhere else.

There was no sense of time where she was, only the need to get home. She could feel the strain Gaige was enduring to keep their bodies in stasis.

She wanted to give up, to call it impossible. Then she remembered Gaige taking her through two dreams when he didn't know what she could do. He wanted to save her, and she wanted to save him and Amanda.

The pieces she wanted became solid as she began to build the framework. The more it came together, the better she understood how she built the construct they were in. She could do this. When she opened her eyes, there was a shining door standing on nothing.

“What do you think?” She looked at Gaige, needing to know what he thought and to revel in his praise.

“I think you’re amazing and it’s time to go home.” He reached for the door, and she hoped home was where they ended up.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Casper could feel Parker behind him. Putting his feet in the prints Casper made. he was a smart man, one wrong step and they could end up anywhere in the realms that serviced the cemetery. There wasn't one place he wanted to go. Parker's flashlight announced them, but he knew the male needed the extra light to see.

"What's that?" Casper stopped and looked ahead where a Tomb had slid to the side showing a doorway.

"That's a doorway." It was shadowy and promised not to be anything good.

"That's impossible." Parker moved around Casper and walked around the grave and tombstone in a complete circle. "There's nothing back here. How could it be a doorway?"

"Certain weather reveals things that can't be seen by the normal eye" It didn't hurt that Parker was more than he realized. The graveyard was quiet and throwing off spooky vibes. There weren't any ghosts stirring that gave Casper

pause he eyed the doorway again, knowing they had to walk through it. The shadows being cast by the tombstones seemed to be growing longer as the dirt under his feet began to vibrate.

He grabbed Parker's arm and forcefully pulled him through the doorway. "What the hell!" Parker screamed. "I lost my flashlight."

"Hold on to my shoulder. You'll be fine."

"How can you see in this inky darkness?"

Casper put Parker's arm on his shoulder but didn't answer his question. He wasn't ready for the truth of the world around him or his place in it.

"How have you been sleeping?" He felt the shudder that went through Parker's body.

"I've been having dreams for a while now. Maybe as long as the girls have been missing. If I'm honest, they are more like nightmares. I..." He stuttered, maybe looking for words. "The academy has become a house of horrors in my dreams and I'm the star pupil being tortured."

Casper said nothing, having an inkling of what Parker went through. There was more to come if the research he did on the academy panned out. Being a police academy was simply a front to lure males like Parker in. He was going to have to be strong enough to get through this.

The inky darkness opened up from one step to another. They were standing in a large chamber with gems embedded in the walls and a large embellished statue of a god or a demon. In

front of it was an altar with two young women lying on it. They looked perfect, reposed in death. There was no decomposition which led Casper to believe they were still alive.

“This is impossible.”

“Like the doorway we walked through?” Casper said.

Parker worked his mouth, no words coming. Casper didn't blame him, it was hard to refute what happened even if your mind was in denial.

“Are they dead?” Parker snatched his hand back, not realizing he was still holding on to Casper.

“No, they've been bespelled.”

“Be what?” Parker moved away from Casper and closer to the altar.

“It's a word that has fallen out of use. In this case, it's a certain kind of spell that can only be done by a hybrid witch.

“Witch? hybrid? Do you need water? I have a bottle hanging from my belt.”

Casper smiled. Parker wanted to take care of him the more time they spent together. It could mean he was right, but now wasn't the time to dwell on that. After all that Parker had seen he was still in denial.

“This is a temple. Pay particular attention to the emerald embedded in the walls and the statue. You know that the statue represents either a god or a demon by the fancy headdress and

the multiple eyes. If you watch closely, the eyes will look like they are following you. Either a deity is trapped within or has inhabited the statue recently.”

“I...what...why?” Parker stumbled over all the words and none of them made any sense.

“Later. We need to get these two out of here.” Casper walked to the altar and stopped. “Parker, do you see that missing piece on the forehead?”

“What is it?” Parker came to stand beside him.

Casper closed his eyes and cast a small part of his body to the statue and then stumbled back, falling. Parker moved quickly, catching Casper before he hit the ground.

“A relic goes there. It’s old and nasty. We need to get those women out of here now.” They were older than Caser thought about thirty with light brown skin, but they were identical from what he could see. They are being kept bespelled to become the sacrifice when the relic is obtained. We need to find it before whoever put them here does.”

“I thought Roger put them here?”

“No, I think someone else targeted them. I wonder... We’ll deal with that at a later time.”

“This is dead weight. How do you expect me to carry her?”

“You can do it.”

“Right, why don’t you show me how it’s done?” Casper picked up a twin and slung her over his shoulder.

“Showoff,” Parker mumbled, forcing himself away from looking at the proof that Casper’s muscles were for more than show. He shook his head. Since when did he look at a guy’s muscles? It was like breaking the bro code.

He picked up the second twin, stumbling before he got his balance.

“Stay on my heels, Parker.” The ground began to rumble. “Run.”

“How am I supposed to see?”

“Just run.” Parker did what Casper said. The inky darkness was more like a gray day. It gave him just enough light to see where he was putting his feet. Small rocks were coming towards them, a couple of them making them jump to keep from being hit hard enough to fall.

“Casper!” Parker yelled as a larger boulder the size of the tunnel came at them. There was no way for them to avoid it.

“I see it.” Casper moved back to where Parker was standing. He flipped them around so that Parker’s back was to the boulder that was coming. “Close your eyes, bury your face in my neck and shoulder and don’t move. Don’t. Fucking. Move. Parker!”

“Well, if I have to die in a passageway, no one will ever discover at least I’m dying in a foursome.” Casper bit his bottom lip to keep from laughing. He needed to concentrate if they were to survive this.

Casper waited until the boulder was about a foot away from them before he changed forms, pushing out his essence to cover Parker and the twins. He could feel Parker's agitation when he felt the boulder roll through his body.

“What the?”

“Don't talk, run.” Casper took the lead, navigating the smaller boulders that came their way. Parker followed in his footsteps. The door to the passage was closing. They could see the tomb moving back into place.

“Jump!”

Parker hit the grave with a sharp thump as the twin he was holding started moaning. They made it but somebody owed him an explanation of what happened. He looked at Casper, who seemed paler than usual.



Lita opened her eyes at the same time a scream came from her. The shock of reentering her body felt like fire licking along her nerves. Tears cascaded down her face and she took deep breaths remembering that she needed glorious air to breathe.

“We made it,” Amanda said between gasps.

The only one not suffering from the shock of the reentry was Gaige. that made a kind of sense.

“We made it,” Lita screamed as soon as she could keep air in her lungs. The door to her bedroom flew open and Sable and Xander fell through it.

“I thought you were dead,” Sable said, pushing herself up and sprinting over to throw herself at Lita.

“We thought you were dead.” The quiet voice of her Aunt Mae rolled over her. She looked to see her aunt crying.

Lita tried to put Sable aside to go to her aunt.

“Don’t you dare stand.” Haile’s voice was military strict when he began issuing orders. Before anything else happened, he needed to look them over. Everyone reluctantly left the room, acknowledging he could work faster without interruptions.

Lita laid there as Haile laid hands on all three of them. A glow emanated from his hands and then he used conventional tools like the stethoscope and blood pressure cuff to make sure they were fine. He took a step back and looked at all three of them.

“You’re fine. I don’t know how you did it, but all of you are going to be okay.”

“How long have we’ve been gone?” Gaige asked.

“Thirty days,” Haile answered with a shake of his head. His eyes told the story, he didn’t voice out loud.

Gaige blanched when he heard how long they were gone. It was impossible to hold stasis for that long. Thirty days would

have acted like ninety for him because he was holding three people's life force's in his hands.

“Gaige gets it,” Haile told them. “Get yourselves together, then come out. Your bodies need food and water. They may have been in stasis, but your blood still feels the lack of nutrients.” He got to the door before he stopped. “I’m so damn glad you’re back.”

Haile said something to Gaige in a language Lita had never heard before. Gaige replied before Haile left them alone.

“It’s a family greeting that reinforces who we are to each other.” Gaige got up and stretched. “It feels good to be in my body again.” Lita ignored the few aches that came from staying still. Haile had reversed most of them.

“Amanda, you can get in the shower first.” Haile had cleaned her up as much as possible, but she still looked like an extra in a horror movie. They all did.

“The what?” Amanda asked Gaige.

“Come with me, baby girl. Let me introduce you to the pleasure that is flowing water.” Lita took Amanda to the bathroom. Gaige went in search of Xander to borrow some clothes and use one of his extra rooms to shower and change.



Lita and Amanda made their way to the kitchen to a chorus of joyous shouts. Her Aunt Mae was the first to hug her, almost

lifting her off the ground in her exuberance. Her grip was tighter than she ever felt before, and Lita melted into the sheer love her aunt was showing her. Then her Uncle Bob took her in his arms and the tears she'd been trying to hold back flowed. After that, Uncle Bob passed her to Xander and his cousins. Good thing she had decided against makeup. Tears flowed, followed by laughter.

“If someone doesn't feed me soon, I'm going to chomp on one of your arms,” she informed the room as a whole

“Not it,” everyone called out, keeping their arms to themselves.

“I got you, baby girl,” her uncle said, turning on the stove and pulling food out of the fridge. Her aunt could cook, and most thought Aunt Mae was the whizz behind the curtain. Uncle bob's secret passion was cooking and if he made it, you fell in love with it. Her aunt and uncle tag teamed the cooking. It kept most of the town guessing who was actually cooking.

“Everyone, this is Amanda. She was being held in that hell hole that almost killed us.” Amanda gave a faint smile and a wave to everyone.

“I got this Aunt Lita. Amanda, you can have the room next to mine and Izzy's.”

“Wait, Izzy has a room?” Lita asked not understanding why a cat needed her own room.

“Aunt Lita, Izzy is a girl. She needs her own room.” Exasperation colored Haru's voice while everyone else was

averting their eyes and covering their mouths.

Lita's eyes went to the yellow wall that held a clock and now a new picture. It was of her, Sable, Xander, and Haru making silly faces. Why? because this was now home, and they were her family.

"You're right, Haru. Girls need their privacy." He gave Lita the brightest smile, like she was the star pupil of the day.

"Damn, can't we get one..." Gaige looked at all the small eyes looking at him and shut his mouth.

"What's happening?" Lita asked. Gaige tilted his head to Xander.

"My wards have picked up someone coming towards us." Xander closed his eyes and when he opened them, his face was a mask of fury.

"Deputy Anson is on his way."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lita had a few curse words of her own. Deputy Anson showed up to ask some questions about what had been happening in town a month or two ago. Then he asked if Xander had he seen a teenager of Asian or African American descent who was causing trouble. Haru could change his appearance to make him look older. Xander had talked to him, not wanting the deputy inside the house or to expose them to him.

Lita had made what she hoped was discreet inquiries when she went to town. No one knew who deputy Anson was, and she'd never seen him near the police station. Now he was coming back. She didn't like it. All she wanted was one day to get her freak on with Gaige. Was that too much to ask?

"Don't let him in," Haru pleaded.

"He's not coming in. I'll meet him outside like last time," Xander reassured him.

“Make sure he stays in front of the steps,” Sable yelled as she ran outside to fall to the walkway leading to the porch.

Lita followed Xander who was one step behind his mate. Sable placed her hands on the ground and a green light emanated from her until her body was covered with it. The ground beneath her hands seemed to roll under her hands as if she was communicating with it. When Sable stood, she was smiling.

“You didn’t use to do that.” Lita said. It was freaky to see her friend covered in that green glow.

“That’s because I didn’t know I could do it. Since this new ability has awakened inside me, I’ve been having dreams that teach and encourage me. The more I deal with nature, the stronger I get. Xander you will have to be rude and stare at Deputy Anson. The ground will move through him and reveal his true face. You’ll know if he’s human and if he’s evil. I can’t believe I said that. Where’s Haile when you need two pain pills for a headache and a tonic to chase it?” She shook her head, getting slapped in the face with the new life she was living.

“Everyone inside. Go to my and Sable’s room. It’s sound proof I don’t want him to hear you.” They nodded, going inside to shut themselves off from what was happening outside.

Gaige was sitting on the second step when Deputy Anson pulled up. He got out of the car but ended up standing on the ground. Deputy Anson was a tall man with jet black hair and

ice-blue eyes. He was on the pale side, which allowed his hair and eyes to stand out in stark contrast to his skin.

“Xander, can I call you Xander?”

“Please. It’s nice to see you again, deputy Anson. I didn’t think you’d be back this way after our last conversation.” Xander gave him a smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

“Right, we had a lovely conversation about those people, if I remember correctly, but you weren’t able to help me. I’m here about a different issue. There’s a rumor that there are wild cats roaming our precious forest. The thing is most people think they aren’t dangerous because they look like house cats. So, I’ve taken it upon myself to warn all the residents. I don’t want to see anyone go to sleep and wake up dead.”

Xander frowned, trying to get a good look at his face, that always seemed to be in the shadows. He stopped trying to see him face on and stared at him the way his mate told him to.

“Did you say vicious house cats?” It pained him to say that without laughing. “I’ve heard that some of them like to claw and bite.”

The deputy gave a weary sigh. “It may sound like a joke, but these house cats can kill.”

“They sound like the perfect companion for man, then. No, deputy I haven’t encountered a cat like that. I’ve also not heard of any encounters when I went to town.”

Xander took an involuntary gulp of air as the deputy’s true face was revealed. He covered it up with his coffee, gasping as

it went down the wrong pipe.

“What happened?”

“Coffee.” Xander held up his cup. “Can’t live without it and sometimes it tries to kill you.”

“Ah, yes. I have a certain fondness for coffee. If you hear anything...”

“I’ll call you,” Xander said before he could reach into his pocket for a card that was peeking out of his dress shirt pocket.

“That will be all, then.” Deputy Anson walked to his squad car door. “One last thing. I’ve heard a rumor in town that you have a young oriental boy in your house.”

“You wouldn’t be talking about my son, would you?” Xander growled.

“Aww, it’s like that. Tell your son to watch himself, just a friendly warning.” He got into his car with a wave and a cocky grin before pulling away.

Xander stumbled back, falling against the steps when his wards told him that deputy Anson was beyond his property. He felt his mate when she left their bedroom and knew everyone was coming outside.

“Xander?” Sable sat next to him.

“Tell us what you found out, coz.” Gaige sat on the other side of him.

“That man isn’t a man. Haru, I need you to stay far away from him. He politely threatened you.”

“What is he?” Lita asked, sitting two steps above Xander.

“Demon.”

There were gasps all around except for Haru who was nodding his head. All eyes looked at him, but no one challenged him. He had known. Haru had secrets that needed to come out soon.

“What do we do?” Lita asked.

“Nothing,” Gaige said. “He’s been here as long as we have, maybe longer. There’s nothing we can do until he makes a move. I think he’s part of whatever is happening, but he could also be working on his own agenda.”

“First, he inquired about Gaige and now Izzy. I think there’s something shady going on, but I’m not sure it’s connected to Sable and Lita.”

“That’s all we need. Two mysteries for the price of one.” Lita dropped her head.

“I have another mystery that we should explore.” Gaige winked at her before holding her hand.

“Where are they going?” Amanda asked.

“They’re umm sleepy,” Sable stuttered.

“Doesn’t she know about the birds and the bees, mom?” Haru asked.

“Kill me now,” Xander said.

Lita’s laughter could be heard coming from the front door.

“Come on kids, let your Aunt Mae and Uncle Bob take you shopping. That means you to Izzy.” A cheer went up and Sabel breathed a sigh of relief.

“I think I’m sleepy too.”



Lita felt shy now that it was only her and Gaige in her room. Gaige took her hand and led her out of the room to the opposite side of the house that she hadn’t really noticed was there until now. She glimpsed an open area that could be a living room with a cozy fireplace. There were two smaller bedrooms, each with a bathroom, before Gaige pushed open double doors to a large bedroom.

“Not yours and not mine. Ours.” She gulped as she looked around. There was a king sized bed and a headboard against one wall. Maybe even larger than a king-size. other than that, there was nothing in the room. Unlike the one she’d been staying in, which was obviously a guest room. She itched to put her personal touch on the room to claim it as theirs. To argue and flirt with Gaige about how they would decorate it.

“Ours?”

“It is, and I want our first night to be spent in our place.”

“Don’t you have your own place?”

“No, I have a place I hibernate, but it isn’t my home. I should have known that Xander would make a home for all of

us. Like our parent's The Created need to be together. Over the years, they moved to a large compound with doors that are always open and there was never no telling who was in whose house. That's how we grew up. More than once, we pushed several beds together and went to sleep. All the houses were mine, and I loved it."

"It sounds warm and cozy."

"Until we started fighting, but I loved that too." He laughed and ushered her into the room.

"Do you want to shower?"

"I didn't bring any of my things down here." She started making a mental note of what she needed to grab.

"I packed some of your things when you weren't looking." She nodded and headed for the bathroom.

So what, if she took a shower a couple of hours ago? She was feeling the need to freshen up. The bathroom was beautiful but bare. There was an extra wide tub with jacuzzi spouts, and the shower was large, big enough for several people. The floor was a gray and black marbled tile. The same went for the shower, which had little raised indents to massage your feet against and a seat in case they'd been fighting evil all day and needed to sit. All it needed were some personal touches to bring it alive.

She jumped in the shower, making quick work of it. All of her shower products were there. After she was out and dried off, she found several outfits she could change into. There

were a couple of negligees she was saving for the right man. Sue her, lingerie was her passion.

She walked into the bedroom wearing a purple negligee that cupped her breast with a matching pair of panties. The negligee itself was see-through and her bra and panties had a shimmery look that when she turned just right, you could get a glimpse of her.

“I always thought you were beautiful. Now you’re a goddess tempting this poor hybrid to do unspeakable things to you.” Gaige’s eyes devoured her, and his tongue flicked like he was tasting the air in the room. “I love the taste of your scent. That is all you. You are wildflowers in a large untouched plane with so many scents complimenting the air around you that it’s exotic and unavoidable.”

“Your words touch my soul.”

“My hands want to touch something a little closer to the surface.” He was sitting on the bed with his legs spread wide, wearing a pair of black, silky boxers. “Lita wanted to tear those boxers from him. She’d replace them later so she could finally see and feel what he’d been teasing her with.

He crooked a finger at her, and she couldn’t resist walking to him. When she was standing between his legs, she gave a sigh. Finally, if anyone interrupted them, she was kicking ass and taking names.

“Some things are worth waiting for, baby.” He pulled her down until she was sitting on one of his thighs. His mouth

went to her, nibbling at her lips as his tongue moved over her mouth in lazy swipes.

Lita gasped, loving the care he took when kissing her. This was a gentle persuasion. When his tongue asked for permission to take the kiss deeper, she opened her mouth, amazed at the way his tongue curled around hers. And touched places that made her whimper and moan that she didn't know she had. He kissed her deeply. Her mouth was one erotic zone, and she wanted to stay there all day.

She whimpered, wanting more, but wanting to move on at the same time. The fear that someone would say the earth was ending, and she was needed, played in the back of her mind like the cock block it was.

“Shh, baby. We have all night. You and me.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Gaige kissed Lita again with what felt like and also made her feel like a queen worthy of his passion. She crawled out of his lap onto the bed. It wasn't sexy to her, but the look in his eyes as he watched her every move told her what he saw and what she saw were two different things. That knowledge made her heart swell.

“You're beautiful. I wanted you the very first time I saw you. I knew that if I gave into that desire, I'd be lost forever.”

The walls were painted a light gray, and she lost herself in the color as she waited for him to break her heart. She reminded herself that once would be more than she had a right to.

“I was right, I've lost myself and all I've done is kiss you. I owe you a warning. If I take your sweet body, I will never let you go.”

Her gaze flew to him. The walls no longer holding her attention. He had called her his mate, but when death and

destruction were calling your name, it was easy to say that in the midst of almost dying.

Now there wasn't the threat of death hanging over their heads. He could have and be with anyone he wanted, but he was with her. Her heart cried out. This was the dream she kept buried deep, and it was coming alive to wrap her in sweetness and desire she refused to think about.

She caressed his face. Then stroked his cheek bones. The sharpness of them turned her on. Everything about him made her hot and needy. "Deep inside my soul, I knew I wanted someone, but who was always a mystery. There was never anyone that really did it for me. Then I met you and you worked my last nerve, but the desire for you never dimmed. I knew you didn't want anything to do with me. I kept saying just one night when I wanted so much more."

"Lita, I'm never letting you go."

"Then you should make love to me and prove it."

"That's all I was waiting for." He took her into his arms, holding her close as they kissed before he worked down to her throat, sucking the skin that would one day bear his mate mark.

Lita moaned as he sucked, licked, and placed gentle bites on her throat. She never realized how sensitive she was there until Gaige took a liking to the spot.

His hand moved down her shoulder while the other kept caressing her neck. She was stroking his arms. She loved his

muscular arms. The way they flexed and caught her attention. Her nails lightly scored his arms when his mouth sucked in one of her nipples through her negligee. The warm heat combined with the sucking on her nipples had her back arching and her legs spreading. Noises came from her that spoke of a desire that she'd never felt before. He took the other nipple into his mouth and her head rocked back and forth as she rubbed her body against his.

Gaige placed a hand on her thigh as he caressed upwards, taking the hem of the negligee with him. Lita's breath caught in her throat as he uncovered every inch of her skin. He took his time like she was a precious Christmas present, and he wanted to savor the unveiling.

He stopped and caressed his hands over her purple panties, making her pant from the pressure and the warmth. She groaned as he went back to pulling her negligee up. He gave her a wicked look that made her shudder. His next stop was her stomach. He trailed his fingers lightly over her skin, making it sensitive. She always thought she needed a firm touch there. The way his fingers stroked it felt like he had a direct line to all her nerve endings, and they sat up when he called. He went back to unveiling her body, and she gave a frustrated groan as he got further away from where she wanted his hands and talented mouth.

“Gaige, please.” Frustration laced every word that was also coated in desire. She pressed her hips together as she thought of his hand in her pussy.

“We have all night, love. I’m not rushing this.”

She wanted to argue, but at the same time, she wanted to experience the passionate torture he was putting her through.

“Up,” he growled as he stripped the negligee over her head. She could see the desire in his blue-green eyes. He looked her over like he’d never seen anyone look like her. Small fangs peaked out of his mouth. The sight of them turned her on, making her hotter.

His hands went to her breasts caressing and kneading them. Her back arched when he pinched her nipples, sending shocks of electricity through all her nerves. Moans of pleasure came out as her head moved side to side in another display of need. His hands slid around her back as he worked the clasp of her bra. When her breasts sprang free, he wrapped one hand around one and took the other in his mouth, taking as much as possible.

Oh! My! God! Her head tossed faster from side to side as her world went foggy. She was flying high from his mouth on her breasts. Her hands went to his chest. His chest was covered with a hint of black fur, just the way she liked it. As she caressed him with her fingers, she felt crystalline scales on his chest. Were they always there or had one of his beast ridden to the surface to be part of their lovemaking? It really didn’t matter because she didn’t care. The feel of those scales that were rough beneath her fingers was taking her higher.

Gaige flipped them over so that he was on his back, and she was on top of him. She was over his cock, rubbing her panty

clad pussy over his boxer clad cock. He was sucking her nipples and pulling at them while she worked her pussy along his hard, thick cock. Was his cock covered in crystalline scales? The thought of it was enough to make her have an orgasm.

“Not yet.” He placed his hands on her hips, slowing her down. “Not until I’m buried deep within you plundering your secret cave for the treasure it hoards.”

His hands, mouth, words, and of course his thick, long cock was going to be the death of her. He turned her over on her back, working his way down while she discovered his pecs and the nipples that were fascinating her. His were hard, and she wanted to pull them with her fingers and bite them. Lifting up she bit him on his shoulder. A taste of who he was flavored her tongue. She pulled away, looking for some kind of liquid, but there was nothing there. The taste of whisky and wildness was on her tongue, encouraging her to do it again.

“It’s one way we identify our mates.” His voice was nothing but a rumble of gravel that touched her deep within her pussy. “It’s just another confirmation that you belong to me.”

“To belong and not to have to worry that the person who wanted her was a stalker psycho. She felt her body loosen more. This was where she belonged, and much like Gaige, she was never giving him up.

“Gaige.” It was a cry, a moan. She didn’t know how much longer she could hold out with him grinding against her. He worked his way down her body, licking and nipping at her. His

hands followed his mouth, making her more sensitive. She growled like an animal and bit his neck as her hands scored his back again. She needed him with a passion that was starting a fire inside of her.

“You’re a wildcat and I love it.”

She watched as a tentacle emerged from Gaige’s spine. It caressed the crack of her ass, going far enough to turn her on but not make her tense up. Was it secreting some kind of fluid? Oh God, there would never be another male good enough for her after him. Good thing she was keeping him. A part of her soul opened, looking for something she couldn’t explain. His hands went to her tiny pair of panties that were just wide enough to cover her slit while leaving her thighs bare. His body moved down, and his mouth replaced his hands. He pulled her panties down with his teeth and she felt like a wild primal cave woman who had no remorse about fucking her man.

When he went to his knees, she grabbed his boxers. This was for her. She pulled them down and watched his cock jump up. Shit! She knew he was big, but Mamma Mia she had a minute of wondering if it would fit.

“I was made for you.” She nodded, they were made for each other but the stretch was going to be amazing.

He stuck out his tongue, and she saw some shiny fluid on it. “I’ll take care of you.” He dived into her pussy like it was a feast while his fingers played with her clit. She wanted to take his cock into her mouth and then one of his tentacles. God, she

felt like a hussy that didn't care what anyone thought of her. All she wanted, and needed, was to please her man. The man she... Enough of that.

She played with his hair until he rose like a god between her legs. As much as she wanted his cock packed tightly inside her, she had to touch it. Oh yeah, there was a thin lining of scales down the back of his cock. She drooled and licked her lips, wanting to feel it in her mouth. Soon, she told herself.

Now it was time for him to dive deep inside of her. She opened her legs wider as he positioned himself. His hands caressed over her body again, taking his time heightening her senses. Two more tentacles emerged from his spine to caress her breasts as he placed his cock at her entrance. He looked deeply into her eyes. Before she could say something, he opened her wide, driving his cock deep inside. She choked on her words as her eyes tried to roll back. She held on to her consciousness with a tenacity that would make a lawyer proud. There was no way she was going to miss one moment of this.

He flipped over to his back. "Ride me, wildcat." She knew that he was giving her a chance to take him at her own pace. To adjust to him inside her even as she was still gasping at being stuffed so full.

She placed her hands on his pecs and tightened her pussy around his hard, thick length. She started moving slowly. It was a nice smooth rhythm that allowed her to get used to Gaige's cock inside of her. Whatever was on his tongue stretched her as she moved, allowing her to take him deeper.

Her rhythm picked up, and she moved faster. Her eyes were glued to his blue-green eyes as she started to piston her hips. Everything became one intense feeling. One tentacle was still caressing her ass while the other two were pulling on her breasts. His cock was taking her for the ride of her life when she literally left her body. She felt as well as saw her soul make a connection with his. He was there with her as their souls entwined. It was still tentative, but she could feel what was going through his body. There was pleasure that allowed them to experienced what the other was feeling.

“Gaige, fucking, hell, Gaige!” She could feel her orgasm build up and she could feel his balls tightening. Hell, they were going to come together and then her orgasm rolled through her body like a hurricane and a volcanic explosion all in one. She was flying high. There was no telling if this was a dream. It was of light fluffy clouds surrounding her body keeping her from falling even as she looked like she was crash landing. Gaige caught her in his arms, and they twirled around in the sky like two lovers with wings.

Pleasure was her friend and her lover. Gaige kissed her, taking her on a euphoric high. This was... there were no words to describe what she was feeling. When the drop happened, she fell into her bed, safely wrapped in Gaige’s arms.

“I never felt...”

“It was the first step to our mating. I didn’t expect it, but I don’t regret it.” He pulled her tighter, like he was trying to enter her skin.

“I don’t regret it either. I want to live my life with you.”

“Live or die, Lita. I will be with you.” It was a solemn vow and a balm to her soul. She snuggled her head on Gaige’s chest and went to sleep, thankful that the world gave them a night off.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lita woke up feeling good. She stretched and hit hard muscle. Opening one eye, she found Gaige on his side with his head cocked up on his arm.

“Hello, sleepyhead.” His voice rolled over her. It was a reminder that he woke her twice last night to make love to her.

“How long have you been up?” She ran her hand down his chest, unable to resist the muscles and the small trail of hair below it.

“I’ve been up for about ten minutes.”

“You should have woke me.”

“I would have, but watching you sleep was so much better.”

“Stalker,” she coughed into her hand.

“Hell, yeah, when it comes to you.” She tried to glower at him, but her lips refused. Instead, she smiled. Her heart was beating fast, and she wanted him, even though her pussy was waving a white flag.

“I want you again, but...”

“I’m a lot to get used to.” His cocky grin said it all. He was full of himself, and she couldn’t knock him down a notch because he deserved it.

“Self-assured and cocky.” She pushed on his chest, and he fell onto his back. A small laugh came because she knew that she couldn’t push him over, but he was committed to allowing her to feel strong. She leaned over him and kissed him. “What time is it?”

“Almost noon.”

“Darn it. We need a shower and then to show our face. They’re probably wondering about us.”

“I don’t think so, but Amanda may be. We need to be there for her.”

“Do you think she’ll be okay here?”

“I do, at least for a little while. We’ll get her accustomed to the world a little at a time. I think with Haru and Izzy, she’ll be fine.”

“Have you noticed that Haru treats Izzy like she’s a person?”

“I have and I’ve also noticed that Haru differs from the typical twelve-year-old boy. I’ve decided to follow his lead on this.”

“That probably makes sense. First one to the shower.” She took off running with Gaige behind her.

Gaige's hands were washing her back when the last dream Lita had, hit her in the solar plexus. "Hell, and Damnation."

"What?" Gaige directed one of the spray nozzles at her back, making her groan in pleasure.

Sable and I went to school with twins. It was always a running joke between us that everyone around our college thought that they were sleeping together, although they were identical. They're missing or they were. That's who I was going to track down when I got into that accident. They're different. I'm not exactly sure how, but I knew if I could get in touch with them, they'd have Sable's back and now mine."

"What do you know?"

"This is all conjecture. I'm not used to paying attention to my dreams. Someone kidnapped them to be the latest victim in a sacrifice."

"Was it the same person who went after you or the one who went after Sable?"

"No, this was after Roger died, and it doesn't feel like the female after me."

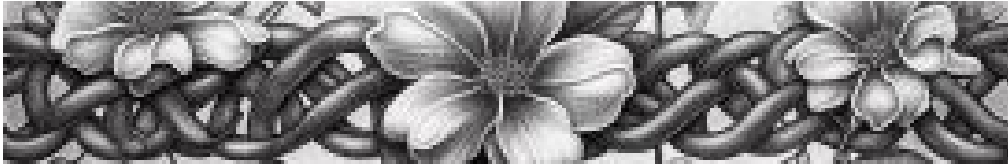
"So, there's another serial killer on the loose."

"Why can't anything be easy?"

"You said someone found them?"

"Yeah, but they're still trapped in a hell in their mind and have no idea where they're at." Hell, and damnation. Why can't anything be easy? Was that the second time she asked

that question? It bore repeating if it was. Hold on, we're coming for you after we take care of whoever is trying to kill me.



“We’re just going to hand them over to the FBI?” Parker was incensed. He risked his life to save them and now an alphabet soup government agency was going to swoop in and take them away.

“I don’t trust them in the hospital here.” One twin looked like she was going to wake, but didn’t. Casper was as concerned as Parker, but he knew this was a secret agency within the force and they knew what was happening. If they were requesting the twins, then they would have the right personal to care for them.

“We’ll get updates and reports on them.”

“Right, because those assholes like to keep norms up to date on their activities.”

Parker wasn’t wrong. He just didn’t know that they weren’t norms and if they gave Casper problems, he’d just walk through the walls and get the information he needed.

“Trust me, Parker. I’ve got this.” Parker nodded and looked at the two twins they had covered in shrouds. He sighed and sat back, waiting for Casper’s contact to reach the park where they were lying low.



“There you are.” Amanda threw her arms around Lita’s waist and held on tight.

Damn, she felt bad. Amanda needed her and Gaige. They were the only ones who went through that hell with her and could understand her story.

“I’m sorry to leave you on your own with my family. They’ll love you the way me and Gaige love you. I needed a night with no drama.” Lita wiped the tears that were coming from Amanda’s eyes.

“I know, Aunt Mae told me that when grownups are in love, they have to sleep in the same bed to let the world know how they feel and to give the finger to the bad guys. Did you know you could lift your middle finger, and it means all kinds of different things?”

“I see Aunt Mae is all about giving you an advanced education.” Amanda giggled and then stood back, showing off her new outfit and hair.

“I love your clothes. They’re too cute. What happened to your hair?” When they first met, she would have sworn Amanda’s hair was black. Then when she found her, it looked brown, almost light enough to be blonde. Now it was definitely auburn.

“Aunt Mae said the bad guys were doing something to it to change my looks. She worked on it until my roots and my hair matched. Do you like it?”

“No Hun, I love it.” There was no way she would have thought that wild child would turn into this beautiful young woman standing before her. She took a look at Gaige out of the corner of her eye and had to repress a laugh. He was flexing one of his beasts claws. Yep, he was doing the father thing without realizing it, but he didn’t have a shotgun, just a set of deadly claws. It was going to get exciting around here when the young boys realized there was a beautiful girl staying here.

“You’re beautiful. Did anyone mention school to you?” Lita took Amanda’s hand, walking her to the kitchen. She may have eaten, but Lita was starving. She had to laugh when she got there. There was a new picture on the wall of Haru, Amanda, and Izzy. It was so cute that she wanted one for her wallet.

“Look who decided to wake up.” Sable was leaning over the island. There were two plates of food sitting out.

“Yum, lasagna. You know, I think I’m going to elevate you to my best friend.”

“Please, woman. We both know that without me, you wouldn’t have any friends.”

“That may be true, but I won’t acknowledge it.” They shared a secret smile. Together, they had saved each other when they

looked like they were going to drown as young girls. “Doesn’t Amanda look good?”

Sable threw her head back and laugh. “Ask Aunt Mae just how good she looks. Uncle Bob was beating the boys back with a stick last night. It seems they all decided they wanted dessert at the Vintage when word got out. Amanda was there.”

“There go my quiet weekends,” Gaige groaned. He sat down to eat his troubles away by stuffing lasagna into his mouth.

“Food won’t do it, coz,” Xander said, walking into the kitchen. “I know, I’ve tried. This one,” he pointed to Haru, who followed him into the kitchen. “Is only twelve. Every time I take him into town, there is a passel of girls who suddenly need something close to us. There are high girl giggles and words like he’s so dreamy. Look at his eyes. I want eyes like his. Don’t forget his eyelashes, they’re so thick. Who looks at a boy’s eyelashes?”

“Girls,” Lita and sable said at the same time.

“On second thought, love. I’ll take a plate of that lasagna,” Xander sat heavily on the barstool, admitting defeat.

“They’ll be the death of us,” Gaige said between bites.

“I agree, but we’ll love every minute of it.” Xander and Gaige bumped fist and went back to eating.

“Amanda and Izzy, do you want to go outside?”

“Yeah, grownups are strange,” Amanda said.

Izzy nodded her head like she understood the question and wanted to go outside as well.

“Is it just me?” Lita asked when the kids were in the yard. “Or did that cat just answer a question asked to her?”

“Izzy has definite opinions on things from when it’s time to go to sleep, or what’s she eating for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. You heard me. She expects to be fed at all three meals and the cat wants a bath. That’s right, I bathe her like she’s a little girl, dry her off and then place her in a cat bed that is on a double bed. While you were messing around with dreams, I’ve been out shopping for a cat to decorate her room. You know what? I need lasagna too.” She cut a piece and joined the adults, making insane chatter and laughing.

“You know I had a thought,” Sable said. Lita and Xander groaned.

“Oh, my,” Lita said. “You know to run fast when Sable starts a conversation with those words. They have gotten me in so much trouble before.”

“Liar,” Sable laughed. “You were always leading me into trouble and then batting those gray eyes that looked innocent and got us out of trouble half of the time.”

“At least I got us out of trouble some of the time.”

“Un-ha. Remember that time you decided we needed to go skinny dipping in the local pond because you heard it was enchanted, but only if you were naked?”

“Didn’t you say you had a thought?” Lita quickly said, trying to redirect Sable’s thoughts.

Gaige leaned over and whispered in Lita’s ear. “We will talk about skinny dipping later.” She just groaned and encouraged Sable to say what was on her mind.

“Right, what I was thinking. I’m on to you.” She pointed her fork loaded with food at Lita.

“Bring that an inch or two closer and it’s mine.” Sable pulled her fork back, quickly protecting her food.

“I was thinking you and Gaige are getting along so well.” She snickered and made wiggling eyebrows at Lita. “Maybe when we hunt down Zuri and Zena, they might want to meet some of Xander’s other cousins.”

“I cannot wait to see their faces when they realize you’re trying to play matchmaker. Didn’t you get enough of that in college?”

“Not with those two.” Sable shook her head, thinking about it.

“Do they like men?” Gaige asked.

“They love men,” Lita answered. “But I haven’t met one, yet the twins don’t eat up and spit out. That’s why people speculate that they were lesbian twins. They aren’t, but honestly, if you’re not completely legit. Stay away from them.”

“Or if you’re two sweet. They were dating a pair of twins once and dropped them. Why? Because they were two sweet,

and the twins were scared they would hurt them. They're kind of different, and that's why I think they may be perfect for two of your cousins."

"Good luck with that," Gaige said. "I don't think any of them are interested in long-term relationships. They wouldn't date your friends because they won't want to hurt their relationship with you or Xan."

"No biggie, it was just a thought."

Lita took one look into Sable's green eyes and knew she was plotting.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Lunch is over,” Gaige said, watching Lita.

“And Amanda is outside having fun with Haru and Izzy, just saying.” Lita’s smile lit up the room they were sitting in. They had come to the room that Lita thought could be their family living room. They were on the floor talking about what would look nice in the room they were sitting in. And wondering if one of the smaller bedrooms would become Amanda’s room, or would it be better to leave her around Haru and Izzy? It’s not like they weren’t all in the same house.

“All of this planning is making me tired. I usually buy what’s convenient and put it wherever I think it looks nice.”

Lita was going to call B.S. on that, but it would wait for later. Gaige had an excellent eye for detail, even if she thought his color sense was a little off.

“I’m feeling tire too. Let’s call it sluggish, and we should definitely take a nap while the kids are playing.” Gaige popped

up putting a lie to the words he was tired and helped Lita off the floor.

He took her hand and led her to the bedroom. She took her clothes off and threw them in the hamper she borrowed from Sable. They had to do some shopping for the bedroom. That was a must. She turned around to find him taking her body in with appreciative eyes, but he was still dressed.

“Chop, chop. There’s no telling how much time we have before Amanda and Haru are knocking on our door. I think it’s time to learn what parents all over the world have learned.”

“The art of the quickie,” Gaige said.

“Well done. Although now that we have a teenager or are claiming her as ours until someone comes for her. I wonder why women even have children when they know they’re going to be surviving on quickies for eighteen years.”

“Who knows, but I’m betting a child with your eyes and smile would be worth it.” Lita stumbled back, those words catching her off guard, but now she’d could see a toddler that looked like her and Gaige and her heart was trying to burst out her chest. That’s why they did it. Could anything be better than a child that held your heart in their hands?

“I see what you mean. Now get undressed. Our child is somewhere between fourteen and sixteen, and I don’t want to explain why the birds and the bees do more in bed than sleeping.”

He started taking off his clothes and laughing. That lying in the bed to show their love is going to haunt Aunt Mae one day.”

“From your mouth to God’s ears.” Lita stopped talking because she knew why Gaige was staring at her. His body was phenomenal. Everyone had a certain type and Gaige was hers. She reached out and took his hand, drawing her over to the bed.

“Do you know what I keep seeing?”

“Tell me wildcat.”

“You sitting on the edge of the bed with your legs spread. This time you’re not wearing those sexy, silky boxers.”

He went over to the bed, flexing his ass cheeks. They were round like an apple, and she wanted to bite them. The more she was around Gaige, the more in the gutter her mind went and didn’t care. Gaige sat on the bed, spreading his legs wide. She licked her lips. This was for him, but she’d get a lot of enjoyment out of it too.

She leaned over him, her hands braced on his shoulders as she kissed him. Her tongue invaded his mouth, dueling with his tongue. Lita loved the way his tongue tried to dominate her mouth, but this time she dueled him back so that she was in charge. She nibbled on his lips before exploring every crevice of his mouth and then pulling back to lick and nip down his cheek until she reached his neck. She bit him on the base of his neck and then covered the spot with sweet kisses. An oral fixation never turned her on before, but now she wanted to bite

him and lightly score his skin. He was hers and she wanted to place her claim all over his body. She started kissing down until she reached his chest. His nipples were calling her name, and she sucked one of them into her mouth.

Could she get high on the whisky taste of him? It would be worth it to know she could get high off her male. He was hers and soon they would finish their bonding ceremony. Mates for life.

She kissed down his chest until she was on her knees between his legs.

“Holy hell,” Gaige’s voice was guttural as she played with his bellybutton with her tongue. The fingers on one hand were playing with the black fur on his chest and her other hand was sliding up and down his impressive erection.

“Baby, you don’t have too...” She pinched his abs, and he shut up. No one took wildcat’s toys away from her. She’d giggle, but her tongue was working hard.

“You’re making me feel so good about how you’re touching me.”

He hadn’t felt anything yet. She kissed down his body until his cock that was growing longer took all her attention. She caressed it, her tongue licking her lips in anticipation.

“My poor beauty,” she whispered to his cock. “Did you think I was neglecting you? Never.” She placed her tongue on the head, swiping up a drop of pre-cum. A sound of pleasure came from her.

Gaige's body trembled, feeling the heat of her tongue on the tip of his cock. Lita placed one hand on his balls and began playing with them. First, she caressed and rolled them through her fingers, watching Gaige's blue-green eyes to see what he liked. Then she gently pulled on them. The catch in his throat encouraged her. While she played with his balls, her other hand was walking up and down his length and then sliding down his cock like it was her own sliding board. Deep breaths came out of bared teeth. God, he responded beautifully to her touch.

Her mouth went to his balls, sucking one in. The hand he had in her hair clenched, holding her tightly as she worshipped at his shrine. The feel and taste of his ball in her mouth was making her hot. One of her hands drifted to her pussy. Gaige knew it because she could hear him suck in a swift breath and sniff the air. He could smell her honey flowing with need.

She took his other ball into her mouth and sucked on it, rolling her tongue around it. She caressed and loved on it. He was hers, and she'd always be able to play with him while she was making love. She wanted to make love to his balls for days. There was that whisky taste that she was becoming addicted to, but there was a hint of musk and salt between his legs, and she would crave that soon enough. Now she wanted his cock in her mouth. The desire was becoming too powerful for her to put off much longer.

She slurped on his ball as it popped out of her mouth. Gaige let out a needy growl as his fingers scratched her scalp before pulling her hair tight.

“Wildcat, your mouth.” She grinned wide licking her lips.

“So, you like my mouth.: Her voice was a little guttural and it would be more when she tried to attack the monster between his legs.

“Baby, I know I’m long and thick.”

“Shh, if you don’t have anything good to say, say nothing at all. Didn’t your mom teach you that?” She wasn’t looking at him now.

Her hand was wrapped around the monster he called a cock, and she was staring at it. Her saliva was flowing, and she was licking her lips. His cock was secreting pre-cum, but she’d bet a paycheck that it was the kind that would make her mouth wide enough to take him. She tried to deep throat him. Wait, nope, she wasn’t going to try that, not for the first time with him in her mouth. There had to be a ‘So, you want to deep throat your man’ book out there somewhere. Probably on the Amazon.

She took the head of his cock in her mouth, sucking on it. His pre-cum slid down her mouth, tasting like whisky while it made her throat tingle. She sucked harder and Gaige groaned with pleasure. His hand tightened in her hair as she took more of him down her throat. It was slow, inch by inch. Her cheeks puffed out before she started bobbing her head. No, she wouldn’t deep throat him, but she’d taken in more inches than she thought she could.

She sucked and bobbed over his cock, saliva flowing out of her mouth to make it a little easier. One hand was on the

length she couldn't take into her mouth. Her hand quickly moved up and down his cock while her other hand was playing with her slit. Her clit was thick and throbbing, and her pussy was weeping with her honey.

“I want some of that when you come.” Gaige's voice was like a rock slide it was so deep.

She nodded on his cock, not wanting to stop to talk. She moved her mouth off his cock to lick it. Her saliva making it easier for her hand to tighten around his cock sliding up and down as she took the rest of his cock into her mouth. Her movements were becoming faster and jerkier. Gaige was moaning and growling as he took control of her movements using the hand in her hair. She let her body go loose and went with him.

When he started fucking her mouth, she was ready to pass out from the pleasure. She tightened her mouth around his cock when she felt his balls draw up.

“Lita,” he growled.

She tightened her lips around him. His hips jerked up and his balls pumped his seed into his hard dick. It came gushing out down her throat and out of her mouth. He was a fount of cum, and she swallowed it as fast as possible. When the hand in her hair tightened and he fell back onto the bed wrung out, she finished herself off. One of her hands went to her clit, pulling on it while the other hand dipped several fingers into her pussy, working hard and fast until she cried out with pleasure. Her hand was covered with her honey.

Gaige sat up and took her fingers into his mouth, licking them clean, and then he sucked and licked on her hand. When he was done, he drew her to the bed to lie by his side.

“I think I could use that nap now.”

She could only laugh. She had tangled with the beast. An hour or two of sleep would be perfect right now. Gaige kissed her. It was sweet and simple and did she dare to say it was full of love.

“Shower?” he asked.

“Naw, we’ll just be crusty and stuck together when we wake.”

He laughed. “I can work with that.”

She closed her eyes as Gaige threw the cover over them.

The power of sleep it was a beautiful thing. Her sweet dreams turned into nightmares. There was bitter laughter chasing her down corridors through the dream world. It was the woman who wanted her dead. That bitch had to die.

“I’m coming for you.” She was ripped out of the dream when Xander’s wards were rocked, and a loud sound echoed through the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“**W**hat’s happening?” Lita screamed, her hands covering her ears.

“Someone is attacking Xander’s wards. I’ll be adding to his wards later, since we’re going to be living here. They can’t get in. I think that she wants to make sure we know your life is in danger. That shower will come in handy now.” They peeled themselves away from each other and the sheet that had the nerve to stick to them like glue.

“Next time, we should reconsider showering before sleeping.” It came out casually, like she wasn’t trying not to freak out. Who was this woman who felt like she was bad enough to attack them on their own ground?

She jogged to the shower following Gaige. She needed a name and then a list of what this woman was capable of. That was the only way she was going to defeat her.

“You’re thinking,” he said once they were in the shower and they washed the first time. There would be a second time

before she got out.

“We need her name. Then we can track her down and take the fight to her. I also want to know if she is working alone or with someone. I think it’s too much of a coincidence that someone came after Sable, and now me. Then I find out that the twins were attacked. It’s almost like someone is trying to distract us. Does that make any sense?” “I’d say no, except I’m inclined to listen to what you say. If this is a distraction, what is the main event and who is behind it?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t believe in coincidences. We have to deal with this woman first.: Gaige placed a liberal amount of soap in his hands and began washing her. She sighed, closing her eyes. His hands on her were always a treat, even in the midst of the world falling apart. They lingered as long as they thought they could get away with it before getting out and showering. The real world was calling their names.

“Everyone still alive?” Gaige called when they left their bedroom.

Lita didn’t think it was funny, but she understood his need to bring some light into the dark that was creeping around him.

“We’re not the ones who didn’t leave the bedroom when all the drama went down,” Xander replied.

“Yes, they’re still alive, and at least one of them still has a smart mouth.” Gaige snarked back. Lita shook her head. Everyone dealt with danger differently.

“I’m making breakfast. Are you hungry?” Sable asked as Lita got closer to the kitchen.

They had slept all night long? She was more tired than she realized.

“Xander looked at the wards. He’s waiting to do a second check with Gaige.”

“I’m starved, Sable,” Gaige said. “We’ll be back in time for breakfast. Xan let’s go look at those wards. I want to reinforce them.”

“We should have done that from the beginning.”

“I know, I was distracted.” They left out of the kitchen door.

“Sable.”

“Lita, stop. This was going to happen no matter where you were. I’m thankful that you were here. If you’d been in your old apartment, you’d have been wide open to any threat.”

Lita sat at the counter and let those words flow over her. Sable was right. What she wasn’t saying was that if she been staying in her old place, she’d be dead and anyone in the surrounding apartments would be dead as well. This woman didn’t care about collateral damage. It was only because of Haile and Dom, along with Sable and Xander, that everyone got out of the coffeehouse.

“They stole a baby from her mother and tortured her.” This woman may not have been involved with that, but she knew it was happening. At least, she knew in the end and didn’t do

anything to stop it. Demented and psycho were not chilling enough to describe her.

“I have to find out what her name is. I know you don’t need a name to kill someone. In this case, I think the name is the first step to getting closer to her.”

“Can you really kill her?”

“What do you mean?”

“Roger was coming after me, and I wanted him dead. I think about it a lot and if I’m honest, I don’t think I could kill him even after knowing what he did to all those other women. Would I have ended up as a sacrifice because I couldn’t kill? If it hadn’t of been for Xander.” She slumped against the island.

“I think you can kill Sable, but never with your hands. Your command over the plants of the earth will be what you will use if you have to take someone out. I think Xander was supposed to be with you as not only your mate, but as your protector.”

“I don’t know if I could shoot a gun or run a knife through someone’s heart. In the dream world. I could do it. It sounds like a subtle shift, but it isn’t. Plants are your playground, dreams are mine. I have no idea what I can do in that world because I’ve been too busy fighting for my life every time I enter it. The thing is, if you come for me there, I will not run. I’ve proven that to myself multiple times. Careful what you wish for and where you want your drama to play out.”

Sable nodded and pushed herself up. “I better get breakfast started or there will be a house of starving people. “Hungry

children,” Sable shivered. “They scare me.”

Lita laughed and got up. “I’ll help.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Please, I need some normalcy in my life.”

“Okay, let’s go for pancakes, eggs, bacon, and sausage, as well as grits.”

“Mmm, I like the way you think.”



Casper got out of his SUV cautiously looking at the townspeople, who were not only up but walking around on a Sunday morning. This reminded him of the second or third scene of a zombie movie when the drug that would kill everyone was already deployed and the survivors were waiting to devour you.

Parker pulled his car into the space next to Casper’s. “What’s happening?”

“No idea. I was thinking it reminds me of a zombie movie.”

“Back, you creature of hell.” Parker used both hands using his fingers to make the sign of the cross.

“I take it zombie movies don’t do it for you?”

“Nope, I’ve been forced to watch a few by well-meaning people. The nightmares that follow aren’t worth it.”

Casper nodded in sympathy and agreement. Zombies couldn't hurt him, even if they were foolish enough to target him. That might be why they didn't freak him out.

“What are we going to do about them?” Parker pointed at the people walking down the street.

“Nothing. There's no ordinance that says they can't roam the streets, even though it's creepy. They aren't hurting anyone or doing property damage and they also aren't hurting themselves. Let them walk. It will tire them out.”

Parker nodded, agreeing, but there was something about the jerky random walking and the blank eyes that suggested more was coming. They left the zombie's pacing the sidewalk while they walked the steps to get to the police station.



“Gaige say what?” She asked in her best tell me you're not crazy voice.

“I think if we want to know that name of the woman coming after you, we have to find it in the dream world.” Gaige was helping Xan, and Haru clear the table and then wash the dishes. Xan, had a philosophy that worked for him. If you cooked, then he cleaned and vice versa. He was raising Haru in it and was now cajoling Gaige into his way of thinking.

It was nice to see the woman take a break while they did the dishes and wiped down the counters and the stove.

“What exactly are you saying? All we need to do is close our eyes and enter the dream world and everything will be revealed to us?”

Lita was having a hard time believing that, and Gaige couldn't help but agree with her. It wouldn't be that easy, and they could fail or die. He didn't have another solution and there was only one place he knew of that they could find the name of the person hunting her.

“You can't enter the dream world without being known. Yes, that means the dreamworld knows everyone from the newborn to the person on the cusp of dying. It knows it all, and it's where we need to go if we want a name.”

“We've been there several times and no neutral dream person has given us a name.” The tiredness in her voice and the slump of her shoulders said this was too much.

Gaige looked her over with a critical eye and didn't like what he saw. Her eyes were dragging and droopy with small black circles saying she wasn't getting enough sleep. At least not enough uninterrupted sleep.

“Maybe we should take a nap first.”

Lita shook her head. “I don't think any amount of sleep is going to make it better.”

“She's right,” Amanda said. She was standing quietly against one of the few walls in the kitchen. Gaige had forgotten she was there. Izzy was sitting at attention beside Amanda's legs.

“There's a drain on Lita's energy.”

“How do you know that?” Gaige asked. Lita was in no mood to ask follow-up questions.

“I can see it, but there’s nothing I can do to stop it. If I was older or had been taught to manage the well that lives within me.” Amanda shrugged, but it was obvious from the way tears kept welling up in her eyes and the way she sniffed that she wasn’t as unaffected as she was trying to pretend.

“Thanks Amanda. I was beating myself and saying that I was lazy, and I needed to make myself get up and go, go, go. It’s nice to know that it’s not me.”

Amanda was across the room in a flash hugging Lita. She was trying to force some of her energy and vitality into Lita.

“Stop it,” Lita whispered in her ear. “You’ll need all of your energy for whatever is coming next. Go play with Haru and Izzy. I’ll be fine.”

Amanda nodded and backed away, but it was obvious she didn’t believe Lita.

The girl wasn’t dumb, that was for sure. Amanda gave Lita a small, mustered up smile before she went outside with her friends.

“Drink this.” Sable placed a cup of hot tea in front of her.

“What’s in it?”

“It’s tea made of natural plant extract. I extract the natural essence of the plant myself. That way, I know it’s pure and powerful. It will help to restore some of your energy. The

word being some, but it may be the difference between you living to fight another day, or not.”

Lita picked up the cup and started sipping. There were a thousand questions about the tea that she could ask. This wasn't like picking up something in a health food store or a new age witch apothecary. Sable made this for her, and she trusted Sable with her life.

Kick in, Lita silently prayed. She needed all the energy she could get, since she could feel herself dragging. Now that she knew it wasn't all in her head, she could feel the effects of the drain even if she couldn't see the drain itself.

She took one look at Gaige sipping from a cup of tea and knew the drain was affecting him, too. Of course, it was. They were one.

They were going back in. She closed her eyes and prayed for strength and energy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“**W**hat’s the plan again?” She asked after she’d changed into a pair of comfy pajamas and laid down. Gaige was playing with the gas fireplace. She wanted to hug and kiss Xander for putting one in their bedroom. It made her wonder what else he had in his house that she didn’t know about. That was a later thought.

Gaige climbed onto the bed next to her. The fireplace was already taking the chill off the room. That chill could be because of how her energy was being attacked and literally suck from her body.

“We know that there’s a dreamcatcher and the sands of time in the dreamworld corridors. One of them or both together could give up the name of the person attacking you. Or there could be a third object imbued with the power to speak to us. I don’t know, but the only place we can get her name is in the dreamworld.”

She was fighting a battle against her eyes closing. Sleep, beautiful sleep, was what she wanted. If she didn’t wake up

from her sleep, would it be so bad? Would the world somehow be less without her in it?

This is why she wouldn't give up the ghost and go to sleep. The voice in her head wasn't hers. Oh, it was smooth and made her feel good, but it wasn't her voice and she refused to be controlled by some bodiless third party who was nothing but a voice in her head.

"Let's do this." Gaige smiled at her before reaching out to hold her hand. They wanted to enter the dream world together, neither felt confident enough that the enemy couldn't separate them on entry.

Lita took a deep breath and the essence of who she was flowed over her while rising. A darkness came for her. With a gasp and a curse word, she hit the dream realm, where darkness was once again her friend.

She stood still, aware that the feel of Gaige's hand in hers was the only thing keeping her steady.

"Lita?"

"I'm here." She tightened her hand around his and felt it when he walked closer to her.

"That was close. Whoever tried to interrupt our coming here also tried to separate us."

That's why she hit darkness and felt like she was being torn apart.

"We survived it." Together they were stronger and wouldn't give in to whatever this woman's tricks were.

“What next?”

“We need light. Hold still.” She felt something warm where their hands connected. Soon there was light coming from his body, reminding her of the glowworm she wanted as a child.”

“You didn’t do that last time.”

“I couldn’t. The stronger our connection becomes the unique abilities I didn’t know I had are coming to the surface.”

She took that in, realizing it was time for them to make the ultimate commitment. The corridor was bright enough for her to see in. It wasn’t anything to write home about. It looked like a long corridor with white walls and black flooring. She was still holding onto Gaige’s hand when he chose an arbitrary direction and started walking.

“What do we need to do to finish the bonding to become mates?”

“The last piece is the blood exchange. Our hearts and souls have already begun binding themselves together. The blood exchange will make our mating permanent.” They walked in silence as she thought about that.

Those fangs that she saw the first time they made love flashed into her mind. Did he want to bite her with them? Was it all a little to Dracula sounding for her to take?

“How do we exchange blood?” He turned his head, opened his mouth and sure enough, those fangs she’d seen were on display for her.

“You want to bite me with those and drink my blood?”

“A little. Your blood needs to be inside of me, marking you as my mate. Then I will excrete a substance through my teeth that will bind us together. Then you will do the same.”

“Wait, I don’t have fangs and there isn’t some scary claiming substance inside of me.”

“There will be.”

She had a lot of thinking to do before they made it out of here. Lita wanted to clarify what Gaige was saying but ended up placing her hand on his chest to stop them from moving or talking. There was a scurry of footsteps that were too small to be a cat or a small dog and too big to be mice. That left her with rats, and she hated rats they scared her.

“It had nothing to do with the fact that her parents dropped her off at an abandoned house once and she was the target of rat’s that bite. Nope, nothing to do with that. She was lying, but sometimes lying to yourself was helpful. After that incident, her aunt and uncle took her in. That said, enough was enough. That didn’t help the emotional trauma she lived through.

“Rats.” Gaige gave her a look, asking how she could be so sure. It was a sound she would never forget.

She nodded her head to emphasize what she said. “We have to leave. They are nasty little creatures that nibble at your fingers and toes. They carry disease and will gang up on you and kill you with their bites.” She wasn’t sure of the last part, but it sounded feasible to her. They needed to leave now! What part of what she was saying that he didn’t get?

“We can’t leave, Lita. We started a quest, and we have to finish it.”

“What?” That was nice and calm.

“Look around you. What do you see?”

She wanted to snap at him and say nothing, but she stowed her temper and really started looking around. The walls in the corridor were either non-existent or some bland kind of white. They were glowing faintly with a blue aura.

It took her several minutes to realize that something was different about where they were. This was the normal corridor that she’d become used to.

“Blue, the walls are glowing blue.”

“The color for quest. Not just blue but navy-blue. Different colors or saturation of colors mean different things. We came here on a quest to find out the name of the person attacking you. The corridor has granted us permission to search.”

“But the rats.”

“If we leave now, we will never have permission again for this quest. It’s up to you? What do you want to do?”

Lita stood there with her mouth open listening to the sound of rats scurrying around. For a minute, she would have sworn they were at her feet. Then she let out a screech loud enough that she hoped the mysterious whoever ears started bleeding.

“Let’s do this,” she said when she could finally get herself together.

“We keep walking.” Her ears worked perfectly, and they were going toward the rats not away from them.

“Can we walk in the other direction?” There was just a bit of a hopeful lilt to her voice. The aura in the hallways was becoming a deeper blue when they moved towards the rats and her heart was pounding with the knowledge that Gaige was gonna say no. She was going to challenge him anyway, but hellfire and damnation.

“No.”

Well, that was short and sweet. “Why not?”

“Because the answer we want isn’t in that direction.”

She moved her head like a bobble head and murmured under her breath. Of course, it isn’t in that direction. Why should any of this be easy for her? She could see Gaige fighting a smile out of the corner of her eye. Let’s see how he feels when he doesn’t get any nookie tonight. She crossed her hands over her breasts in a display of just how unhappy she was.

You would think that whoever controls these corridors wouldn’t let a woman like that in. She didn’t know if they were sentient objects or little alien people. They looked like the typical Martian.

“When we bar one person, where do we draw the line?” Lita stumbled over her two feet. Did she hear that or was it her unconsciousness calling her out?

“Did you hear something?”

“Beside the pitter patters of rat feet?”

“Yes, besides that.” Darn infuriating man. This was not a laughing situation.

“No, I don’t hear anything. If you did, I would pay attention to it.”

She nodded. She’d heard those words like someone was standing next to her talking. Unfortunately, she couldn’t hold on to her anger.

“When we say someone was no longer allowed in our corridor. If they are banned. Where do we stop? Can, we ban someone on the gender or their non-gender. What about race or creed or simply for what they believe in? Could they be banned because of who their friends were or their parents? What if someone thought you would turn to the evil side in ten years? Should they ban you?”

One question led to another until there were thousands of questions in her mind. In the end, they all led to one question.

What was the first book banned? When was it banned and why? It seemed to her that book banning was the start of saying ‘sorry, you can’t come in.’ She could be wrong. Still, she was disgusted with herself about wanting to keep someone away from their calling simply because of her hatred of rats.

“Growing up.”

“She learns fast.”

“There is hope for her yet.”

Those were three separate and distinct voices. I kept my mouth shut and my thoughts to myself. No need to piss off the

corridor gods.

Gaige coming to an abrupt stop, brought Lita back to the here and now. The color in the hallway was pulsing an intense dark blue. It could be mistaken for black. We were standing in front of a door, one that I didn't want to go into. I could hear the rats, not just the scurry of them, but their blood thirsty cries. They sounded like they hadn't eaten in years. My toes curled up in my shoes and my fingers were already throbbing at the thought of fighting them off.

"Is this the only way in?" She wasn't trying to be a badass or show that there was no one braver than her. Fear, like a heavy hand, pressed on her heart, making it beat out of rhythm. Her soul clung desperately to the thought that she could turn around. It was the thought of Amanda, and Gaige, Sable, Xander, Haru, and the cousins as well as her aunt and uncle. They gave her the courage to step up to the door.

If she died in this room, their lives would be spared, but if she turned around like the scaredy cat, she was beginning to believe she was, then the woman, whoever she was, would be able to attack the people Lita loved. She might even kill them, and that was something she couldn't live with.

"I'm ready."

Gaige gave her a big smile, like getting eaten by thousands of rats was on his to do list. "I know you are."

She opened the door. If they ran out, she wanted to put herself in the way of danger, not the man she loved. Hellfire and damnation. She didn't need that little nugget of truth right

then. Would she ever be able to tell him before she died? She pushed it down and continued to turn the handle.

What was the last thing she ate? It was an idyll thought as her stomach tried to rebel at seeing the room filled with rats. She couldn't see any space to step between them.

The halfhearted thought that this was all in her mind took off with wings of Satan because no angel would have made her think this was a trick.

“Gaige.” She choked on his name. The rats were turning their little heads to look at her. They trapped her in their beady eyes. She was going to die. “Babe, you should stay out here.” Those words cost her, but she didn't want him to suffer for whatever thing she had done to bring her here.

The rats weren't swarming around her, but she could feel the shield that kept them away from the door. All bets were off when she walked into that room.

“Lita.”

“No!” Damn it, she was crying. Big bad dream weaver her ass. “I won't have you hurt; I'll never have you hurt if I can help it.”

She crossed the threshold, and the door slammed behind her. A mass of furry bodies overpowered her even as she tried to fight, assaulting her. They took her to the floor where darkness consumed her, and pain became her friend.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Are the natives getting nervous?” Parker asked Casper. He was standing in the doorway watching the zombie like jerking and twisting of body parts.

“This is bothering you?” Casper asked.

“It passed bothering me several hours ago. I’m firmly in the realm of terrified and you should be too. One bite and this town could become infected. They’ll call in the National Guard to kill everyone. Women, men, and children and then they’ll set fire to everything to stop the rampant spread of infection. We’ll become a footnote in history of what not to do when there’s a zombie uprising.”

“There will be no zombie uprising.” Casper raised his voice when he noticed several officers standing around the front desk as white as a ghost. “They’re okay, and so are we. The national guard is not coming, and no one is going to burn our town to the ground.”

Now to deal with Parker.

“Deputy?” Officer Anderson’s voice interrupted his thought.

“What’s up Anderson?”

“We just got a call that something strange is happening at the bank. Do you want one of us...”

“No, stay here, monitor for any strange behavior. Call me at once if anything changes.” There were sighs all around. At this rate, he might make deputy of the year. Hell, they might buy him a Christmas present.

“Parker, you’re with me.”

“Take me into the belly of the lion’s den. Why don’t you?” He muttered, following Casper out the door with one last longing look at the safety of the police station.

Casper waited until they got in the car to take Parker to task.

“I need you to back me up, Parker. The men are scared and scared men do stupid things.”

“They have a right to be scared.” Parker didn’t yell. He felt like that only made things worse. He was yelling now.

“We are going to operate under the assumption that nothing is wrong unless proven otherwise.” Parker slouched in his seat and gave a nod of his head.

His once nice quiet town was baffling, and he couldn’t get a bead on it. It was like there was a darkness that seethed below their feet. It was always there, but well hidden. Now it was pouring out in a bid to make itself known.

Casper pulled in front of the bank and parked. They each put their hands on their weapons as they left the car. Normally, there was a lot of coming and going from the bank. Some town's people used the bank as the perfect place to catch up as they did their banking. It was eerily silent today.

Casper eased the door open to find the bank was filled with people, but they were all standing there looking catatonic. Casper and Parker's eyes and heads swiveled from one person to another like a play was going on. One he and Parker hadn't been invited to.

"Coleson," Casper called out. He was an officer who had pulled the simple job of guarding the bank after forty years on the force.

"No idea, deputy. It was like every other day, and then people seemed to go into a trance. When they wake up, it's like a bad comedy show." He nodded towards the two men who were waking up.

The bank was small with a lot of wood from when it was first built close to a hundred years ago. They've done some updates to the vault and the main counter where business took place. It wouldn't hold a candle to a city bank.

"I hate you," one man growled, taking Casper's attention from the dim beige walls and the equally dim beige floors. Someone tried for color coordination.

"Randy, what are you talking about? We've been friends since grade school."

“You were never my friend.” Randy’s cheeks were red, and his eyes were bulging like he may have an aneurysm. You stole my thunder and then you stole my girlfriend and everything else in my life until the final coup de grâce. I wanted that job. Because of you, I’m desolate on the street.”

“You bastard, you never wanted Cindy, and we both know that job would have held you back. Desolate my ass, you drove up in here in a damn Mercedes. You pretended to want Cindy to make her appealing to me, and you did the same with the job. Now I’m stuck with three rug-rats that should have been yours.”

Dave and Randy went after each other with their fists, intending to beat the other to death. Parker jumped between them, taking several deep scratches for his trouble. He finally pulled them apart, and they went back to looking catatonic.

“That’s what’s been going on,” Coleson said, answering the unasked question. “Ten minutes ago, it was those two Clara and Angie. Before that it was Fred and Myrtle. They decided they were getting a divorce, and each got into it over who would get the divorce first. Do you think it’s long repressed anger that’s finally coming to the surface?”

“Do I think Myrtle is going to divorce Fred? She is vicious and will cut a bitch who gets too close to her man. Ask me how I know,” Casper said.

“Have you ever seen anything like this?” Parker asked.

“Maybe, never on such a wide scale. I saw a delivery truck parked out front. Go liberate the dolly for me and bring it

inside”

Parker snickered at the word liberate but went to do as he was asked.

“Coleson, pick up anyone you can carry and take them outside. Let’s try to keep them as closely arranged as possible. Start with the children.”

“Parker, we’re going to put people on the dolly. Two or three, depending how big they are.” Casper took a couple of pictures not only for prosperity’s sake, but he wanted to get the group together like they were now.

Moving the children turned out to be easy. It was harder to move the adults for several reasons. One, there was hand placement, but also, they may be moving them like their mannequins. But they were people and deserved to be treated with respect. It was hard work even with the dolly, but eventually they got everyone into the parking lot, including the tellers.

“What do we do now?” Parker asked, looking around at roughly thirty people.

“I know they have several long hoses. You and Coleson find them and set them up.”

Casper waited until they went in search of the hoses before he allowed the tight grip on his nature to loosen. He started looking for signs of a natural hallucinogen or mind manipulation. Neither rang true, but someone had definitely

done something to them. Whoever it was, gave off the same signature as the zombies people in front of the station.

He may have to make a quick call home to see what his family thought of this.

“Ready.” Parker handed him a hose.

Casper grinned, looking like the evil bastard he could be on occasion. “Let her rip. Soak them completely, the children as well.”

There was no response at first, but soon people were cursing up a blue streak. Casper kept going until they were hopping around threatening his life and the children were laughing and playing in the water. That’s when he called a halt to it.



“Mistress Lavina.” One of her men called, knocking timidly on the door.

“Don’t mistress me, imbecile.” She snatched the door open and then stopped, not wanting it to come off its hinges.

“What do you want?”

“I wanted to give you a report on what is happening in town.”

She pushed through the man at the door and entered her living room. “Pray tell, why am I interested in the games the town’s people play?”

“Because you set the test up.” A different man said. He was hiding in the kitchen to stay away from Lavina.

“Tomato, Tamato.” She waved them off. They are nothing except sheep to be slaughtered. “What happened to them? Especially the ones in the bank. I thought it was a bright and cutting edge idea.”

“The deputy and his men moved them outside and then dosed them with freezing water. None of them remembered what happened.”

“More’s the pity. This town could use a few good grudge matches.” She took a seat on the couch, crossing her legs at the ankles. “They’ll be there when I need them. For now, I’ll allow them to wallow in ignorance.” She stood and went to the wall of windows.

It was a beautiful day. She could see herself sunning on a boat with her bikini on and a parasol close enough to keep her from burning. She was too fair to be out in the sun without protection. The town’s people nor the sun were worth another thought. It was Lita who was the problem. She could call her a dozen of different names, some of which she was partial to. It didn’t matter.

Lita wanted her name, and it bothered her that Lita was doing the one thing that could reveal it. If they found her worthy. It bothered Lavina that she had never been found worthy in the dream world. Is that when she decided to burn it all down?

They accused her of stealing her power to enter the dream world instead of coming by it naturally and then growing it. There may be some truth to that, but she had power, and that was all that mattered. Soon she would have Lita's ability to weave. Then the dreamworld would be her personal playground. That brought a smile to her face. Once she got unlimited power to the dreamworld, things would change around here.

"I want to see Nate. Find out where he is." James practically ran from the room, leaving her alone with her bad attitude.

She could see herself controlling the dream world. It would be the perfect time to get revenge on those who discounted her and said she'd never be anything. She'd show them. The beauty of the dreamworld was that you could kill in there and make it look like natural circumstances.

'Oh, I'm so sorry. Your husband went to bed and never woke up. What a shame.' She'd be at every funeral gloating. You don't mess with Lavina Brooks and get away with it.

"Your car's ready, mistress." James said. He'd changed his clothes to those of chauffeur." Wait outside in the car for me, please." She had to bring out the manners when she was dealing with Nate. Best to get started early.

"Yes, mistress." He scurried off, leaving Lavina to stew over her name being known.

She was still stewing over her name being revealed. It wasn't like she was a fae. They couldn't use it against her. She spent

years protecting her name and now this little upstart thinks she has the rights to it.

“Scream my name while I’m torturing you, Lita. It will be the best orgasm I ever had.” She gave an evil grin. Too bad no one was there to see it.

James was in the driver’s seat with his cap at a jaunty angle. How could she forget when she gets mad that he and her other servants were beasts in bed?

The trip to Nate’s old boys’ country club didn’t take long. The valet was there, opening the door for Lita. James didn’t appreciate anyone driving the car. The valet wanted to do his job. She left them there to argue over who was parking her baby.

She walked into a foyer with elegant old chairs and two benches. There was a mirror over the side table pressed against the wall. Nate’s country club has a little of everything, including secret rooms. He had taken her to one of those before, and she swore on all that was holy. She wasn’t going back.

There was a hostess standing in front of the main dining room. If you looked out the wide windows, you would see some people golfing and other playing tennis or racquetball. Nate was sitting at the center table holding court.

“Lavina, baby. Come join me.” Nate called out.

She put on her sexy walk with desire shining from her eyes and made her way across the dining room floor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Nate.” Lavina leaned over to put a kiss on his cheek.
“Sir? Did you forget?” Nate gave her a smile saying get with the program.

Why was she with him again? It was because her plans for Rakes Forth were a compliment to his.

“Vamoose.” He shoed everyone at the table away then motioned for Lavina to take a seat facing him.

When she sat, he took her hand in his and kissed the back before kissing the palm.

“I missed you, baby girl.” Nate would never call her mistress, although he required her to call him sir.

“I’ve missed you too, sir. I’ve been busy playing with the locals.” She looked at the walls that displayed the pictures of influential people who’ve come here for a night or a week.

“I’ve gotten reports of what’s happening in town. Tell me all about it. I’m staying away from the sheriff and the station

while you play. Have you gotten anywhere?”

Lavina settled into her chair and told him everything she'd been up to.

“Tell me about Lita. As you know, her friend got away and the person out to kill her died. It wasn't a pretty death. I could try to bring him back, but it's more trouble than it's worth. There is more than one way to go about this. Speak.”

She told him about Lita and the dream walker at her side.

“It seems they are getting too big for their britches.” It was statements like that which made Lavina wonder how old Nate was. He looked thirty, but she knew better. He was old, maybe an ancient.

“She's trying to find out my name.” The frustration was thick in her voice.

“She can have it. There's nothing she can do with a name. Let's put our heads together and come up with some surprises for her.”



Lita was on her back fighting the rats who were biting her.

“Get up, girl.”

“Her name is Lita.” An unfamiliar voice said.

She felt the heavy weight on her body disappear along with the scurry of tiny paws. One eye opened cautiously, and the

other followed. She was in a room full of natural light. There were no windows or skylights.

“We may tell you our secrets later. Now, it’s time for you to get up. Our time is valuable, and we don’t wish to waste it on you? You’ve come to ask for a boon.”

Lita stood looking down at her clothes. They were ripped and torn. She was covered with rat bites. There was going to be an infection. Not gonna lie, she wanted to die. She shook her head and tried to square her shoulders. The rats would not defeat her.

“Heal her, so we can be finished with her.” A bright light covered her body, followed by warmth that seeped deep inside of her.

“How...what... where am I... who are you?”

“The young are so sweet with their inquisitive questions.” The being stepped out of the shadows.

Looking at him was more than she could take. There were angles she never associated with a living being. They were obviously living. She closed her eyes tightly against the sight.

“You can open your eyes now. You’re not ready for our natural form. This one will be comfortable for you to look at.”

She opened her eyes for a second time to see what looked like a man. Glamor. One day, she and Haru had a talk about the subject of glamor.

“This is a lot better, thank you.”

“Walk with us.” One man looked like he originated from Greek blood. The other looked like his ancestors were African. They both gave her a friendly smile before gesturing her to walk between them.

They left corridors behind and entered dreams. There was one of an older man dreaming of his wedding. They entered the dream of an infant maybe three days old. She dreamed of being born. The pressure and the fear of not knowing what was happening to her. Then her dream turned to her, placing her mouth on a nipple and warm food came. The child enjoyed the second dream.

“We protect this world. Humans need an outlet. In their dreams, they can be as violent as they want. They can also be studious or the world’s greatest lover. Sometimes it fails by encouraging the dreamer to play his or her fantasy in the waking world. It doesn’t fail as much as humans think. That’s not why we brought you here.”

“Our dream world has been keeping humans alive since the beginning of time,” The African said. “Many of the world’s inventions have started here as well as loving relationships. The thought of a child is first realized here. You can find both life and death in dreams. Why? Because this world is precariously balanced on the razor-sharp blade. One tilt to the right or left and everything crashes. We can’t let that happen. We won’t let it happen.”

They were silent as they walked through more dreams. A little boy tried desperately to get away from his abusive

parents. It broke her heart.

“You could help these little ones. Not all of them, but some by helping their parents. That’s the beauty of a dream weaver and the horror. You can take your ability and help them inside of their dreams and save their lives.”

“Or,” the Greek said. “You can use your abilities for evil, breaking the minds of all who dream.”

Lita shivered. She’d never been one to entertain evil or chaos. Now, it was there right in front of her. It shined brightly tempting her to the dark side. ‘Just one foot,’ it whispered seductively. Evil and chaos were a slippery slope. If she decided to take their hands, she knew she’d never be the same again. This felt like a gateway drug. Just one hit little girl and all your problems will disappear.

This wasn’t what she wanted, but if the person trying to kill her was to take her power away. She knew what she would do with it.

“No, that’s not who I am or who I want to be.” They were standing in a child’s bedroom. There was a glider the parents used to sit on when calming him down or putting him to sleep.

She’d always wanted a glider, but why buy one when she didn’t have children? That’s her story, and she was sticking to it. She sat in the glider and closed her eyes, allowing her dream to manifest.

“Beautiful.” They said together.

Lita stood, having forgotten where she was for a precious minute. She followed them out of the dreams and back to the corridor.

“To receive a boon from us, you must face your worst fear and come through on the other side.”

There went that boon. She did not come out on the other side.

“You must be willing to sacrifice yourself for the good of others.”

Well, that was the end of that. Lita was Lita centered. It was how she was raised until her aunt and uncle took her in.

“You made the decision to keep going when you knew what was waiting for you. It was a test,” the African said.

She would have loved their names, but she knew without asking it was a step too far.

They both started laughing. “You couldn’t pronounce our names if we gave them to you,” the Greek said.

“You’re right, asking our names would be a step too far,” the African said. “You protected your mate when you were sure that death was stalking you. For that and everything else that has happened in the corridor...”

“We find you worthy,” the Greek said.

“Name your boon Aelita Mintz.” This got serious fast.

There was only one thing she wanted. She wanted the name of the woman stalking her. With that knowledge, she was sure

she could even the playing field.

“I want the name of the person stalking me.”

They looked at each other, communicating silently before there was a decisive nod to their heads.

“Her name is Lavina Brooks,” the Greek told her.

“Heed my warning,” the African said. “Her ability to enter dreams and manipulate them was torn from many who now sleep.” It was the diplomatic way to say Lavina killed them. “Then she destroyed their essence so that they can never come back and demand what once belonged to them.”

Lavina Brooks was a nasty piece of work.

“There is someone waiting for you.”

They spun her around faster than had ever happened before. She stumbled, heading for a splat on the ground when a pair of muscular arms caught her.

“Gaige.” It was a soft sigh on a breath. The understanding that in his arms was where she wanted to be.

“I know her name.”

“Let’s go home. You can tell everyone at the same time.”

That sounded good. It felt like she ran a triathlon over the course of eight days. She was exhausted.



Lita woke up in bed. How long had she been here and was anything that happened real?

“You’re up, wildcat.”

She turned her head to see Gaige, who sprawled out on the bed like she was. She tried to ask a question, but her throat was too dry to get words out of.

“Take a sip. Not too much or the wrath of Haile will fall on us.” She took an experimental sip and then a bigger one.

“How long?”

“We were gone for two weeks and according to Haile when we got back, we slept eighteen hours”

“Two weeks, eighteen hours?” It was going to take some time to process it. “What do we do now?”

“We take a shower and try to look like the living and then we have a discussion about what you found.”

She nodded and went along with the plan. After eighteen hours of sleep, she shouldn’t be tired, but she was. The drag wasn’t just physical; it was emotional and mentally disabling. Every one of her movements needed to be thought out first. She felt like she couldn’t think, and her body wasn’t running on autopilot.

“Let me help you.” Gaige came around the bed and helped her stand. He would have carried her, but she looked like she needed to get herself to the shower under her own steam.

“I never thought I’d be so happy for a place to sit in the shower.” She managed a shaky smile, hoping Gaige wouldn’t see below it. “Any time I’m in the shower with you, it’s a good time.”

He stripped her efficiently and sat her on the bench, taking one of the shower heads off for them to use. He washed her hair and then her body, twisting and turning to be sure he got her clean.

“Sit right here and don’t move.” He quickly got himself together and then he was drying her off with a fluffy towel.

“I feel like I’m depending on you.” He placed her on the bed and was now going through her clothes for an easy to wear outfit.

“Why? This is part of what mates do for each other. I’ve watched my father worship the ground my mother stands on. I’ve also heard people talk about him being whipped. Some of those people are on their second and third marriage. It’s my honor as your mate to always take care of you. That means if you choose not to do the blood ritual, I will stand by your side until your days are over.”

“You really mean that, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“When this whole thing blows over, can we go furniture shopping?” She needed something to look forward to. Furniture shopping with her man would be great.

“Yes, and you can get anything you want.”

She'd noticed with Xander and now Gaige that money didn't seem to be an issue for them, and she wasn't going to say no.

Treat me like a queen. She stood and wrapped her hand around his arm. More like she clung to his arm. Her hand was never making it around.

“Let's go face the masses.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“We’re sitting at the table to eat.” Sable pointed to the seldom used table. It was flush with the wall and allowed the kitchen back door to open.

“God bless you, my child.” There was no way she was going to sit on one of the stools to the island. She could see herself going splat on the floor.

“Drink this and then you can have coffee.” Sable put the glass in front of her. “You were gone a long time. Both of you and I started to worry. Xander said time doesn’t flow there the same way it flows here.”

“He’s right. It felt like maybe I was there for a day, but not two weeks”. Anything could have happened to her.

“Nothing happened, and you were right where you needed to be.” Sable took away the glass that Lita chugged and replaced it with a cup of coffee and breakfast.

She handed out more plates and glasses of juice, with Haru and Amanda helping. They ate in silence, and then the men

cleared the table and did the dishes. After that they sent the children out to play.

“At the first sign of rain I want you back in the house,” Sable told them before she stepped out of their way.

“To have energy like that,” Lita mourned, feeling tired.

“It will come back. We’ll find what’s happening and put a stop to it.” She nodded, Gaige was always going to be there for her.

“Let’s take this to the living room.” Xander stood and led the way. They all got comfortable. Lita was almost on Gaige’s lap, he wrapped an arm around her keeping her in place

“Those who rule the corridor have a distinct feeling about what’s right and wrong. They tortured me with rats.”

“I’m so sorry.” Sable was up and pulling Lita into her arms before it registered to the people around her. They hugged for a while before Lita pushed Sable away to go sit with her mate while she sat with Gaige. This time, she was on his lap and refused to apologize to anyone about it.

“Her name is Lavina Brooks.” Lita allowed her body to crumple into Gaige’s. They had a name, but what was that going to do for her?

“Lavina, why is that name familiar?”

“That’s what I said, but I couldn’t place it.”

“Hold that thought. I’ll be right back.” Sable left the room while they sat and waited. It didn’t take that long before she

came back with their freshman high school yearbook.

“I haven’t seen that book in forever. I packed mine away in some boxes.”

“You need to move in already and unpack.” Yeah, she needed to do that, but one thing at a time.

“Maybe over the weekend. What are you looking for?” Sable was turning the pages fast. There was something she thought was hiding in their yearbook.

“Ah ha, I got it.” She handed the year book over to Lita.

“That’s her. It’s really her.” Lavina Brooks was two years ahead of them in high school. She was a nasty piece of work then and is the same now.

“I say we stalk her and give her the beat down when she’s alone.”

“My blood thirsty mate.” Xander kissed her.

“It’s not a bad idea,” Gaige said. “We can turn the tables on her. She might get the message and leave Lita alone.”

“I think she’s too far down the rabbit hole for her to think and process rationally. We could go to the police,” Lita said, hoping someone would say. That’s a great idea.

“What would you say? There’s a woman terrifying you in your dreams? Ma’am, has anyone seen this happen? No, officer. It happens when I’m asleep. It might be better for you to report this to the dream police. After all, that’s why they’re there.” Sable finished her one woman soliloquy.

“Right, no going to the police. Then what can we do?”

“What about a spy?”

“Sable say what?”

“Hear me out. We could use an animal to spy on her. The same way she sent those animals for you.” Sable laid out her plan.

“Let’s say I’m a bit intrigued. Who among us can speak animal?” Lita asked.

“I don’t like that look in your eyes.” Xander told Sable.

“You worry too much.” Sable kissed him and went outside.

“What’s she up to?” Lita asked.

“You don’t want to know.”

Sable came in with all three children trailing behind her.
“Lita tell Haru what we were thinking.”

“Sable wants to spy on someone using animals. I asked who among us can talk to them?”

“I can,” Haru said.

“I can too,” Amanda said. “Haru’s been teaching me.”

“The animals can come back here to report that way we aren’t risking the lives of our children.”

“What do you think?” Lita turned in Gaige’s lap to look at him.

“I don’t like it. If the children can really talk to the animals and they stay on this side of the fence, I won’t throw any

negatives into the pot. What's in that pot?" He pointed to the imaginary witches caldron.

"Witch's Brew, of course." Sable laughed.

"We need a genuine witch around here."

"Bite your tongue Haru and go back outside to play."

"Are we going to use animals to spy for us? Isn't that a bit unethical?" Lita couldn't say she was all about animal rights, but she was staunchly against animal brutality.

"The animals I want to use have made their way here from places where they were hunted or treated badly. Everyone will get paid. Us in information the animals in a few free meals. The animals won't have to hunt for a few days. I think that will make them happy."

"When you put it that way, I feel like an ass who couldn't see the big picture."

"You're too busy trying to stay alive to deal with someone else's grand scheme."

That was true, but she wasn't going to put all her eggs in the same basket. She'd let Sable work on her animal connection. She was going to town.

"Amanda, what about a girl's day? We'll go see Aunt Mae and she may take pity on us by feeding us and taking us shopping."

"Yes!" Amanda stuck her fist up in the air and did some dance that Lita was sure Haru taught her.

“It seems we are having a girl’s day out. Sable, are you coming, and Izzy? I can’t take you. I wish I could.”

“No, you and Amanda have a good time. I’ll work on the animals and keep Izzy company.”

“Thanks. Don’t give me big blue-green eyes. You’ll survive a day without me and then be happy when I come home. I’ll probably stop by my place to grab more things. Yes, things because I’m not sure what I left behind.”

“Get changed Amanda. I’ll see you outside soon.”

Gaige reached for her hand, and they walked to their bedroom. “I don’t like the thought of you in town alone.” He sat on the bed and pulled her onto his lap.

“Join the club, but where have I gone since that night Lavina tried to kill me? Staying in the house and hiding isn’t an option. I have a new car that is road worthy and all I’m doing is going into town. My aunt will be with me when I get to town. I’ll be okay, but I can’t hideaway.

“Remember, you’re harder to kill because we have started bonding. That doesn’t mean you can’t be killed, and you’ll have to look out for Amanda at the same time.”

She knew he was just looking out for her, but every word made her want to hide under the bed until the end came.

“You’re right and I know it. I’ll be on guard for my life, as well as Amanda’s. I can’t sit in this house saying to myself, this is the only place I’ll ever be free. What kind of mate would that make me?”

“The safe kind.” He handed her a set of keys. “I know your new car is roadworthy, but Dom came up and dropped mine off. It’s a lot more resistant to bumps, bruises, and gunshots.”

“Of course it is.” She went to her toes to kiss him one more time. “I have my cell phone. It’s completely charged. I also know you added code to it to pinpoint me wherever I am.” She took her phone and stuck it in her bra. She knew that you weren’t supposed to carry your phone that way. Bad habits are hard to break.

He rolled his eyes and gave her the ‘what am I going to do with you’ look?’

“Amanda, are you ready?” Lita called when they got to the living room.

“How am I supposed to stop the kids from yelling in the house if you’re doing it?” Sable put a hand on her hip and tapped her foot.

“Sorry, mommy.” Lita placed a kiss on her cheek.

“I’m ready.” Amanda came out in a pair of shorts Lita planned to throw away after she went to bed. She was wearing high-top tennis shoes and a cute shirt that emphasized she’s all girl.

“Where is that sack, I got for you? The one I said you needed to wear when you leave the property?” Lita’s eyes were on Amanda’s shorts.

“Gaige.” Amanda attached herself to his arm.

“Speaking of sacks.” His hands went to Lita’s clothes, and she had to slap them away. “Don’t touch the clothes. Adult,” she pointed to herself. “Teenager,” she pointed to Amanda.

“Mine,” Gaige pointed at her.

“I’ll be yours in cute and sexy clothes, and I love this outfit. Hurry to the car before hurricane Gaige gets us all wet.” They ran out the door shouting their byes.

Lita waited until they crossed the threshold of Xander’s property and were on the street leading away before she talked. Gaige drove a candy apple red BMW. It had reinforced tires. No one was taking them out. And the body had the same treatment. The door was heavy when she opened it. She didn’t know if the windows were bulletproof, but she’d stake a month’s pay on the answer being yes.

“How have you been getting along in the house?” She hoped that Amanda would open up to her. She’d been too busy trying to stay alive to know what was happening with her.

“It’s been good. Haru and Izzy treat me like a sister. Everyone has been so kind. They touch my cheek or the small of my back. They are trying to show me love without overwhelming me. I like it here.”

“I’m glad. We love having you here with us.” Lita took a moment to look at Amanda before she turned into town. “Is there something on your mind?”

“Do you think my mom is still alive?”

She wanted her mom. That wasn't a surprise. She remembered the ache she carried around in her heart wanting her mom and to be loved by her.

"I don't know. When we get all of this straightened out, well see if we can find her. Can you wait a couple of weeks?"

"Yes. Thank you, Lita, you're totally awesome."

"Now I know we're not hungry, but what if we turn up our noses and get dessert in the middle of the day?" Lita pulled Gaige's car into a space, wondering how she could get one of these.

"Ooh, that's so bad. Let's do it." Amanda chirped in a high voice. Everyone was growing up when Lita wanted them to stay as young as possible.

"Excuse me, can I have a couple of minutes of your time.?"

Oh hell, it was the fake deputy Anson.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“We were just going into The Vintage for some dessert. You’re welcome to come in with us.” Lita pasted a bright smile on her face while talking to Deputy Anson and pointing to The Vintage.

“I appreciate the invitation, but what I have to say won’t take that long.” He took a step back, staying well away from the door.

“Have you ever had dessert from there?” She wanted him to feel welcome so that her aunt and uncle could get a look at him.

“I haven’t. I can’t afford to indulge.” He rubbed his lean stomach.

“I see. How can I help you?” They were standing on the sidewalk. It was a beautiful day with lots of foot traffic going in and out of the stores. She was thinking about sending Amanda in to her aunt, but the young girl was sticking to her like glue.

Anson was very pale. It looked like he never got sunlight, but he was standing there bold as day. She also realized the uniform he was wearing wasn't for Rakes Forth. Anyone seeing him would simply think he was passing through town. No reason to raise the alarm.

"I've heard from a series of people that you have been staying at the house outside of town." Anger bubbled inside of her as she wondered if he was working with Lavina. Should she name drop? No, it was too risky. Right now, Lavina didn't know she knew her name or where they originally met.

"I didn't realize that this town kept such close tabs on me. That's very disconcerting."

She flashed him another smile before making her back ramrod stiff. "I believe the people of this town should mind their own business. Wouldn't you agree, deputy?"

"I don't know of one town that minds its business, Ms.?"

"Mintz, Aelita Mintz."

"That's a very prestigious name. You may be related to the Mintz's several towns over."

"I've yet to discover royalty in my family. Did you want something else?" Stupid, Lita walk away. She didn't want to be around him, especially with Amanda next to her, but her manners won out.

"I wanted to give you a warning. There's something fishy going on with the people who live there, and I'd hate to see you and this precious child get hurt."

“I would assure you that we aren’t in any danger, but that wouldn’t be enough for you. Tell me, what town do you represent?”

“I am proud to say I represent our very own Rakes Forth. You may have noticed my uniform is different. That’s because this uniform I’m wearing is a throw back.”

“You learn something new every day. Thanks for giving me a heads up on where I’m staying.”

“As long as you’re safe.” He stopped, turning mid step. “I just had a thought. Seeing as how your safety is my number one concern. You could invite me in to look around and meet the others that are staying there. This way, you know your care and needs are being looked after.”

Lita felt a headache coming on. She could have stayed with Gaige and not have been dealing with any of this. She was trying to pin him down to look directly into his eyes, but he was constantly in darkness. The realization made her shiver. His blue eyes were as hard as stone. There was no warmth in them.

“I may not have heard you. Did you suggest I allow you into someone else’s home?” Her eyes widened and her mouth opened on an ‘O’.

“If you live there, it’s your home, too.” Damn, he had a point, but there was no way she was going to give him an invitation to enter. Xander thought he was a demon. She would swear on a stack of bibles that he was a vampire. But those don’t exist, right?

“That’s a good point, but deputy Anson, I wouldn’t feel comfortable making that kind of decision. As you can see, we have children in our house and are very careful who we allow in with them. I will pass your request on to Xander, and he may decide to call you.”

“I could give you my card?” His voice warmed just a little.

“Thanks, no pockets. If we need you, we’ll call down to the station. You have a good day. I’ve enjoyed our talk.” She took Amanda by the hand and left Deputy Anson standing there looking on.

“Why did you say you enjoyed talking to him?” Amanda asked when they were standing in The Vintage’s foyer.

“It’s the polite B.S. I was taught to say it growing up. I could have told him that he freaks me out and will never get into a house I’m living in. That’s the correct and real thing to say. Unfortunately, saying things like that can come back to haunt you. So, I spoke a white lie to protect his feelings and keep me feeling safe.”

“Does everyone do that?”

“No, the mavericks in society say what they think, then walk all over your feelings on their way out the door.”

“I think I want to be one of these Mavericks.”

“You’ve got time. Nobody is in a rush for you to grow up or leave.”

“Why are you standing there waiting for someone to seat you? If you don’t take a seat, I’ll take a switch to your

backside.” Aunt Mae winked at Amanda.

Lita made her way to the booth. She didn’t play when it came to her aunt and the switches.

“Switch?” Amanda whispered.

“I’ll explain later. If my aunt threatens you with one, you say yes, ma’am, and do whatever she told you to do.”

“Alright girls, what do you want?” Aunt Mae gave them a smile. She was dressed for a day at the mall, not cooking food.

“I want the chocolate volcano. What about you Amanda?”

“Can I get apple pie a la mode?”

“You can get anything your little heart desires,” Aunt Mae said. She brought the desserts out and then sat with them.

“Anything interesting going on in town?” Lita asked.

“You mean things like people walking the streets in a zombie stupor or best friends fighting in the bank? There was a rumor that Myrtle and Fred were divorcing.”

“No way, they can’t do that.” Lita was half up.

“Calm down, it was a misunderstanding. But that’s the problem. Whatever happened to them, it came on suddenly. They examined the people from the bank and the zombie walkers. but they found nothing. It was strange.”

“I wonder.” Lita was tapping her spoon on her plate. Was that something Lavina could do, but why?”

“Trouble,” Amanda said.

Lita turned her head to see Lavina Brooks in the flesh, coming their way.

“What a quaint little diner. Do you own it?” The smile on Lavina’s face was fake and her eyes glittered like green gems and were just as cold.

“I do. Have a seat and I’ll bring you a menu.”

“That’s not necessary. I saw Lita come in and wanted to speak to her for a minute, BFF to BFF.”

“I didn’t know we were BFF’s it’s polite to tell the other person your plans.”

“I did. I laid them out, giving you the best survival rate possible. And what did you do? You threw my generosity in my face. Was it worth it?”

“Yes, and it will be worth it in the end.”

“You think you’re safe from me, that I can’t reach you. You’re wrong. I can reach out and touch you anytime I want to. I’ve been playing you, but playtime is over. Aelita Mintz, I am coming for you.” Lavina slid her hand down the classy blue pantsuit she was wearing and made a moue with her lips.

“Bring it, Lavina Brooks.”

“Those old fuddy duddy’s found you worthwhile. I can’t wait to get my hands on your power. This will be more delicious than I thought.”

Aunt Mae’s shoulders tensed, and her eyes sparked. Lita slid her hand onto her thigh. She’d worry about sparking eyes later.

Right now, they had to have a united front. If Lavina caught dissension in the ranks, she'd strike like a hungry boa constrictor.

“Aww, did they deny your request for worthiness? Maybe you need to take lessons from me.”

“I would, but you're going to be dead.” Lavina spun around on her heels and walked out.

Lita held her hand up and stopped anyone from talking. She took several deep breaths shared her concern. “Lavina was wearing a pair of Louis Vuitton's, and they were not last seasons. Yes, I am jealous and am coveting them. Do you think if we killed her, the same way they killed the Wicked Witch of the West, her feet would curl up and the shoes would be mine?” She turned her head to see her aunt and Amanda staring at her like she might have a screw loose.

She sighed. “That's what I thought. It was worth a shot.”

“Lita, you know I love you, but there are days I worry about you. If you want the shoes buy them.”

Lita gasped. Her hand went to her chest as she stared at her aunt. “Auntie, do you know how much those shoes cost?”

“I do, and I also know you can afford them.”

“Shh, don't put my business in the street. Besides, where would I wear them?”

“Naked in the bed when you're...”

“Little ears,” Lita screamed while placing her hands over Amanda’s ears.

“I never get to hear the good stuff,” Amanda whined.

“Let’s keep it that way or I’ll have to keep you away from Auntie Mae.”

“Do you want to talk about boring adult stuff or go shopping?” Aunt Mae asked.

Amanda threw her hand up in the air and shouted, shopping. The diner laughed at her antics.



Lita and Amanda stumbled through the front door burdened by an unholy number of bags and packages. Most of them belonging to Amanda. Her aunt spent the day saying a girl needs variety and spice. Lita’s credit card, on the other hand, was still crying. Why didn’t anyone tell her that children are expensive?

“Haru, I got you something.” Amanda grabbed some of her bags and disappeared down the hallway, with Haru and Izzy following her.

“Don’t worry, she got Izzy something, too.” Lita fell out on the couch and worked on catching her breath.

“How was your day?” Gaige leaned over and kissed her before he lifted her head and sat on the couch, placing her

head in his lap.

It hit her like a bowling ball in the stomach. Ow, by the way. She loved this man and didn't want to be separated from him. She hadn't been leading him on, but she felt the part of her that was afraid to commit. How could she have been comparing him to her bad boyfriend's from the past? The problem was several of them had started out great. She was always waiting for the other shoe to fall. It wasn't going to happen with Gaige. If they ran into difficulty because every relationship did, they would work it out.

“Did everything go okay with your shopping trip?” Gaige asked her.

“Yes, and no. The shopping was superb, tiring, but great. Before the trip, I ran into Deputy Anson and then Lavina tracked me down in The Vintage.”

“We need to talk about them, but later. Right now, I need to speak to Gaige.”

She gave him a smile and a wink before getting up and leading him out of the living room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

This was long overdue, Lita told herself as her nerves made the butterflies in her stomach flutter. How long did it take to fall in love? An hour, a day, a week or a month. Sometimes it takes some people years to fall in love. She envied those people because they waited so long that they were convinced that like the stars in the sky, they would always be there for each other.

Her Aunt Mae says it took her four and a half hours to fall in love. Uncle Bob said it was love at first sight. Lita didn't believe in any of that hogwash and then she met Gaige. Had she fallen the first time they met? Maybe. He tugged at her from the moment she met him. The harder he pulled, the more determined she was to ignore the crazy alien.

"You're thinking hard," Gaige said when they were finally behind closed doors.

"I've something to say and am not sure how to say it."

“Did you bring me in here to tell me you decorated the whole place without my help?” She could see his eyes and the brightness of them that was contagious and went to his smile. His head tilted, and he was trying hard not to laugh.

“No, but I saw a set of dressers and chairs that were like the ones we looked at. They will be delivered tomorrow or the day after.”

“I can’t wait to see them. I know they’ll be perfect.” He turned on the fireplace. It was nice outside, but the house always seemed to be a little cooler than the outside temperature.

He walked to the bed and patted his thighs for her to take a seat. “You can tell me anything you want to.”

“I know. It’s one of the things I find special about you. We’ve committed to each other. So why do I find this so hard?”

“You’ve been hurt and there are precious few people that you can trust. I’ll go first. I was waiting for you to be ready to hear it.” He sat there, just staring into her eyes.

“I could wish for a romantic dinner with violin music and dancing. Right now, we’re in the middle of a war zone. It doesn’t matter. I love you, Aelita Mintz. I think it happened the first time I saw you. I’m sure I was head over heels the moment you gave me sass. Who is this human and how dare she give me sass? Doesn’t she know who I am? Turns out you did know, and you gave me more sass, anyway.”

Tears welled up in her eyes. If she could have designed the perfect male for her, she wouldn't have ended up with Gaige. She didn't know what she needed in a male until she met him.

“I love you, Gaige. I don't know when it happened. What I know is that you were there every step of the way. You wouldn't allow me to pretend you weren't by my side and everything you did told me, I want you forever.”

She leaned forward to press her lips against his. It was nice and easy, the seal on the love they shared.

“I want to be your mate, to exchange blood and know you are forever mine.”

“I want to be your mate with all my heart. You have to understand one thing, though. Once we do this, we will be together in life and death. There is no do over or divorce.”

“You can't leave me?”

“No.”

“What the heck was taking me so long?” Lita leaned back and looked at the ceiling, but she was seeing the midnight sky. Thoughts of her and Gaige making love outside heated her blood.

Gaige placed her on the bed. He laid down and held her in his arms. “Come with me, love.”

He drew her from the bed and through the door. This time, it wasn't their spirits or dreams that were going for a walk. He physically pulled her into a dream. It reminded her of the first

time they walked together. He took her into a dream to save her life.

They were at a beach, standing along the shoreline. The water was lapping up to give sweet kisses to the sand. The sun was setting, and it filled the horizon with a rainbow of color.

“This is my special place. Where I come when I want to think. I hope it will become our special place.”

There was a decadent four poster bed on the sand. Gaige draped it in black and red silk. It was practically screaming at her to try it out.

“You set all of this up.” The warm breeze ruffled her hair and played with her sensitive body. Everything around her from the blue water to the white sand was beautiful.

“It was waiting for when you were ready never before then.”

She felt the prickle of tears behind her eyes, and she blinked fast to keep from crying. It didn't work. Gaige was a miracle, her miracle, and she was going to indulge in every emotion he made her feel, including the tears of happiness.

He picked her up and carried her to the bed. “There's no threshold here. Will this do?”

“We're going to have to talk. A woman can get used to this kind of treatment.” He followed her down on to the bed, kissing at her throat before he went to her lips. “I love your lips.” They were plush and beautiful. He nibbled on her lower lip before taking over her mouth.

Gaige could kiss, and he knew it. She lost herself in the pleasure that he brought every time he touched her. When she opened her eyes, the sun had dropped lower. Low enough to pour one perfect golden beam over Gaige. In that moment, she knew he was the hero of dreams. He'd charge in on his alien horse and make everything ok.

“My knight.”

“Just an alien who loves you.”

“As it should be,” she whispered. His chuckle let her know he heard her.

He kissed down her neck until he reached her clavicle. She started swarming and giggling.

“What have we here?” he licked and sucked at her until he started putting small bites on her clavicle. “Don't worry my friend, I'll be back,” he said in the terminator voice, which made her giggle louder.

He rose above her, looking at her breasts in all of their splendor. She knew he could see the pinkish areoles and the shape and curve of her breasts. This was their wedding night and having him look at her like this made her shiver. This was who she was, who she would always be. The appreciative look in his eyes told her everything she needed to know. He wanted her.

She tugged on his shoulders, wanting his mouth on her. He took one of her nipples into his mouth, sucking hard. His hand kneaded her other breast. He pulled at the nipple while he

sucked on the other nipple and her back arched. Her pussy wanted to get in the act by secreting honey. Gaige brought out the best in her in all ways.

Her hands went from his hair to his shoulders as he devoured her breasts. She was a twisting mass of female when he took the other nipple into his mouth and began playing with her other breast.

“Writhe for me wildcat, let me see and feel your pleasure.”

She opened herself up, giving him unfettered access to what she was feeling. Lita wanted him to see himself through her eyes. He was a worthy male who made her life joyful.

“There you are, wildcat. You’re so hot for me.”

Gaige opened himself up to his mate. He wanted her to feel what she was doing to him. The need and the desire for her. He wanted her to feel and know that her pleasure was the second thing on his mind. Her safety being the first always. To him, there was no life without her. He stopped for a minute, wondering if he told her everything about being his mate? The thought fled as quickly as it came. His wildcat was using her nails, and he loved it.

Lita could feel Gaige’s pure primal passion. There was the human part that she could identify. Then there was an alienness that fired her blood. That part of him felt feral. He kissed her body, taking his time like they had all night and tomorrow that would spread out into forever. The way he touched her worshiping every inch of who she was had her nerve endings firing. There was heat in her nipples as they

continued to get harder. Her pussy was seeping honey and wanted to skip to the next part but wouldn't do it. He licked and tasted every part of her body as he kissed his way down. He was mumbling little things that were sexy because they weren't meant for her ears.

“Does this place on you ribs taste as sweet as this section of skin?” He would stop and explore that place on her ribs, using his hands to make her so sensitive she wanted to scream.

Her fingers lightly scored his back as she ran her hand over his shoulders, arms, and back. She felt more than saw when one of his tentacles came out to rub over one of her ass cheeks. She felt when his tentacle caressed the slit of her behind. One day, not today, they may have to discuss it. Her mind flittered like a dancing butterfly it was when she felt two of his tentacles wrap around her breasts.

He was at her belly kissing and licking and she wanted to get a hold of him. Her fingers wanted to part the hair on his chest. To feel the texture on it on her fingertips and to touch the scales she knew were covered on his sexy chest.

He flipped them over, presenting himself as a prize that she couldn't resist. Her hands went to the enormous expanse of his chest as she started working to drive him crazy. Every touch, every taste took them both higher. They were writhing, but neither wanted to let this moment pass.

When her hands made it to his chest, she played with the short black fuzz and then caressed the scales that would always fascinate her. She kissed and licked and worked her

way down. When another tentacle came out to play, she paused, wondering what he was up to. It snaked its way up her body until it was between her breasts that were being pushed together by his other two tentacles.

That was sexy. Watching him breast fuck her with his tentacles. She sank down onto his thick cock, rubbing against him in a writhing motion. She wanted him stuffed deep inside, but he was playing, drawing out her pleasure.

“Gaije.” His name was a breathless plea on her lips.

“Take what you want.” He lifted her high until his cock touched her slit, leaking honey.

Lita placed both hands on his chest and lowered herself onto his cock. She loved the way the head of it opened her up wide as she took him in inch by inch. She was teasing herself, but the feel of that thickness pressed against her walls was a sensation she couldn't resist. The girth of him opened her wide as she took all of him in. She set an easy rhythm as she got used to him in her body.

A slow up and down as she moaned and gave him words of praise. When she began to move faster, her gray eyes dilated and she needed him. She had to find that place where heaven, earth, and bliss became one. Indistinguishable from the others.

He turned her over and took over. His thrusts were fast and hard. He knew what she wanted, and he was giving it to her. Taking her higher each time. Then the tentacle between her breasts moved to wrap around her neck. It didn't, but she was

flying high now. He was claiming her as sure as if he placed a diamond necklace or collar around her throat.

“Now love.” She stared into his blue-green eyes and everything around her felt peaceful. She had been waiting for this moment all her life. He opened his mouth and the fangs she’d seen were on display.

Her hand went to his jaw, caressing, and then she ran her hand over his bottom lips, getting a better look at his fangs.

“Lita.” She lifted and kissed him, not worrying about cutting her lips or tongue on his fangs. She needed him, wanted him fangs or not.

He drove deep into her body until she was riding on the crest of an orgasm. His fangs sank into her shoulder, and she could feel him drawing blood. It might have hurt, but she was so high on the feeling he was giving her that it was all she could feel. She felt it when he started pumping the bonding secretions into her body. It took her higher, like she was touching the stars and exploring new universes.

He withdrew and before she knew what was happening; she struck. There were fangs in her mouth, and she was taking his blood in and then finishing the bonding connection.

She wanted to scream in pleasure even as she was still connected to him. Her body exploded into a million pieces, and she knew no one would ever put her back together again. As long as she was with Gaige, she was okay with that.

They tumbled together, flying high around the earth with no protection except each other.

When she finally came down, she was lying on the bed with the beach around them. The sound of the waves crashing against the shore gave her the right ambiance to fall asleep on the male she loved with all her heart. She licked her lips. She'd bite and be bit by her lover, her mate, every day of the week if he desired it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Lita shifted. The warm breeze blowing over her made her eyes open. Gaige was leaning over her, his fingers touching the spot he bit last night. He bit her last night! The blood bond was in place, and they were mates in every sense of the word. Her fingers went to his shoulder and there was a bite. It was the size of a quarter, and it looked like a small tribal tattoo.

“You have one too,” Gaige told her. “The bonding secretion mixes with the blood and the skin and leaves behind a visible mark to let everyone know you’re bonded. We’ll have to look at them at home, but I suspect they are the yin and the yang that proclaim us as mates.”

“I love it. Can we stay here forever?” The sparkling blue of the ocean went as far as the eye could see and the white sand looked pure. Were they the first people to walk on this beach? This was a paradise she never knew existed.

“Swim?” he asked, not answering her question.

“Last one in,” she shouted, laughing, already running for the waves. They played on the beach and then made love again before Gaige said they needed to go back.

“Tell me we’ll come back again.”

“We will,” Gaige assured her. “It will be our home away from home.”

She took one last look around before taking Gaige’s hand. Together, they walked through the door that would lead back to their lives.



Lita and Gaige took a shower, washing the salt and the sand off. When they were ready to face the family and talk about Lavina, they opened the door to find all hell was breaking loose. They ran through the hallway until they reached the common living room. Her Aunt Mae and Uncle Bob were standing in the doorway with Sable freaking out.

Aunt Mae grabbed Sable and hugged her until she calmed down. Sable was crying, and the kids were crying. They looked like they had walked through a war zone. There was soot and ash on their clothes.

Lita took in the hair that looked singed and the tears in their clothes. Her heart thudded in her chest as her mind denied that anything could be wrong.

“Can we come in?” Uncle Bob asked.

Sable dried her eyes and moved back. She looked at Lita, who was standing as still as a statue.

Nothing could happen to them. Lavina did this. She tried to kill the people she cared about. She couldn't get here, so she targeted her aunt and uncle. The only parents she had ever known. She was dying, suffocating, but she couldn't move or breathe. An earthquake hit her between her shoulder blades.

"Breathe, Lita. you're about to pass out." Gaige was holding her tight, rubbing where he hit her on the back.

Silent tears flowed as she realized while she was making love to her mate, someone was trying to kill the closest people she had to parents.

"It's all my fault," Lita howled, leaving Gaige and stumbling to her aunt and uncle.

"Mae, I told you we should have stopped by the bed-and-breakfast to shower."

Lita was gasping for breath, but at least she was breathing. Her mind was on revenge. She'd make Lavina wish she'd never been born.

"I'll kill her. I promise you she's a dead woman and whoever helped is dead, too." Fury and anger made her shake. She would invade Lavina's dreams and make her life a horror show. When she heard the name Lita, she would piss on herself. That's how scared she would be.

"Stop it!" Aunt Mae slapped her across the face. "Are you the young lady I raised? The one I brag about every chance I

get? Remember who you are, Aelita Mintz.”

“Someone hurt you and I’m supposed to be okay with that? And don’t call me Aelita. They named me that and I’m changing my name.” She’d thought of changing her name, but it’s the only thing her parents had done that was good.

“Young lady,” Aunt Mae shouted. “I named you Aelita and you will not change your name.”

All sound stopped, and Lita looked around the room. She was trying to understand what was happening right now.

“Can we use a shower and borrow a change of clothes,” Uncle Bob asked. “Aelita, after we’re done, your aunt and I have to tell you a few things.”

She nodded because words weren’t coming. Her heart was already breaking because she knew they were going to tell her that she was never theirs. That they never loved her but couldn’t stand seeing her abused, but now that she was grown, she was on her own.

Xander took them to a guest room while Sable took Lita’s hand and led her to the kitchen.

“We have hot chocolate with whisky, marshmallows, and whipped cream, or the tried and true standard tea with whisky.”

“Hot chocolate, please.” Her voice was husky, and she leaned against Gaige, her port in a storm.

Sable worked her magic while Lita’s mind flitted from one thing to another. She felt like the world was coming apart

around her. She needed to wait. Maybe they wouldn't reject her.

Sable sat a cup in front of her and Gaige and she noticed the children were missing. They didn't need to be here for this.

When her aunt and uncle came out, they looked better. The soot and the ash were gone. Why had they looked like they've been through a fire? Sable handed them each a cup.

"Let's take this to the living room." Xander led the way. He turned on the fireplace making the room feel a little cozier.

"Aelita, I have a story to tell you. I don't expect you to forgive me, but you need to know everything that has happened in your life," Aunt Mae said. She took a sip of her drink and then laid her head on Uncle Bob's chest for strength.

"There was a young girl a little over thirty years ago who met the love of her life. She was thrilled he was in Rakes Forth on holiday, but she knew he was the one. He would stay with her, she was sure of it. She did what all women in love did. She rocked his world. He got called home unexpectedly without having time to tell her. A month later, she missed her period."

"I don't understand what this has to do with us." Was she talking about her mother, making an excuse for her?

"I think you need to listen," Gaige told her. She snuggled closer to him and watched her aunt.

"I was sixteen years old." She made it personal. This wasn't some stranger she was talking about, but part of her life.

Did she put the child up for adoption or have a miscarriage? Before she could ask, Gaige was squeezing her hand.

“My mother, your grandmother, was furious. Young women with proper breeding did not have children out of wedlock and they didn’t have them that young. We argued for two months before she put her foot down. I was too young to have a child and needed to finish school. She decided without my consent that we would say that my older sister was pregnant. She was married and a proper lady. My mother floated the rumor that she was having a difficult pregnancy and was going away to rest. I would go with her to make sure no one took advantage of her in her delicate condition.”

Lita was listening, but it wasn’t connecting with her.

“The child, my baby girl, was given to my sister and her husband to raise. I was sent to a proper girl’s school. I didn’t see her for years after that. During that time, my mate came back. Time moves differently on his planet. By the time I was done with school, my mother tangled me up in so much red tape I couldn’t claim my child. They had gone to court to seal the records to make sure that I wouldn’t be able to tell anyone about my child. They also placed me under a curse that kept me silent. When the incident happened to you with the rats, I told them all I would do every news show I could and make sure the world knew that they were dealing with witchcraft. That’s why they placed you in my custody”

Lita was sitting shaking her head while her body trembled.

“Today The Vintage burned to the ground. Aunt Mae and Uncle Bob died in the fire. The autopsy reports will confirm this. The burning of The Vintage and the death of Aunt Mae and Uncle Bob ended the curse.”

“I can’t... I don’t.”

“Let us get it all out, baby girl. You don’t have to call me father, but you deserve to know who I am, who we are.”

Uncle Bob, wait, her father stood and began to change.

“Holy Fabio.” Lita would have fallen if Gaige hadn’t tightened his grip. “You can’t be my dad. You’re hot as hell. Did you model for those books? No, really did you?”

“Do I look like a swashbuckling pirate to you?”

Hell yeah, but she wasn’t going to admit that out loud.

Aunt Mae snickered. Not her aunt, her mother. She might need to lie down. Her mother stood and her body changed. Holy hell, it was like looking into a mirror. She knew who she favored.

She held up her hot chocolate cup that was empty. Sable took it. When she brought the cup back, Lita took a sip. Sable had added more whisky. That’s what best friends are for. They have your back when you need it, if only to offer liquid courage. She noticed Sable had a cup of her own. Yep, Bff’s forever.

“Wait.” Lita almost choked on her sip. The whisky was doing it’s job. She was a lightweight and may be hung over

tomorrow, but today alcohol was needed. She turned to her dad. “Did you say you’re not human?”

“Caught that, did you?” He chuckled.

“I’m not and you’re only half human. Not that anyone knows or cares. Your alien side is masked enough that none of the doctors ever noticed. I’m willing to bet you the healer noticed. He has given you mother and I several long drawn out looks.”

“Is that where I get my dream weaver talents?” Her father’s chest puffed up. Holy hell, look at those pecs.

“It was so much easier when he looked like a fuddy duddy white man and not a Greek God. Maybe we were too hasty to tell you who we were? I’ll be beating women off with a stick.”

“That’s because I’ll be glued to your side.”

“Sweet talker.” Her mother beamed with pride and love.

“Why was the diner burned?” She wanted to stare at them for months at a time. Then she’d cry because the one thing she would wish for at Christmas every year was for them to be her parents. She was not adjusting well to the new information.

“We let Lavina burn it to the ground. She’s probably somewhere crowing her victory.”

“I always found it strange you didn’t realize we warded your house seven ways to Sunday,” her father said. “Anyway, she couldn’t touch the diner unless we let her. It was the last stipulation standing between you and us.”

“Are you leaving?” She heard the child like note in her voice and tried to clear her throat. It didn’t work.

Her mother closed the distance between them and held out her arms. The past was the past and they would sort the heartache out later. Right now, she needed the arms of her mother. Lita walked into her arms and cried as her mom hugged her tightly. Then her father was there, hugging them both.

She looked over and was sure she saw a hint of glistening in Gaige’s eyes. Lita was tearing up and finally her life felt complete.

“The wards,” Xander said.

“Are screaming,” Gaige finished. They walked to the windows to find deputy Anson approaching in his SUV.

“What now,” Lita mumbled.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Xander went outside to meet deputy Anson. This time Sable and Lita, as well as Gaige and the rest, except the children, went out with him. There was no more hiding from the deputy. If there was going to be a showdown, then they would take part in it.

“The gangs all here,” deputy Anson said when he got out of his SUV. “Do you mind if I take a seat on the porch?”

Xander took his time looking over the deputy, getting a feel for him. The other times he came there had been a low level hum of evil that made him not want to have anything to do with Anson. Now that was gone. There was neutrality in its place. It was a bit disconcerting, but he no longer felt the need to protect his family from him. There was a story behind the change. One he would need to figure out later.

“Come up, have a seat.” Everyone took a seat, a few in the chairs or the porch swing. Haile and Dom sat on the top step while Anders sat in a chair next to the deputy.

“What can we do for you, deputy?” Gaige asked. Lavina and her antics were on his mind, and he was sure she was about to show her face and he and Lita were going to have a fight on their hands.

“I’m not sure why I am here or why I even care.” He shook his head, looking confused.

The dimness that always followed him seemed to be absent, allowing Xander to get another good look at him. He’d been convinced he was a demon, but now in the absence of the shadows. He thought Lita might be right. The deputy might be a vampire, or he could be something totally different.

“The townspeople have lost their minds. They are raiding and rioting. The police are having a hard time getting them under control because they’re willing to die to keep doing what they are doing. There were two deaths before I left town. They killed each other. There going to kill themselves and destroy the town if no one stops what’s happening.”

“Do you think?” Lita said.

“That this is Lavina causing trouble? Yes, it sounds like something she would do.”

“There’s another group of townspeople heading this way. I got a head start on them, but they are definitely coming. They looked like zombies, blank eyes and a slow shuffling walk. I don’t know what they want with you, but I wouldn’t discount their ability to cause mayhem.”

When deputy Anson got up this time. He didn't extend his hand or try to give them his business card. He walked down the stairs, but stopped before he got into his SUV.

"I'm going back to town to lend a hand. You're going to have to deal with the zombie people on your own." He got into his car and rolled down the window. "Y'all stay safe now." he flashed a smile and took off.

"What just happened here?" Sable asked.

"No Idea, but he has to go on the back burner. We have greater things to worry about."

"We need help." Xander picked up his phone to call for backup. "Dom will pick up Haile and Anders. Then he's coming here."

Brianna and Ajani walked out carrying cups of tea. "Sable, I added some of your energy abstract to each of your cups. The children are at the table eating. They each have a cup of tea with the abstract in it. I added it to Izzy's water bowl. They'll need it."

Sable nodded, not questioning Brianna.

"We have to lure away the townspeople who are coming this way. We need to know our home base is protected while we are out trying to save the town," Lita said.

"I have an idea. Gaige, do you remember when we used to play distraction?"

"It could work, but who will we use as the distraction?"

“It would be ideal if we could use the children,” Xander said.

“Wait... use the children for what?” Lita and Sable said.

“What have we missed?” Dom said when he stepped onto the porch.

Gaige filled them in on what was happening. Brianna brought them each a cup of tea.

“Lavina broke the townspeople into two groups. Group one is rioting and rampaging through the town. I’m sure they are stealing and breaking into businesses. Group two has been brainwashed well dream washed to come for us. If Anders agrees to cast a look alike ward on the children, we can make them look like Lita. The zombies will go after the Lita’s and the children can lead them back to town.”

“What about the people already in town?” Lita asked.

“Don’t doubt my genius, mate” He leaned over and kissed her on the neck. “The rest of you will go to town to help police subdue the people. I don’t think they will wake until Lavina is taken care of.”

“It sounds like they are in a never ending dream.” Lita shivered. No one wanted to sleep or dream forever.

“Exactly. I’m basing what we need to do on this theory.”

Xander stood. “Let’s go see if the children want to play.”

They walked into the living room to find the kids huddle together on the couch. The fear on their faces was enough to make him want to take Lavina apart piece by piece. They may

be young, but they were strong. It was time to remind them of that.

“Amanda, Haru, and Izzy, do you want to play a game of hide and seek with the townspeople?” Gaige asked, grinning like he was asking them if they wanted to go to Disneyland.

The children perked up, looking at each other. Izzy was right in the middle, looking better and asking questions with her eyes.

“Our cousin Anders can cast a look alike shadow of anyone,” Gaige explained to the children. “It works better if he can cast it on a person. I’m not worried about the townspeople hurting the children,” he told the others

“If Anders cast a look alike shadow on you,” he started talking to the children. Then you can distract the townspeople. Does anyone have a better plan?” Gaige looked around the room, but no one answered.

“I’ll be watching over the children as Aunt Mae.”

“Love hit me.” Brianna’s body shimmered, and she was Aunt Mae once again. “I’ll watch the children and make sure everyone sees me. The coroner will confirm I’m dead tomorrow and the townspeople will tell themselves that their dreams were extra weird the night before. There was no way they were chasing a dead woman.”

“Thank you, Brianna.” Sable was worried about the children.

“Whenever you’re ready, Hun.” She spoke to her husband. “That’s mom to you, Sable, whenever you’re ready.” Sable

turned her head to hide the tears that flowed.

“Remember, the rest of you are going to town. Stay away from Aunt Mae because we don’t want anyone connecting the dots if they see you talking to her.”

“I’m pretty impressed,” Anders said.

“Battle plans are my specialty.” The cousins groaned and threw pillows at Gaige.

“Alright, I need my little warriors in front of me.” Amanda, Haru, and Izzy lined up by height. “Perfect.” Anders said something and an orange light came from him and before him stood three carbon copies of Lita.

Lita walked around the children. It didn’t escape her attention that somewhere along the way; she started thinking of Izzy as a child. “If I didn’t know better, I’d swear they were me. Amazing.”

“Thanks. Are we ready to start this operation?” Anders looked at Gaige. He was tonight’s general.

“Distract the townspeople is a go.” Dom took the children and Brianna. They appeared outside of the perimeter.

The townspeople were close to the perimeter. They were looking tired and many of them were breathing hard although the walk had been slow. When the look alike Lita’s appeared in their mist, the programming Lavina did in their dreams switched. They started pointing fingers. There were shouts of stop and we’re going to kill you. They followed the children with zombielike slow movements. The children were going

slowly to make sure they didn't lose anyone. Once they were well away from the perimeter, they would lead the townspeople back to town. Hopefully, the real police would be on hand to handle it from there.

Dom came back into the room. "The children will be fine. None of the zombie townspeople are fast enough to catch them. Brianna is there and if I'm not mistaken, that lady has some moves we haven't seen yet."

"You're right, she does. She'll keep the children safe. It doesn't hurt that they belong to her daughters."

Lita and Sable puffed up.

"Who's going to town?" Everyone except Lita and Gaige gathered around Dom. At the last minute, they joined the group.

"We need to know what's happening in town if we want to stop Lavina," Gaige said before they all stepped into a shadow.

"Are you getting stronger?" Gaige asked when they were in town.

"I am." Dom left it at that.

Mayhem might have been too nice a word for what was happening in town. Women with big curlers in their hair in nightgowns running up and down the streets screaming and hitting people. There were at least three older adults with canes going take that sonny as they hit younger teenagers. There were teenagers breaking into stores and shoving jewelry

or whatever they could take into different places on their bodies.

Lita refused to note where they were hiding things. There were the people who went to sleep in the nude and were flapping what God gave them. There were even a few of the police force who had been sleeping and were now caught up in the riot.

The police were outnumbered and hindered by the fact that they weren't trying to hurt anyone.

The sheriff was on the bullhorn, calling for peace. Not that anyone was paying attention to him.

“We have to stop her, or soon they won't have any choice but to hurt the townspeople.” Lita ran to a young girl to stop her from hitting an older woman.

The girl kicked and screamed before she started biting Lita's hands. “Let me down. She deserves it!”

Lita realized there was more than mayhem and destruction to Lavina's command. She was turning people against each other, setting them on a course of retaliation and revenge.

“You're a hateful little girl and I'll make sure you never pass fifth grade”

No one was going to be happy when they woke up. She wasn't sure what to do with the child. She threw her at the first cop she saw. He could handle this little problem.

“What next?” Lita asked, dodging a chair thrown her way and a kick from behind her.

Gaige grabbed her hand, and they weaved through the crowd until they were standing on the edge of the chaos.

Lita looked around and sighed. Clean up was going to be a bitch.

“Now we find Lavina.” They took hands and Lita weaved a dream. They stepped into it, leaving the chaos behind.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“**W**here are we?” Gaige asked after they entered the dream Lita had constructed.

“No where specific. I wanted to enter the dream world without drawing Lavina’s attention immediately. She’s around here waiting for us. Where? Don’t know.”

“You’re right let’s not draw her attention yet Why don’t we enter a few dreams of the townspeople and see if we can wake anyone up?”

“How?” She looked around where she thought those dreams would be, but the doorway seemed blocked.

“I think we need to start by entering a dream of someone we know or someone we encountered while we were in town.”

Lita thought of the fifth grader and her teacher. “I met a young girl and her teacher. Let’s try them.”

Entering dreams was easy when she had Gaige by her side. This was harder than expected. She was meeting resistance. It was like seeing a juicy orange or a watermelon in front of you,

but not being able to get to the fruit because of the outer shell. They found themselves kicking against a barrier before they finally tumbled into the dream of the fifth grader.

Anger, red and pulsing, was all they could feel coming from her. Thoughts of death, hers, and the teachers brought Lita to her knees. Her anger grew because this wasn't a joke, and she knew children killed others and themselves based on anger like this. This wasn't natural, though. Lavina was fueling it. She was gearing up to destroy two families just because she could.

“No!” It was a scream from her heart as Lita tackled the dream version of the little girl. “You don't want to do this.”

“I do,” the child cried. “It's the only way.” She was shaking as her head dropped onto Lita's shoulder. “It's the only way. My parent's life will be better without me.”

“You think?” Lita didn't stop to think that she didn't need to be showing off her talent to a child.

She constructed a dream she didn't know she could do. They were standing in a funeral parlor. The girl was lying in a casket, and it devastated her parents. There was no keeping a stiff upper lip. She was their only child. The funeral went ahead, but they cried and wailed through it. Then she dragged the child to the house that once was alight with laughter, but now was as dead as her parents were inside. There was nothing there. Her parents looked like skeletons, who were just waiting to be told it was time to die.

“Does this look like better to you?” It was easy to think things would be better without you because you couldn’t see the aftermath of your decision.

“They love me,” she hiccupped.

“You’re their heart and soul.” The girl wasn’t fighting anymore. Her tears had turned into soft sobs, and she wanted to be held by her parents.

Lita looked for her parents and found them at home. Whatever Lavina had done hadn’t touched them. The more Lita looked, she realized that there were a lot of townspeople that hadn’t been touched by Lavina. It felt like someone was protecting them.

“Fortunately, I know a shadow walker. He’s going to take you home. Gaige?”

“He’s on his way.”

Dom showed up in the dream, but he was also standing beside the child. Lita showed him her house.

“Come on sweets, it’s time for you to say goodbye.” Dom took the child home.

“Let’s find her.” Lita was done with Lavina and the grief she was trying to work.

“Do you realize that you unlocked a new talent tonight?”

Lita had no idea what he was talking about. They were now standing in a corridor. There were doorways and corridors

branching off in every direction. It felt like they were standing in a hub of activity, even though everything was quiet.

“You walked into a possible future. The future of that girl’s death. It wasn’t what you thought would happen. It was the actuality you were seeing.”

“You realize that makes it worse. Lavina could have instigated that child’s death. Then the death of her parents from heart break”

“Right now, I’m more concerned with what she would do if she got that kind of ability.”

A door to their right opened. Then let’s make sure it doesn’t happen. On the other side of the door was a large room.

“Welcome to my playground,” Lavina said. The room morphed into a playground with children on swings or going down the sliding board.

“You hate children. Don’t you?”

“They’re dirty and nasty. What’s to like about children?” Lita didn’t argue. She simply looked around, noticing that besides the children there were several of Lavina’s men placed strategically. She was sure the children were to encourage her to give into Lavina’s demand.

“This is nice, but let’s take this to my playground.” She wove a construct that they weren’t going to be able to leave and filled it with people who were simple constructs of her mind. There were no children, and these people weren’t real so they

could take whatever collateral damage Lavina wanted to throw at them.

They were in a nightclub with a disco ball and loud music. There was a bar along one wall. There were people dancing and laughing. The door to the outside was open and there was a street.

“Gaige promised to take me to a club. We haven’t gotten there yet.” Lavina’s men were also in the club because she had to add every real person that had been in the playground.

Two of the men came after her. The other two after Gaige. She was running and ducking through dancers. They were doing the same before they realized that the people were just a mirage, and they didn’t need to go around them. She was climbing onto the stage when one of them grabbed her by the collar of her blouse and pulled. She stumbled backward and into a large fist.

His hand went to her hair and pulled her to her feet while his other hand fisted punching her in the stomach. She gasped and threw up at the same time. He tossed her to his partner, and he swung her around before slamming her onto the floor.

“I want your ability to dream weave, and anything that comes with it.”

Lita tried to crawl away. one of the men put his foot on her back to stop her.

“It’s easy, really. I need you to focus on your ability until you get to the root of it. That’s when I come in and tear it away

from you. It's helps if you tell it to come to me willingly. I've done it the hard way enough times to have mastered it. Don't worry if you want to fight."

She cut her eyes across the floor to find Gaige in a fight with the other two men. He was still on his feet. She was cheering him on even as she was wondering how she was going to get back into the fight. There was a chair a few inches away from her fingertips as she concentrated on pulling it to her. When she had a firm grip, she hit him as hard between the legs as possible and made onto her knees to crawl away.

There was a shout from Lavina. "What the hell did you do?"

She started laughing, which made her cough. "I locked the room down, surprise." No one was leaving unless she died or unlocked the room.

Lita's head turned when she heard a death gaggle. Gaige killed one man with the dagger in his hand.

"The room maybe locked down for flesh and blood but not for inanimate objects." Lavina grinned. Both of her men had bullwhips in their hands. The one Gaige was fighting had a sword.

She'd have to be more specific the next time she locked a room down. Lita made it to her feet to dive over a set of chairs on the side of the room as the whip came toward her. It caught her along her back before she escaped. A loud cry came from her that caused Lavina to laugh.

Lita stood in the corner trapped with nowhere to go. She watched as the first man approached her with the whip. This fight was a distraction. A way to make her tired so that when Lavina was finally ready, Lita would be too tired to resist. The tea was still working, but she felt the tiredness coming for her. Building this construct took a lot of energy. Then she was practically bleeding energy when she showed the fifth grader what her parent's new reality would be without her.

When the man got close enough, she wove a cage around him. She used energy she couldn't spare because that was the only thing Lavina wouldn't be able to take apart.

She watched Gaige jump over several chairs, doing a flip in the air before he landed on the back of the man he was fighting. He slid his dagger into his heart and rode him to the floor.

"Two down Lavina. One more to go. Are you sure you want to continue this fight?" Gaige taunted.

"Kill him," Lavina spits out.

"And then there was only you and me," Lita said. They were moving around each other. It was the circle of girls who planned to fight but were looking for the right opportunity.

"One of us is still fresh as a daisy. While the other had been trying to protect the world."

Lita gave a slight tilt of her head to acknowledge her comment. Lavina jumped at her, and Lita met her midair. They slammed to the floor together, rolling over each other until

Lavina came out on top. Her hands went to the side of Lita's head as she panted the word "mine."

Lita's hands came up as a defense on top of Lavina's hands. She could feel Lavina pushing against the barrier of her mind. It was weakened in her tired state. She pushed back until Lavina crashed into it, falling into her mind. They linked and became one.

"Oh, your mind is beautiful," Lavina sighed.

Lita shuddered. Lavina's mind was a nightmare landscape. She could see her whole life unfold. The beatings she took as a child. The lack of love she experienced. It was painful and the woman before her was beginning to make more sense.

Every villain didn't have a tragic backstory, but this one did. How was Lita supposed to kill her when she was feeling sorry for her?

"Don't feel sorry for me, bitch. I'm no one's crybaby. Life happens, and I made the best out of mine." Lavina went on the attack, trying to tear through Lita's mind, looking for the root of her power.

They fought, Lavina tearing at pieces of her soul while Lita did the same. Lavina found the memory of the rats and threw it in Lita's face. She made her experience what it felt like to be left alone in that old building that she couldn't find the way out. The terror tore at Lita's mind like she was there again reliving the same nightmare repeatedly.

Lita found the nightmare of Lavina's father coming home drunk. She was hiding in the closet because she knew what came next. He would stagger into her room. If she was lucky, he would find her and beat her. If she was unlucky, so much more would happen.

The fear was too much for Lita and she dropped the nightmare. She couldn't make her relive it.

"And that's why you'll always lose." Lavina cried triumphantly. She'd found the spot where Lita's talents originated. She placed her hand on the root and began to pull. Lavina's mind was focused on cutting it out of her.

"Lavina, don't do this," Lita begged. The tiredness that had been plaguing her for days was back. Her energy was gone as she felt the tug on her soul. There was no way she'd survive this. Only one of them was walking out.

"You don't understand what I am. Stop, I'm begging you."

"It's mine, all mine," Lavina crowed. She pulled one more time.

What came out wasn't Lita's talent, but the alien half of her came to the surface. It was mixed with some of whatever Gaige was. Lita stood eight feet tall. Her skin was black with red feathers. Her eyes were wide, with no lids and double pupils. Lita's human consciousness was gone, and her alien consciousness saw Lavina as a tasty snack. Lita held Lavina by the throat as she choked her. Lavina was slowly dying. Her legs kicked like from a hangman's noose and her face was turning blue

“You have every right to kill her,” the African spoke before he entered the room.

“Every right,” the Greek said, coming into the room after the African. “We will not interfere with your judgement of this creature.” They both gave Lavina a disdainful look.

“Or,” the African said. “You can opt for another punishment.”

The creature could not entertain such a thought. It was hungry, and she'd do. Lita was fighting with her inhuman side. She was not eating Lavina, ever. The fight was dirty and thankfully brief. Her human conscious slid to the front of the alien's body.

“What can we do?”

“Ask your other half,” the Greek said.

She looked inside and wondered if dying wouldn't be better than that, but she knew the answer was no.

The alien was disgusted with Lita's human half. It threw Lavina at the males standing there. When the Greek caught Lavina, she was a newborn infant.

Lita felt her body changing to the one she knew and loved. Let's not do that again. She told herself.

“You'll never see her again,” the African said. “Her second chance at life will be better than the first.” They walked out, leaving her alone with Gaige and the man in the cage.

“We’ll take him too,” the African said and the cage and man were gone.

“That takes care of that problem,” Gaige said, crossing to where Lita was standing looking shell shocked. “You could have killed her.”

“Could I? Do you see me ending her life?”

“No. But I’m watching you regret that you’re not a killer.”

“I’m not sure she deserves a second chance after all she’s done.”

“We really don’t want to be the judge, and executioner. No matter what the other person has done. At least, today we don’t have to have her death on our minds. Let’s go home.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Lita walked into the living room to see everyone sprawled out. They looked tired and sweaty.

Her father who was snuggling with her mother was up and standing in front of her before she could blink. “Welcome home, baby girl.”

That was all it took to have her stepping into his arms. Thoughts of Lavina and how she wished she’d hit her a few more times were gone as she was pulled back into her personal drama.

Her father scented like a father. Not that she was sure of what that should be. Old spice and newspapers? It didn’t matter whatever it was it comforted her.

“Dad?”

“My name is Ajani Mintz. You can call me that or Dad Ajani. Whatever you’re comfortable with.” She nodded her head against his chest. The pain she lived with in the past was

worth it to find out that Ajani and Brianna were her parents. It would be uncomfortable, at times, but always worth it.

He placed a kiss on her forehead before turning her over to Gaige. Her dad went back to the couch where he was cuddling with her mother. Not only did they love her, but they also loved each other. Her mom gave her a smile that made her insides melt.

Gaige hugged her tight before looking at the room. Everyone looked a little beat up, but no worse for wear.

“What happened?” Gaige asked.

Xander let out a grunt and pulled Sable closer. “Lavina started losing her hold on the townspeople’s minds one at a time and then several at a time. Our best guess is she couldn’t fight you and hold her hold here.”

“As soon as they came too, they regretted whatever they had done. People were returning goods and promising to pay restitution. No one seemed to want to do a stint in jail. The ones that were nude quickly left. The others left too but at a slower pace,” Sable said. She snuggled deeper into her mate’s arms.

Her friends and family may have been no worse for wear, but Lita could see how weary they were.

“There are a large group of people that will have to do some self-exploration,” Brianna said.

“What happened with Lavina?” Haile asked.

Lita gave a distorted snort; still not sure she was good with the outcome. She sat on the floor and Gaige sat next to her. He pulled her into his lap, placing small kisses on her cheek.

She took the kisses, needing them to be honest. She was still cold and distraught from knowing her body had changed into an alien with a taste for human flesh. That was a lot and was going to take some time to adjust to. She was going to have a long talk with her father. Not today, though, and probably not this week.

Gaige told them everything that had happened, leaving out the flesh-eating alien. Lita loved him more for that. She also noticed he accepted her like she was. Could she love him more? No, he was just what she needed.

“She’s not even slapped on the wrist. She simply becomes a baby and gets another chance to ruin lives?” Sable asked.

“That’s how we left it,” Lita shrugged. That took the air out of the room as they each thought about what this meant.

“We killed Roger.”

“It’s like apples and oranges,” Xander told Sable.

“Where are the kids?” Lita asked.

“They’re in Amanda’s room,” Sable told her. “I think they felt safer huddled in one bed. They’re down for the night.”

Lita nodded. She’d catch up with Amanda tomorrow. Speaking of sleep.

“I feel like a shower and then I want to sleep for a month.” There was a consensus. Everyone got up and made their way to their rooms.

“I feel like I lived several years in the space of hours.” Lita stripped in the bathroom, desperate to wash everything that had happened off her body. If only she could wash her brain.

Gaige made sweet, slow love to her in the shower. He showed her once again she was the only female for him. They were mates, lovers, and partners. No matter what tomorrow brought. They would face it together.

He dried her off and put her to bed. Lita fell asleep, not worried about a monster at their door.



Lita’s stomach rumbled as she laughed with Gaige, each trying to get out the door first to make it to breakfast. She prevailed, running into the kitchen.

“I’m starved,” Lita declared. “I could eat a complete cow.”

“I knew you would be. “Her dad winked at her as he went back to cooking. She beamed at him. That talk might be coming sooner than she was prepared for.

“No sign of the kids yet?” Famous last words.

Amanda, Haru, and Izzy were hollering while racing into the kitchen.

“My mother is coming!” Amanda danced around the kitchen with Haru and Izzy as they celebrated.

“Wait.” Sable grabbed Amanda, stopping her wiggly dance mid stride. “Your mother is coming?” Her eyes caught the picture of Amanda, Haru, and Izzy on the yellow kitchen wall. A rock settled in her stomach. She hadn’t had Amanda long enough.

“Yes, and she’ll help Izzy. I just know she will.”

“When is she coming?” Never would be too soon.

“In a couple of days. Grown-ups have their own time.” She broke away from Lita and started dancing again.

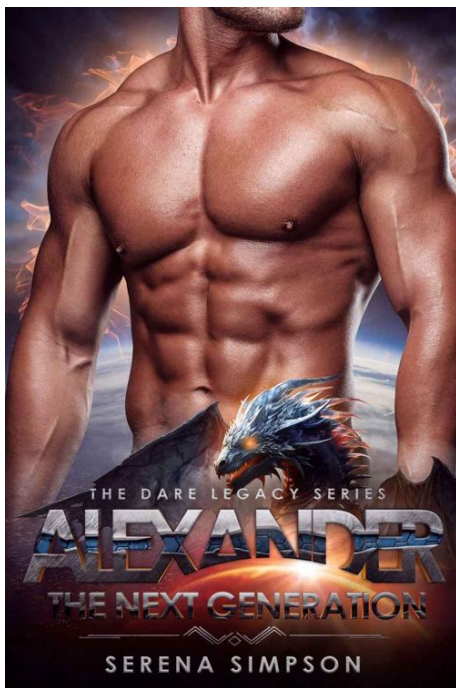
Gaige wrapped his arms around her. Lita blinked fast. Life was full of change. How could she deny Amanda her mother when she lived her life desperate for parents who loved her?

Her mate kissed her, and she knew they’d get through this together.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Alexander

If you haven't read Alexander the first book in The Dare Legacy, you can pick it up on the same retailer you bought Gaige.



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Please leave a review

It doesn't matter where you purchased Gaige, every retailer would love if you left a review. I also would love if you left a review.

Sign up for my newsletter to find out what's coming next and/or to find out a more about me. [Newsletter](#)

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

About the author

I 'm the single mother of one child, who's old enough to think she's an adult. Yeah, that's fun.

I've been spinning stories since I was old enough to talk. I love reading and writing although I am a natural oral storyteller.

I love writing about aliens but I'm about to branch out. Keep your eyes open.