

## **Two halves, One Whole; Ultima**

The only thing I knew when they told me they had a child available was that he was troubled. That couldn't have been farther from the truth. It took me six months of working with him constantly, creating a bond, making sure he knew he could trust me for everything to fall into place. For him to open up and decide I was what he wanted, and not the other way around. We'd gone through every agency, every backend door we could find, every place he'd been before me, searching for answers. It was like looking through a peephole backwards. My frustration was difficult to hide, but I think him seeing it was part of why we'd grown so close. The system isn't set up to benefit children, and he'd been so buried under everything when he finally felt safe enough to show me what he could do, all I could do was marvel at his talent. He said he'd tried to tell others, but they were afraid. So, he hid himself and his abilities.

"Mom?"

Every time he said it I felt my heart swell, because even though it's been a few months since he decided I was his mom, his cheeks still softened under a warm glow. "Yes, Sweetie?" He pointed to the distance and I pulled into a parking lot. "Are you sure?" His eyes swept the floor boards and I gently pulled his attention to me as I brushed his hair behind his ear. "I'm not asking because I doubt you, my little mite."

He looked back at me grinning and rolled his eyes. "I'm almost twelve, why do you call me that?"

I laughed as I opened the door, and waited until he joined me at the front of the car. "Because you may be young but everything you do has the potential to be mighty. The world has no right to make you feel small or force you to hide what you can do when you're so special." I jarred as he grabbed me in a bear hug, and pulled me closer.

"Mom, it's not the same as mine."

"I don't care if it's the same as yours. This situation is the same, and it's no wonder you had such a hard time with everything when they cut you off from the only thing you ever knew."

"But we had to run, we had to leave everything. The house... You had to –

When he pulled away gnawing the inside of his cheek, I took hold of his jaw and gently pulled his face to mine. "Timotheos," I said in a stern voice, "There is nothing wrong with you. I wouldn't care if you were from another planet. They're just things. It won't make me love you any less, or keep fighting for what's right."

"What if I am from another world? What if I'm not even human?"

"So, my son's an alien, or maybe a god? Do you know how lucky that makes me to be his mother?" I caught my balance as he grabbed me again. "Ready to get this done?"

With a nod he grabbed my hand and we walked about half a mile, until the barbed wire above thick stone walls came into view. "THIS IS A RESTRICTED AREA. RETURN TO YOUR VEHICLE OR BE ARRESTED AND PROSECUTED UNDER THE FULL WEIGHT OF THE LAW!"

We looked up at the intercom and saw a guard watching as the gates came into view. Tim almost shrank as rifles appeared. I squeezed his hand when we stopped. "Mom?"

"I'll be here to support whatever you do, but there's no point in playing games with them or making an excuse about why we're here. What do you need to remember, Tim?"

He closed his eyes as we both recited.

"Destruction drives creation. It's the natural course of all things and leads to the same path. My choice and how I choose to let others create the future is all that matters."

He looked around shakily. "I've never used all my power before."

"But we've practiced. Focus on the decay under you, around you, drive it forward so it makes things grow faster and find the weak points in the structure. You can do it, Sweetie, just try. You can get us in there if that's what you want."

"It's what I want Mom."

"Then get us in there!"

He looked at me smiling as the guards screamed again.

"THIS IS YOUR FINAL WARNING. LEAVE THE AREA IMMEDIATELY."

I stepped back as the ground under my feet shifted. Sirens blared inside the base; armed soldiers rushed to the gates as men in the towers tried to keep their balance. Somewhere under the earth small things opened, took root, and shot through the ground. I stepped back watching as vines sprawled over thick stone walls, wrapped and coiled around barbed wires, and entangled every set of feet rushing towards us. Trees broke through stone and soldiers fell, slowly being wrapped in the plants moving faster than they could. He held a hand out and we entered together, walking past breaking doors as roots traveled. The vines rushed past us down walls, breaking through locks, floors and sealed areas. He stopped at a thick steel door and watched as the vines curled around everything. When nothing moved I squeezed his hand. "It's not just plants Tim. Use water, my little mite."

He closed his eyes and the dripping came. Slowly the water doubled, tripled; rushing over steel. We watched the oxidation break through the barrier until the door cracked and fell, leaving a dark void he was hesitant to walk through. "Mom?"

"I'll wait here. If I die, can you make me into a field of Tiger lilies?"

He grabbed me in that bear hug I'd come to love, but still caught me off guard once in a while. I waited, holding my breath when the shuffle of his feet came back into the light. In his arms he held a girl, quite a bit smaller than him. Dark unkempt hair framed her face, almost opposite of his glowing locks. He laid her in front of me and as I reached for her he held a hand up. "Its not like mine, Mom."

"Is she alright?"

"I don't know. She's not waking up." Her eyes fluttered and he held his breath when they opened. Bright brown staring at him. "Eulalie? Do you remember me?"

I held a hand to my mouth as she bolted upright, and curled around him like he might become invisible. But as I watched, I was blinded and quickly thrown into darkness. My eyes couldn't adjust. When I tried to move, I felt I was entombed in stone. Cold surrounded me, each time I touched it the temperature dropped until I coiled myself tightly. "Hmm, I figured death would be nothingness. Not that I'd just be stuck in a box."

The wall in front of me turned to ash and I had to blink a few times as my eyes adjusted to daylight. "Mom? You Ok?" Tim grabbed my hand and helped me up.

"Yeah, I just wasn't sure what happened."

"Sorry. We haven't been together for a while and when that much energy builds up we can't really control it. I sealed you in so the blast didn't disintegrate you, but it did everything and.... everyone else."

I looked around and sighed as the dust settled. "Serves them right for keeping you apart and locking her away like some dark secret. How is she?"

He lifted his arm and brown eyes timidly glanced around his back. "This is my sister, Eulalie. I've always called her Ula. Ula, this is our new Mom."

I waved slowly and bent lower as she studied me. "Hello Ula. My name is Gabriel."

Ula looked at Tim and scrunched her nose. "Is she for real? She's not gonna lock us in someplace and only give us stuff when we break something for her? That's all they ever want." She looked at me skeptically as Tim held a hand out, waiting until I was holding his.

"She's not like the other people. She won't make me or you do anything we don't want to do. She thinks we have a gift. That all destruction is the birth of creation."

"Yeah? What if I turn her into dust! She's your new mom, does that mean you love her more than me? What happens when she gets killed because I can't control it like you can? Will you hate me then too?" Ula asked, tears struggling to break loose as Tim shrank from her.

“Well,” I said, “If you turn me to dust: I hope your brother makes me into a field of flowers, or at least that my dust helps them grow into something beautiful. I don’t have to be your mom if you don’t want me to. I could just be your friend.”

She looked me over cautiously and back to Tim as she held a finger out and tapped my arm, stepping back like she wasn’t sure I was real when I smiled. When her jaw fell, Tim bit his lip and nodded. “Mom thinks you’re like me, the only reason you turned things to dust is because no one knew you needed to let off energy once in a while. If someone said I was bad, I acted bad, if someone said I was good, I acted good. She’s the first person who asked me what I wanted, how I felt.”

I agreed with him. “True, except someone figured out your sister had raw power and you were overlooked.” Ula stared at me like I had two heads. “The little things they wanted you to do weren’t enough for you to let go of the energy constantly building, at least not without your brother to balance things.”

“Everybody tells me I’m a freak, or uses me to get something they want. There’s nothing good about me.” She cast her eyes to the side as Tim watched her with an understanding sadness.

I sighed, looking off in thought after she glared at me. “What’s your favorite thing?”

“Pokémon and Harry Potter books.” Tim answered, smiling as she looked at him like she couldn’t believe he remembered.

“That is a wonderful way to explain this.” Ula glanced at me warily as I stuck my hands on my hips. “Imagine you two are a spell book or a Pokémon. Tim is the directive and holder of the spell: the book or the Pokéball. Either way, he helps you stay in order, protects you, and contains your energy when you’re together. He’s just as strong and has just as much of the same energy, just in a different way. There’s nothing bad about a spell book or a Pokémon. Just the wizard or witch that uses the spell, or the trainer holding the Pokéball with the Pokémon inside. There’s nothing evil or bad about you.”

Ula looked at Tim when he cleared his throat. “She said she wouldn’t care if I was an alien or a god, she’d love me anyway. She’ll love you too.”

“No one ever passes the test. Have you scanned her?” Ula asked.

Tim looked at me sheepishly. “I didn’t tell her we could do that. I didn’t want to freak her out.”

“Timotheos.” I said sternly, watching his shoulders slump, “We agreed, no secrets. What does she mean by scan me?”

“Sorry Mom, it’s just a weird thing we can do when we’re together. We can touch someone and see who they are.”

I cringed. "I'm not crazy about you seeing my past. You're young and some things should be private."

"Not like that. We can just, kind of see what your intentions are, how you feel. That kind of stuff."

I nodded. "Like a vibe check?" He nodded again as I took a deep breath. "We can do that if it'll help her trust me." I looked between them and watched as Tim held his hand out to Ula. She took it and chewed her lip. I had to fight not to giggle. I knew they'd been apart for a couple of years, but they still had similar mannerisms. When he reached for me, I held a hand out and watched as they both grabbed my fingers. I felt this shiver, almost like a mild electric shock and stepped back as Tim gawked at me. The expression on his face wasn't one I'd seen and my uncertainty grew as Ula burst into tears. "Did I do something wrong?"

Tim shook his head, and I pinched my shoulders as he tried to clear his eyes. "Mom," he started, using his shirt to wipe his face off.

Ula slammed into my chest bawling. "WE HAVE A REAL MOM!"

The shock of it wasn't enough for me not to wrap my arms around her and look back at Tim as I pulled him in. "I have two little mites and they both love bear hugs!"

Tim looked around. "Where are we going to live now? I kind of destroyed our house like you did the base."

Ula looked up at him and back to me with a white face and I laughed. "We'll figure it out. It's just a house. Let's go see if the car's still here."

We started walking through the dust until we found an area flowing with dead plants and fallen rubble. The car was barely visible as we crawled over crumbled walls. I sat and caught my breath, waiting for Tim to help Ula. "Mom, there's something else you should know."

"Another secret?" I looked back and tipped a brow as Ula wrung her hospital type gown in her hands.

"More like, two?" His shoulders leaned towards his neck as Ula shrank into herself beside him.

I took a deep breath and stood, stepping closer. "This better be the last. It's not going to make me love you any less, either of you." I caught my weight as Ula slammed me again, and brushed her hair back as she hiccupped in my arms.

"We kind of know where we came from, we just don't know how we got here." I lifted a brow and waited until he nervously tapped one of his toes into the pile of rubble. "You wouldn't believe me."

“Try me.”

Ula and Tim looked at me and he sighed. “We really aren’t from this world. We’re not sure what the place was called, but we know our name was Ultima. It’s kind of funny you mentioned a spell. We were divided because they thought we were too strong together, so they split us in half.”

“Who is ‘they’? Do they know where you are? Do I need to keep you hidden so you’ll be safe?” I looked between them and Ula burst into tears as I opened my arms, waiting for her. She was against my chest again as Tim wiped his eyes. “I’m not trying to be pushy but these are things I need to know guys. We’ll be ok, no matter what. Why are you crying again?”

Tim wrapped around me and his sister. “Because no one’s ever loved us. Just what we could do for them. We’ve never had a family.”

“Let me look and see if I can find something about the name Ultima...” I pulled my phone from my pocket and they both watched with me as I scrolled through several pages. “It’s from a game called Final Fantasy.. Sound familiar to either of you?” They both shook their heads as I tapped into a page. “Google says; ‘The ultima spell is used outside of elemental magic. Non-elemental magic refers to a form of magic that operates outside the conventional elemental system, described as utilizing raw Ki, Mana, or a fundamental cosmic force at the center of elemental’ ...hmm that kind of makes sense. It’s why things grow after you destroy something.”

“How?” They both asked as I clicked another page.

“Well, without you Ula, the energy Tim draws is pure mana. But he can’t absorb it. It just comes to where he is. I think it just speeds decay. The decay itself creates heat, the heat creates moisture and makes things grow faster. It may not be elemental magic, but it’s manna he can’t draw in. That’s your part. I’ll have to work with you for a few months to see how things are different so you can control it though. We’ll have to study things for a while because magic isn’t something that lives on this planet. Well, it wasn’t.” I laughed as their heads fell. “What?”

“We’re not human, not even from Earth.” Ula said, looking away.

I took another breath. “Technically, you’re part of a computer program made in this world about a magic spell in the digital world. Did you know in some cultures they believe if you create something it takes on a life of its own and the creator becomes responsible for nurturing that life after bringing it into existence? I don’t care who brought you into this existence, or how, or why. You’re my children now, and it’s my job to do the same as whoever created you. I have to assume they created and separated you from each other, hiding you here for good reasons, or they plan on coming back and using you as a means to their own ends. That’s not going to happen. Whoever they were, they made you human. Humans are no better than any other kind of life, be it a program or a spell. It’s just a difference. It’s my job to make sure you can make the choice by showing you how humans think, work, or might try to manipulate others to act in their favor. All I can do is keep you safe until you choose the path you want to take.” We walked to

the car and I opened the door, watching as they jumped in. "So, what's the first decision you'd like to make?"

Ula leaned forward from the back seat. "You don't believe us do you?"

Tim looked back at her grinning as I curled my brow and adjusted the mirror so I could see her. "I don't know everything. But I've always thought science and technology were magical. If there's another explanation from where you guys came from or how you do things, that's fine too. Nothing is impossible. I mean, what could be more magical than me getting to be your mother?"

"No one's ever loved us before." Ula said it so quietly it seemed to stop all other sounds.

"Well, that's because they were stupid. I love you both, and I'll always be proud of my kids and what they're capable of. So, decision time. Well stop and grab you some real clothes on the way, but do you guys want pizza, or tacos for dinner?"

Ula burst into tears again and climbed over the seat. I started the car and drove until she fell asleep, her head resting on my shoulder. When I brushed her hair away from her face, Tim grabbed my hand. "They'll come looking for us Mom."

I tilted my head back and forth, ticking my eyes between him and the road. "Then I should prepare the magicians for every battle we might face, my beautiful boy."

His cheeks matched the light in his eyes as we turned from the highway. "It will be bad."

"We'll be ready. I'll make sure of it. You'll be ready...."