

Facing the Past  
by  
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Only Mark would bring popcorn to me while I was busy working in the library vaults, so I didn't look up when the scent of popcorn washed over me. "How long has it been?"

"Two days." He answered. "I brought popcorn and sodas."

"Nikki worries too much." Apparently, I had spent two days in what is essentially a study room in order to decipher a set of images given to me as a vision, imagine miniature cinema screens hanging in the air which I could control with a wave of my hand, a gift from the Most High Master. That was a day longer than Mark's wife would tolerate me going without food. Mark on the other hand had watched this process many times.

Mark put the popcorn bowl and sodas on the table. "Wow, is that my Nikki?"

"Yeah, these are like micro-moments from the past." I pointed to another image with Nikki holding a baby. "That's Samantha."

"Have you ever received images from the past before?" Mark was carefully looking at the images now.

"No, and they have to be relevant to the future or else there's nothing I can do about them."

Mark started counting the floating images. "How many are there?"

"Ten," I answered, "and I think I have managed to place them in chronological order."

"How did you manage that?" Mark pushed the nose of his glasses back into position.

"Well the first three are kind of a guess, but the rest have to do with Samantha and the events in her life."

“So you asked Nikki.” He smirked.

“Yes, which should count as me coming out of my room.”

“I would have counted it, but you know she doesn’t if you don’t eat.”

“She has issues.” I responded.

“Don’t we all,” he answered pointing at the images. “What are these telling you?”

“I was hoping to get your opinion before I made any decisions.”

“That sounds ominous.” I could see Mark studying me through my peripheral vision.

“Are you going to need Lilith?” Mark asked cautiously.

“Funny you should mention her.” I waved my hand and the first image in the line of floating screens played.

*“It is wrong.” Lilith whispered as she scrubbed the blood off the floor.*

*“It is a fact of life.” Lilith’s mother said in a gravelly voice as she tossed medical instruments into a bucket. “Our ways are considered uncivilized and if you want to continue living a relatively peaceful life, you will learn to perform the deeds that keep you in the good graces of our Lord.”*

*“That boorish man-” Lilith stood and slammed the bloodied brush onto the floor. “We are more powerful than they are. I do not understand why you choose to be subservient.”*

*Lilith’s mother stared into the bucket and took a deep breath. “Your father lost his life to ensure our subservience.”*

“Two hundred years has done little to change her.” I said.

Mark glanced at me. “I think all Seers are a little boorish, don’t you?”

“Father, how could you say that about me?” I placed my hands over my heart feigning pain.

He laughed. “Imp, who besides me knows your real name?”

“Don’t you dare.” A part of me panicked for a moment thinking he would say it out loud, but he didn’t.

Instead he returned our focus to the images. “What is important here?”

“Nothing really. I mean, you get to see Lilith’s mother, but I think people would prefer accepting that Lilith is the one all demons come from.”

“She isn’t that old.” Mark rolled his eyes. He hated when I spoke poorly about my predecessor, but he found kindness in everyone, which is probably why he and Nikki make such an amazing couple. “Play the next one.”

*“Please. You have to. Your mother would have.”*

*Lilith stood at the threshold of her door as a young pregnant woman pleaded for help. “I am not my mother and I will not aid you in the murder of an innocent child. Perhaps you should have kept your legs closed.”*

*Lilith slammed the door on the young woman, a smile spreading across her lips.*

“Again, I don’t think there is anything particularly important here. I think these two visions set up what happens in the next one.” My head twitched slightly as I glanced at the third image, closed my eyes and looked away. I waved my hand to play the image.

“You aren’t going to watch?”

“I’ve seen it enough.”

*Lilith was sleeping when the front door burst open. A hulking figure entered the home and growled. "Who are you to disobey my order?"*

*Lilith jumped from her bed.*

*"You, whose existence is dependent on my approval." He crossed the room until he towered over her.*

*"My Lord?" Lilith shook her head.*

*"My offspring cannot have progeny with your kind. You will perform the procedure."*

*"I will not, my Lord."*

*Lilith had barely spoken the refusal when he grabbed her arm and forcefully laid her across her bed and lifted her chemise. He licked the side of her face. "If you carry this bastard to full term then I will give you peace, otherwise," he chuckled, "you belong to me."*

"Who is that?" Mark asked.

I shook my head trying to wipe away the tears in my eyes. "Did you see it though?"

"The seizure? Yes. Do you think this was Lilith's stress inducer?" Mark wrapped his arms around me.

I nodded.

"Are you okay?" He whispered.

I cried into his shoulder and tried to think of anything other than the attack this unknown man had forcefully put Lilith through. "This was the moment Lilith became a Seer's apprentice. Did you know that she is the only Seer not to be led to her Master by the Most High Master?"

“I am sure I have heard that before.” Mark pushed me away from him to get a good look at me. “Are you okay?”

I wasn't but I nodded. “Nikki's in the next image.”

*Lilith cracked the door open. “I know you.”*

*“I would hope so or else this would be extremely awkward.” Nikki pushed her way into the house. “Where is Samantha?”*

*“Why do I know you?”*

*Nikki opened the curtain over the kitchen sink. She ran her finger through the dust covering the counter. “This is not the condition that a child needs to be living in.”*

*A cry came from the bed. Nikki looked at Lilith, who was still standing at the door, and moved to pick up the child, who smiled up at her. Nikki returned the smile when she noticed the walls covered in drawings. A particular one about her holding Samantha caught her attention.*

*“The mother has sent you.” Lilith said shutting the door.*

*Nikki bounced the cooing child and spoke using mother ease. “No, the Most High Master has sent me.”*

*“Who?” Lilith tried to take Samantha from Nikki's arms, but Samantha pulled away.*

*“The god of the Christians. You should get some sleep. I can explain everything later.”*

“No one really talks much about this time in Lilith's life.” Mark said.

“There isn't any information that I have been able to find.”

“You would have to request it from the European Temple. All of this happened in Ireland,” Mark stopped talking. I knew that look and finger movements, like he was writing in the air, was actually him doing math in his head. “Hmm, it’s been a while.”

“Or you could just tell me since you know something.”

“All I know is that Nikki spent several years trying to get Lilith to understand that until Samantha showed signs of being a Fallen child, she was not allowed in the temple.”

“You aren’t of the Fallen.”

“No, I am not a descendant of a fallen angel, but I am considered the father of the Seer and I was an employee to the previous Seer and I am married to the Coven High Priestess, which has given me some rather important secrets to keep and afforded me a few extra luxuries.”

“Ego much?” I smiled.

He elbowed me in the side. “Adopting you has been the best part of this journey.”

“Oh, blah, blah, blah.” I had to break the moment or else I might cry again and I had too much work to do. “The fact that these are just moment to moment is frustrating. It is so much easier for the Most High Master to just give me a vision that says ‘Hey, get these two people in the same room with each other’ or ‘Can you make this person refuse this other person’s request.’ I don’t understand why I need all these images.”

“Well, that is a lot of built up frustration. Are you sure you don’t want something to eat?”

“No.” I said popping open a soda can and grabbing a handful of popcorn. I waved the hand holding the soda to play the next image.

*“Nikki will continue to care for you while I am gone.”*

*“How long will you be gone, Mammy?” Samantha asked brushing her doll’s hair.*

*"I don't know, sweetie." Lilith answered.*

*"Okay, see you in a few days." Samantha bounded off into the garden.*

*Lilith attempted to follow her, but Nikki grabbed her arm. "You leave for herb trips often enough that she has no concept of you not returning."*

*Lilith raised her voice. "I have the right to want her to understand."*

*"If what you want is her to cry and tell you she will miss you then you are being selfish."*

*Nikki's voice remained even.*

*"What if this is a stress inducer for her?" Lilith's eyes filled with tears as she glanced out the window at her humming child.*

*"Then she will enter our world." Nikki placed a hand on Lilith's shoulder. "You have nothing to fear. You are becoming an apprentice Seer and therefore she will always be cared for."*

I couldn't help but compare and contrast me with Lilith. We both put a barrier up to keep people away from us. I looked at Mark and realized that we each had a small handful of people we trusted. She had a far more difficult stress inducer and had to give up her daughter in order to serve a god who she was not raised knowing. I'm not sure I could have survived her trials. "I think the mentioning of stress inducer here is the first real point we reach."

"You said the rest of the visions are about Samantha, right?"

"Yeah, mostly."

"Nikki watched over Samantha for several years before Samantha got married.

Apparently, Nikki and several others decided that Samantha would never experience a stress inducer and left her to live outside the temple world." Mark filled in the question I hadn't asked.

I shook my head. "Then Nikki left right before everything fell apart for Samantha."

*"I cannot refuse my brother's call." Ethan said stuffing clothes into a bag.*

*"Yes, you can." Samantha countered.*

*Ethan shook his head. "He is my brother. I have a duty to him."*

*Samantha snatched the bag from the bed. "You have a duty to me."*

*"I have received several summons from my family for three years now. This is not a request for us to visit where we will be questioned about our plans for children. This is a war summons."*

*"Choose ostracism." Samantha pleaded.*

*Ethan grabbed the bag and returned to packing. "I will not."*

*"We have plenty." Samantha grabbed the bag again.*

*As they struggled over the bag, it tore. Ethan raised a hand to strike Samantha, who set her face to accept the strike. Ethan dropped his hand. "I love you, Samantha, but I have to go. We will be back before winter."*

"So, if this is supposed to be a progression of Samantha's life then this would be another great moment for her to experience a stress inducer." I said cramming more popcorn in my mouth.

"Do you think that is what these visions are leading you to understand?" Mark opened a can of soda.

"No, because she doesn't experience a stress inducer here. Then again, she now works in the temple. I know there are visions here somewhere that shows some of this."

“Really, which one.”

“It will ruin the surprise.”

“There’s a surprise?”

“Just watch.” As I waved my hand my stomach growled.

*Samantha ran into Ethan’s arms. He embraced her for a moment before pushing her away.*

*With tears in her eyes, Samantha smiled. “I found you.”*

*Ethan showed no emotions. “You cannot find what was not lost.”*

*“What happened? The rest of the men came home.”*

*“There is no reason for me to return home.”*

*“I just knew-” Samantha paused, “wait, what?”*

*“Look around you. Who would want to leave this for a dirt floored hovel?”*

*Samantha reached out, “Ethan?”*

*He took a step back. “You are a domestic. Go home and tend to your sheep.”*

*“You are my husband.” Her voice quivered.*

*“My vows were until death do us part and I am dead ... to your embrace, to your love.*

*These past several years spent in the arms of well-groomed women who can offer their life force to me.” Tears began to fall as Samantha stuttered to say something but Ethan clenched his jaw and continued. “You begging for life that I can no longer give your already barren womb or there would have been a child. Defective from before our vows. I had hoped in your deceitful ways you would have already moved on to a new husband.”*

*“I have always been chaste.” The words were barely audible.*

*“Because no one else would have you. And I choose to have you no more. Go, return to the mud you were born in.”*

*Samantha fell to her knees. Her head inches from the ground. “What have I done to deserve this?”*

*Ethan looked around as if searching for something. “You were born into a family of whores.”*

Mark’s mouth dropped open. “He told her.”

“I know.” Mark was as shocked as I was the first time I heard Ethan tell Samantha he was dead.

“I don’t understand.”

Lilith had been dealing with Ethan for a while now and went out of her way to keep Samantha from finding out. “I don’t think Lilith knows.”

“Does Ethan?”

My stomach growled again as I nodded.

“We should get you something to eat.”

I walked over to the door of the study room and pushed what looked like a doorbell. “I would prefer to order in.”

It didn’t take more than five minutes before someone came, took our order and I was back to work.

*Samantha was standing at her window as a tiger and panther ran past. After several minutes, Samantha saw the two felines again. She put down her cup and went outside.*

*“It has been a while since we have been sent to the Seer.”*

*“Hello?” Samantha called out.*

*“Who is that?”*

*“I guess she does come out of her room.”*

*“Rarely from what I hear.”*

*“Are you talking about me?” Samantha asked.*

*“Can you hear us?”*

*“Of course I can hear you.” Samantha answered.*

*Cautiously the tiger lowered its head from between the branches of a tree. “You can hear me?”*

*Samantha’s eyes widened.*

*“Can you hear me?”*

*Samantha turned to find the panther right behind her and screamed.*

*“Hmm, that is a yes.”*

*Samantha ran back into the house and bolted the door.*

“Wait, what?” Mark asked with a mouthful of sandwich. “Did we miss it?”

“I don’t know.” I shook my fists at the floating images. “This is what I am talking about. It’s frustrating. Here,” I motioned back to previous visions, “it appears as if we are waiting for a stress inducing moment and now she has already had it?”

I paced as Mark considered the visions. “Play the section where she collapsed on the ground again.”

I did.

“It could be here and we can’t see it. Coven abilities are not always as obvious as a person shifting into an animal.”

“Yes, and I would have to do some research, but this ability crosses factions.”

“We have several cross-faction abilities.”

“We do now, but this is before Samantha came to the temple.”

Mark took time for that to sink in. “You think Samantha’s father is a Shifter.”

“My offspring cannot have progeny with your kind.” I repeated from a previous vision.

“What if the father knew he was a shifter but didn’t know that Lilith didn’t know about the Coven?”

“There is a lot to unpack in that sentence. How many of the women coming for abortions were from the Coven faction?”

“Better yet, how many people throughout the world belong to a faction and don’t know it.”

Mark shook his head. “It is unlikely that too many people can exist without suffering from stress inducing moments.”

“Is it? Really?”

Mark stared at me with that fatherly expression, the one where he thinks I am not accepting something obvious. “Yes, Imp, we would know if people were just popping up with new abilities.”

“Mark, part of Nikki’s job as the Coven High Priestess is to find and relocate those with Coven abilities and there are people working with the large homeless community of Shifters and let’s not forget that we have a military whose sole purpose is to track rogue faction members and return them to the temple.”

“True but that is a tiny fraction of the population. If it was-”

I cut Mark off. “If it was about to get worse. If that fraction of the population was about to rapidly grow.”

Mark began to understand. “Then the Most High Master would send you a vision in order to keep it from happening.”

“Or at the very least give a warning. Perhaps something like this?” I played the next vision.

*“Ethan?” Samantha called out running after a man who had turned the corner. As Samantha rounded the corner she was faced with both Lilith and Ethan.*

*Lilith took a step forward. “Sam-”*

*Ethan put a hand out stopping Lilith and stepped forward himself.*

*Samantha took a running leap, shifted into a lioness and attacked Ethan.*

Mark gasped. “When did this happen?”

“A couple of months ago.”

“Okay, so this confirms that her father is a Shifter.”

My heart started racing and my hands were twitching. I could feel a panic attack coming on. “No, it suggests that could be the case. Realistically we could be wrong about Samantha’s father. He could have been referencing their social status.”

“Lilith would have to have latent Shifter abilities for that to be the case.” Mark reached out and took my hand. He had this way of rubbing his thumb in my palm that helped sooth me, which usually worked until I considered the complications of what the visions might mean.

I snatched my hand away from him. "Tell me this isn't what I think it means." I waved my hand one last time.

*Samantha stopped at the sounds of whimpering. She found a small boy, covered in bruises and lacerations, hiding in the woods. Kneeling down she reached out to the child. "Who did this to you?"*

*The child stared at her but didn't answer.*

*"Come with me."*

*He shook his head.*

*"I can help with your injuries." Samantha showed the boy some ointment and gauze.*

*When the small boy crawled out from under a bush, Samantha could see the extent of his issues. The boy was skin and bones with a distended belly. His lacerations looked like whip marks.*

*"I need you to come with me." Samantha said more forceful.*

*The boy recoiled from her, again shaking his head.*

*"Sweetie, you need more help than I can give you." Samantha twitched slightly as she reached out and took his hand. "You need a doctor."*

*The boy shivered. "I can't leave. My sister needs me."*

*Samantha's eyes widened. "I can take you both with me."*

*He shook his head hard.*

*"Can I at least send someone out to check on you?"*

*The boy nodded.*

*Samantha walked away from the young boy looking back one more time before disappearing into the trees.*

“What is that?” Mark asked pointing to the boy’s feet.

I paused the vision. Mark had noticed the same thing I had. Around the boys feet, in a widening radius, weeds and plants began to die. “I think the better question is did Samantha trigger it?” As I said the words, all the hair on my body stood up.

“Is it possible to experience multiple stress inducing moments?”

I wanted to say no, but recently several changes have occurred in the temple world that told me otherwise. I played the end of the last vision.

*Everything is about to change.*

Critique: