

Dream Weaver

By Su Williams

Prologue

Nick

Incorporeal I drift, camouflaged against the shimmering snow, no more than a sparkling flurry in the wind, dancing just on the precipice of light shielding me from her--and *them*. I am her aegis, her defense from the darkness that presses in on her from without, evil cloaked from her eyes. I feel her inner darkness' pull on her; hear it call her name.

Vivid images whose birth I cannot fathom--whether from within her heart, or tailored for her torment--still, after all these months accost her sleep and crush her soul. Yet, her screams tear the night and my heart less often than before. Surely, she is strong enough to endure some terror; no lifetime is without it. Such a gentle soul so tethered and weighted by so much loss, so much grief. I have mended what I can of her damaged mind without wholly purging her memories. At least I can dull her pain, callous her tender heart.

I know the unwritten code: 'There are mortals, and there are immortals, and never the twain shall meet.' Still, I find myself here, hovering on the fringe of the woods just outside the halo of light that wreathes her home. And *they* haunt the darkness, hidden within the shadows. I sense them, though not how near. I shudder at the consequences if they discover my presence. They would kill her, or at the very least brutalize her--just because they are able, just for my torment, the fresh nightmare of her torture a delicacy on their lips as they devour my memory.

They are changing, such aberrant evolutions we have found in their kind of late. Creatures so like us, spoken from the same heavenly breath, yet worlds apart. Their sustenance makes them monsters, even evil. They grow stronger pillaging the gifts of our kind and using them as their own and leave us worse than dead. For this cause, I feel powerless, mortal.

She knows nothing of my world, few mortals do, and it is only because of a promise and her safety that I enter hers. I vowed to protect her at any cost, with my life if necessary. And something of her draws me in, her heart to mine. It wakens an ache, a passion that long ago I laid to rest, deep beneath the sodden earth, entombed in company of my mortal life.

My heart aches with indecision. Should I go to her, risk her life perhaps to save it, or leave her be to strengthen from the terror?

CHAPTER 1 Going Under

Night terrors stalk my sleep and haunt me through each day. I am never free. Macabre phantoms, twisted metal, flames and the sound of my parent's screams, their cries for salvation. And I would give it--if I could, were the realm in which I live and the terrors in which they died equal.

In time, my gasps for air and life abated. I learned to live without the press of suffocation on my lungs. At the least I was treading water with some hope of survival. But monsters strike even in the shallows, even when you're feet from shore and almost standing on solid ground.

The subtle bumps of a predator, like a shark in the deep, reawakened the terrors. And I lived in fear of the jaws ripping through me and dragging me under, lost again to the darkness of terror. The darkness that has nothing to do with light or sleep.

I am Emari Sweet, sole survivor of a crash I was never in. The crash that claimed the lives of my beloved parents Zecharias and Jane Sweet. The crash that left me orphaned at 17. The crash I foresaw in the eyes of the State Trooper before the words formed on his tongue. Cold and hard, the words turned my

blood to hardened steel and eviscerated me. My soul twisted and shredded.

I lived with the terrors for many weeks after that. My best girl, Ivy, kept my body functioning, the basics for sustenance of life. She kept me Earthbound and alive when I'd rather have been neither. She guided me through an icy summer that tumbled into autumn like the leaves off a tree.

Adrian Rovnikov, my father's best friend, my shrink since the crash, brought me drugs--antidepressants. But they are only safe in the right hands. In mine, they are death. So, before I caused irreparable harm, the pills went the way of dead fish.

Dreams of an angel with eyes of obsidian wound their way through the darkness until they finally displaced the terrors. His gentle hand calmed my writhing body, drew out the poison of the chimera, and guided me back to life. The dark-eyed angel faded as my darkness dawned into light. Yet, even when the terrors diminished, the torment hovered nearby, stalking my sanity, prepared to strike at any show of weakness.

Winter's chill cast a mantle of white over Spokane. Trees wore shimmering nacreous cloaks that rivaled the grandeur of their summer dress greens and fall's autumnal oranges, reds and yellows. The city lay calm and peaceful under winter's frigid embrace and my heart still ached under the frost of grief. I hid it from all but the most discerning eyes.

The tumble of seasons brought more than cold; the real monster lurked in dark corners and phoned me at work, promised me pain and fear.

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Daylight masquerades as dusk, the clouds heavy-laden with snow. An arctic blast extends its arm, balling its fist to bludgeon the car from the road. Brake lights flash a glaring red. The tires whirl and whine on the frozen asphalt seeking elusive purchase. The wind flings the car across three frosted lanes. Panic twists my father's face as the car fishtails out of control. His frantic hands, hands that can do anything, build anything, grapple uselessly at the wheel. My mother's face is fear-white, her mouth a perfect 'o' that disappears beneath her small, stark hand. A wall of white emerges out of the flurry before the windshield, but not of snow. Cement. Massive and merciless. The shiny new sedan plows into the bridge abutment, lifting Mom's side of the car into flight. Giant sparkling snowflakes of shattering glass fly into the air as the car rolls over and over. Metal screams and moans in protest. Finally settling on its top, the car slides across the icy black tarmac, a path of broken scattered pieces in its wake.

Upside down, my mother's pallid face appears at her window. Violent crimson drenches her hair, a severe contrast against her spectral skin. Her dazzling emerald green eyes, my own eyes staring back at me, implore for my help. Pounding hysterically, her knuckles split and bleed, smearing the window in a web of red. The roar of fire drowns her cries, flames that now return the light to the day, and vanquish the masquerade.

Driven by panic, I plunge through the whirling eddies of snow. But I can't get to them. I have no traction, my steps falter. I am prisoner to the freezing storm, powerless to save them; held at bay by the fireball that lights the grey gauzy day cotton-bright like summer, and sends seismic shockwaves that undulate the ground beneath me. Shrapnel of rocks and glass rain down upon me.

Exhausted and useless, I collapse to my knees on the caustic, sub-zero ice. The acrid smell of smoke and gasoline grows heavy in the air, searing my throat and nostrils. Like a pin-hole camera, the light etches the panic and fear on my mother's face onto my retinas and deep into my brain. The blaze scorches my eyes, bringing my tears to a boil. Searing heat and the horror of looking into the faces of my mother and father as the flames devour them forces me to look away. My body finally crumbles onto the cold freeway, in exhausted agony. I crush my ears with my hands to block out the maelstrom. Their haunting screams reverberate in my ears, echoes of the torment resounding throughout my body.

The reality of my own screams awoke me. I bolted upright and clutched my head. My body trembled and rocked, soaked in sweat, as I manically searched for a thread of truth. My breath rasped from my raw lungs that thrashed against the smoke-that-wasn't.

Comforting gazes from my black and white movie monsters centered my thoughts. Bela Legosi, both Lon Chaney's, Boris Karloff and even Vlad Dracul himself, with his large round piercing eyes, crowded the walls of my black and white bedroom. Vlad was the only true monster there, but somehow I found a strange compassion for the man, given his tortured history. My glossy companions brought my heart an odd comfort.

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Ninety minutes later, I sat in Adrian's office and debated with myself just how much to tell him. I didn't need the 'Emari, you should come stay with us' lecture again. I'd proved to the Spokane Courts that I was capable in every way to be considered an adult, and was granted emancipation.

"Nightmares again?" Adrian asked.

"Ya think?" I wasn't being disrespectful. We were just beyond fluff and formality.

"Any idea what the stress trigger is this time?"

"Um..." I squirmed against the soft red leather of his couch. "There's this guy..."

A small conspiratorial smile crept onto Adrian's face while I paused, contemplating.

"Uh, no. I mean a bad guy. He's calling me. At work. Like phone stalking me." I hated admitting even this little bit to him, but most of the time his psycho-babble really did help.

Adrian leaned across the desk. His eyes narrowed and deep canyons grooved his forehead. "And just what is being done to stop him?"

Great! Just what I need. 'Protective-daddy' mode.

"It's all good." I waved him down. "My friend, Jesse, escorts me to and from my car every day and Collin keeps one of the Loss Prevention guys in the department as much as he can." Despite playing it off as no big deal to Adrian, a cold uneasiness squirmed through me like night crawlers.

"Is he only calling you at work?" The Doc was in full-on interrogation mode now.

"Yes. Only at work. But it's weird. It's like he's watching me but the LP guys never find anyone."

"Tell me you've called the police."

"Sure, sure. Nothing the cops can do unless the guy actually kills me or something, though."

Adrian sat back in his chair with a harrumph of frustration, the 'daddy-look' still plastered on his face. "Emari..."

"Adrian. Don't even start."

"Then why are you here?" he retorted.

"The night terrors? You're supposed to say a bunch of 'shrinky' kinds of things to make me feel better."

So he did. And when he was done, he walked me to the door. He gave me the usual 'be careful' and 'buckle up for safety' speech; something he and Dad must've gone to school together to learn.

Then he gave me his best fatherly hug. I had to admit, his arms truly did feel like the safest place in the world.

"See you for Thanksgiving?" he asked.

"Sure, Uncle Adrian. Kiss Celeste and the kids for me." He wasn't really my uncle. Just my father's closest friend in the world.

"Of course. See you then, Emari."

"See ya."

I shambled into work after my meeting with Adrian. Ivy saw me for the zombie I was, so in contrast to her perky pixiness. Her ornery smile wavered as I drew nearer but she reined it in. She'd given up months ago with the 'you look like hell' comments. Visine and Covergirl couldn't wreak miracles that big. She opened her arms and I stepped inside.

"You okay?" she whispered.

I stepped out of her embrace. "Sure, sure," I said with a grin, and a quote from one of our favorite books. The marbled blue of her eyes softened into limpid pools, so vast any guy could swim in them. I tucked a wisp of her soft brown hair behind her ear. "Let's get to work."

She pinched my arm playfully as she released me. "Collin's got LP scheduled in an hour, but Blake came early, off the clock," she informed me as we sorted children's clothing to reshel. "Jess's gonna be pissed you didn't wait for him."

Jesse DeLaRosa was the closest thing to a real life Prince Charming in my world. He was instantly likeable, flirtatious in the sweetest way, easy at being a fast friend, faultlessly kindhearted. His ingenuous smile lit up any room, a constant feature that graced his lightly bronzed face. He sang or whistled while he worked, no matter how mundane or dirty the job, a lingering accent, from his days as a child in Puerto Rico colored his speech. He was a couple of years older than Ivy and me, but he clicked with our dorkiness and we'd become best friends. He'd taken it upon himself to be my daily escort--even on his days off.

"He'll get over it," I told her, but inwardly I hoped he wasn't too mad at me.

Every time the phone rang, it jangled our nerves. Ivy's hand lashed out with the speed of a viper to

protect me from innocuous callers.

“You can’t field all of the calls, Ives,” I said after the fourth call.

“I can try,” she replied with a smug half smile.

The stalker wouldn’t call with Ivy present, and we both knew it. He would wait until she went on break, as though he had a bird’s nest in the middle of the department. He wanted me alone, separated from the pack, vulnerable.

Ivy reluctantly took her break and Blake haunted the racks. Despite my anticipation, adrenalin shot through me like an ice river and my heart banged against my ribcage when the phone rang. I watched Ivy’s shadow disappear from sight as I reached a quivering hand to the phone.

“Children’s Department,” I choked out. Collin instructed us not to give our names until this ‘situation’ was resolved.

“I see you,” the voice purred gruffly. I envisioned a lion crouched in tall grass. Rigid, poised for attack. His words were soft and succinct, as though masking something from me, but the smooth lacquered surface didn’t camouflage the menace that roiled underneath--like the delicate crust of cooled lava veiling the molten lake beneath.

Blake’s eyes locked on my face as he lurched away from a rack of boy’s jeans. They followed the silent nod of my head. The muscles of his line-backer physique hardened as he prowled the department.

“I’m sorry. What was that?” I delayed. My voice quivered with anger, to my dismay. I wasn’t scared. I was pissed. But I knew he would read it as fear--just what he wanted.

“Your rent-a-cop won’t catch me.” The lion’s throaty warning growl. His voice turned acerbic, his need to induce fear sparked electrically through the phone. “Nah. He’s not even a rent-a-cop. Not even a pathetic mall cop. Just some punk kid they hired to baby-sit the store.”

Baby-sit? Either this guy’s full of crap or he’s freakin’ huge. I was betting on full of crap.

He chortled at my unease, and I heard something familiar but untouchable in his voice. Like I knew him from somewhere--and that pissed me off even more. “What the hell do you want?” I demanded.

“Just you,” he said slowly. He sniggered again with a ghoulish glee and the line went dead.

“Damn it!” I slammed the phone down and turned with a start. A customer, a woman with a little boy about five glared at me with righteous indignation. “Oh. I’m so sorry. I just...it was...there was this guy.”

She harrumphed and stormed away, towing the boy in her sanctimonious wake. No doubt to complain to my manager.

So. Let her.

Blake shuffled up to the quad, what we associates at Cash’s Department Store called our customer service desks. “Sorry, Em. No luck.” He looked every bit the defeated athlete, his hands stuffed into his jeans pockets making his shoulders and arms bulge.

“It’s all good. He’ll get bored eventually and go away.” *I hope.*

Chapter 2 Haunted

I was prophetic, if not pathetic. The calls ceased and my stalker fell silent, not so much as a heavy breather. Perhaps he’d moved on to some other prey. *Poor girl.* Everyone around me breathed easier. But a specter of black ice lingered under the surface, chilled me to my core. Deep down I felt a dark and malevolent storm brewing. I wondered if I’d manage to survive it unscathed or if my entire world would shatter with the velocity of its fury.

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