

Part 1 - Earth

Chapter 1

Stephanie remembered that it was a few days after their daughters' second birthdays when she and Todd noticed the dark circles under their eyes. Dr. Santana, from the Hunter's Program, ran every test she could think of and could not find the answer to the girls' lethargy. After ruling out every human disorder and disease, they thought it was a genetic problem since Stephanie was from another dimension and they were half human. The components of her DNA and human DNA were different but the twins' DNA showed the same triple-helix as Stephanie, with the same sequences. The helix was open until the age of two and then it locked.

Unable to find a reason for the weakness that overtook them every few weeks they called in the five best genetic specialists to help with their diagnosis. When they told them of the twins' heritage, half-Lartherian and half-human, it both intrigued and delighted them but after months and months of tests they were no closer to finding a diagnosis for their daughters. Other than the weariness, they had developed quicker than human children. By two, their vocabulary and cognitive abilities were extensive and they had both developed heightened senses like Stephanie's.

Other symptoms developed as they aged. At three, they had their mom's strength and speed but those abilities varied with each day. One day they could lift a car and the next they could not raise their arms. It was frightening and exhausting for the girls and the people who loved them as Dr. Santana tried treatment after treatment to help stabilize the twins. They both learned to read six months after their third birthday although Cordie mastered reading a month before Lena.

Yesterday was their fourth birthday. In the last few days, they had developed striated lines across the nail beds of their fingers and toes.

As Stephanie crawled into bed with her husband, Todd, she sighed.

"It was a nice party," Todd said, pushing the hair away from her face and behind her ears.

"The elephants were a nice touch." She chuckled. Her hair had gotten long in the last six months and she had not taken the time to cut it because she was training recruits at the Oakland facility and not chasing creatures now. This job allowed her time at home with her husband and daughters and she appreciated that Jack, her father here on Earth, had opened the program to ex-military and law enforcement personnel. Her job was to train them to hunt and destroy the creatures that wandered through the dimensional gaps between her home world of Lartherian and

Earth. For training, she could pull her hair back into a ponytail but for killing she needed it short. It was not a good idea to give something that was trying to kill you another way to grab you.

“What the hell was Brett thinking, bringing live elephants to the girls’ birthday party?” Todd huffed.

“Uncle Brett spoils them rotten and it was a circus theme,” Stephanie reminded him.

“He’s their guardian, but he’s out of control. Did you see the truckload of gifts he brought for each girl?”

Stephanie shrugged. Brett loved those girls as if they were his own and promised to take care of them if something happened to Todd and her. Guardianship was one of the few things she had learned of her Lartherian heritage, so she’d asked him and he was delighted with both the asking and the job.

“Well, Uncle Brett can just clean up the mess they made in our back yard. I never realized elephants pooped that much.”

“I think it was the handfuls of grass the girls kept feeding them.”

“Did you notice the girls’ fingers?” Todd asked, pulling her closer into his arms.

“Yes, at least it’s not causing them any pain in their hands. Cordie wants me to paint black in between so she can have zebra-striped fingernails.”

Todd chuckled. “Well, Lena wasn’t happy. She said it didn’t match her pink tiara and dress.”

Their daughters - Cordie, short for Cordelia, got her name from *King Lear* and Lena, short for Helena, got her name from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Stephanie had found the complete works by Shakespeare on Todd’s bookcase and when he was lying in bed in a coma, she had read him those books every night, thinking they were his favorite. He later told her his late wife bought them from a thrift store to fill up the empty bookcases. But by then they had named the girls and liked the nicknames they had given them.

“When do you leave?” Todd asked.

“Brett and I have to finish up the new Hunters’ training. That will take another week. After that, there’s a Kremlin nest in Dallas that needs dealing with.”

“More pets missing?” Todd asked.

“Yes, so no hurry.” It was nice that he was learning the demons.

“You wouldn’t say that if they were here in San Francisco,” Todd mused.

“Hey, those dogs are part of our family. If a Kremlin showed up, I’d kill it before it could eat them.”

“Everyone feels the same way towards their pets.”

“Okay, then. Brett and I will head out tomorrow and take care of the little demons, I mean Kremlins.”

“Hey, that’s the first time you’ve referred to them as demons in many years.”

“Well, since I’m from the same place and don’t consider myself a demon, I’m not calling them that anymore.”

Todd rubbed his nose up her neck and whispered, “If you’re leaving tomorrow, I’ve got plans for you tonight.”

Stephanie chuckled, turned and kissed the man she loved.

In the morning, Todd fixed blueberry pancakes, Stephanie’s favorite.

As Todd was flipping the pancakes, he said, “I’ve got to go into the office and meet a client this morning. I got a voicemail asking for the appointment and said she’d be in this morning. When are you leaving?”

“I’ve got to find Brett, tell Jack and gather the supplies we need. We’ll leave early this afternoon.”

“Perfect, I’ll be back by one or two, at the latest.”

“We need to find a permanent solution to watching the girls, Todd. You and I coordinating our schedules every day isn’t working well.”

“They spend hours either in my office or at the training facility but it’s better to have them with us than with a stranger.”

“If we’d gotten someone a year ago when we first discussed it, they wouldn’t be a stranger anymore.”

“The girls will attend school next year. That’s soon enough for them to be away from us.”

Stephanie rolled her eyes. She could remember having a series of nannies growing up. Jack Stanton had the Hunter Program to run and could not stay home and take care of her every day. But Todd worried over the girls and whatever was happening with their health. He had lost his first wife and children to a drunk driver and she was not sure he could survive losing the girls, too. After getting shot during a routine traffic stop, he lay in a coma for several months and then broke his legs rescuing her from a crazy lady. The police department had not wanted him back

on the streets. They offered him a desk job so he retired from the San Francisco Police Department. Six months of taking care of the house and playing with the girls and he was ready to get a job. He opened a private investigating firm and, although he had only started with one or two clients, the business had grown over the last year.

“You’re interviewing another client?”

“Yes, but I might not take the case because I’m too busy to handle the clients I’ve accepted. It’s nice that the inspectors give out my name to people but I will have to stop accepting clients soon.”

“Why don’t you hire another investigator?” Stephanie asked, then added, “What’s Carlos up to these days?”

“Still day trading last time I talked to him but I might call to see if he wants to make an honest day’s work.” Todd chuckled.

Carlos Ramirez was Todd’s partner when he was on the police force. He was shorter than Todd’s six foot-three-inch frame and at least a hundred pounds heavier. His dark eyes and olive skin highlighted his Spanish heritage. Every day Stephanie had seen him, the man was wearing an expensive tailored Italian suit, starched white shirt and indigo tie. He drove a black sports car and loved trading stocks.

A few minutes later, the twins came into the kitchen, and Cordie said, “When are you leaving, Mom?”

Stephanie raised her eyebrows. “How do you know I’m leaving?”

Lena chuckled and pointed. “Dad always makes blueberry pancakes and bacon when you are leaving.”

“And you always order waffles covered in strawberries and whip cream from the IHOP when he is leaving on a trip,” Cordie added.

“We have smart children,” Todd beamed.

“I can cook waffles,” Stephanie huffed.

Lena patted her mom on the shoulder. “I love you, Mom, but you burn everything you try to cook. More is not always better when you are talking cooking times.”

“What are you hunting?” Cordie asked.

“Kremlins.”

“Nasty little things,” Brett said as he came through the kitchen door.

“Uncle Brett!” Both girls squealed in delight and launched themselves at Brett.

He caught them, spun them around and then placed them on their seats at the kitchen counter.

Stephanie walked over and Brett engulfed her in a big hug. “Hey, beautiful. How are you today?”

“Fine. How did you know we needed to leave?” Stephanie asked, looking up at Brett.

“I didn’t.” He pushed a loose strand of her hair behind her ear. “I brought a crew to clean up the elephant mess in the backyard.” Brett smiled and winked at the twins who grinned their total adoration for their uncle.

“That’s good,” Todd growled. He did not appreciate that man touching his wife. Brett loved his wife and had saved Stephanie’s life multiple times out on the field so Todd did not punch him when he held her longer in their hugs and touched her face. And Brett would take care of her and the twins if he were not around. He had said as much when Todd was in the coma four years ago. It had irked him then and still did.

“I want to watch,” Cordie announced, picking up her plate and starting for the back door.

“Stay out of the way of the excavator,” Brett told her as she went through the door.

Todd turned toward the backyard. “How did you get an excavator in our back yard? The yards is not that large since we put in the swimming pool.”

“Helicopter,” Stephanie said as she took another bite of breakfast and sighed. Todd made excellent pancakes.

“You didn’t hear it, Dad? It was loud enough to wake Papa Jack when he’s snoring,” Lena snickered as she picked up her own plate. “I want to watch, too, in case the excavator falls into the pool.”

“If it does, please retrieve it.” Brett sat, pulled an empty plate and filled it with pancakes.

A second later the excavator’s engine roared to life and two beagles came running. They both had the same coloring of white with large black areas and light brown shading but one was larger than the other. The smaller one was Sadie and the larger one was James. Todd jumped in front of the door and put in the dog door. “No, you two don’t. You can go out after the huge piece of machinery leaves.”

Stephanie whistled and both dogs ran over to her, sat and she gave them each a piece of bacon.

Todd ignored his wife. He had given up long ago telling her not to feed the beagles scraps from the table. They used to sleep on the floor of the kitchen when he was eating and now, they were both beggars when anyone had food.

“Kremlins?” Brett asked between bites of pancakes and bacon.

“There’s a pack in Dallas.” Stephanie filled her own plate again.

“We should take two new recruits. They should be able to handle Kremlins,” Brett replied.

“That’s a great idea. I’ll call Jack.” Stephanie reached for her phone.

That is when they heard the twins’ screams.