

Head down. Hood up. Hands tucked in pockets. This was the way Lilith walked home from school everyday, hoping not to get noticed. It rarely worked, but Lilith still did it hoping in vain that she would just be left alone. Today was no different.

“Hey, death girl! Going to cry yourself to sleep again? Run home to mommy! Oh wait—I forgot. You don’t have one!”

Lilith had started running at the sound of their taunting voices. The rain poured down around her in freezing cold sheets, chilling her to the bone. Lilith’s feet pounded on the concrete of the sidewalk as she ran, away from arrogant kids who believed they were better than everyone else, away from the teachers that knew what was going on but ignored it, away from other classmates who wouldn’t even dare to look at her.

Lilith was miserable. Today hadn’t been the worst day, not by a long shot, but she was so tired of everything. She slipped into the shelter of her apartment building, fishing her key out of her backpack. Opening the door to her apartment, it was no surprise that Dad was still at work. He worked long shifts, leaving Lilith to herself most afternoons. Sighing, she pulled out her homework.

Hours later, her dad still wasn’t home and Lilith was beginning to become increasingly worried. She called and texted him several times, but he never picked up, never responded. At seven, she warmed up dinner—spaghetti for the third night in the row. She made two servings, desperately hoping her dad would be home soon. She waited another half hour before she ate, hoping in vain she would hear his soft footsteps outside her door, that he would open the door, that he would tell her all the crazy things that happened during his shift at the grocery store on the opposite end of town.

But he never showed up.

She checked her phone again, but she found nothing. Not even the usual cruel and threatening messages from people who could never understand her. Finally, Lilith left the emptiness of her apartment to ask her neighbor across the hall if she had any idea where Lilith’s dad was. She worked at the same grocery store as Lilith’s dad, and might know where he was. When she knocked, no one answered.

Lilith was definitely feeling scared now. *Where was everybody?* She wondered hopelessly. Lilith stepped out of the confines of her apartment building to find that the street was empty. Terrified, she pinched herself as if it were all a dream that she would wake up from.

It wasn't.

Glancing around again, she noticed something she had missed; a stray dog, staring at her from across the street. For some inexplicable reason, Lilith felt the need to walk closer, to pet the dog. But when she drew close to the stray, it started walking in another direction. Possibly because this was the only sign of life she had seen since she got home from school, she followed it. It led her towards the old abandoned school at the outskirts of the town, a 15 minute walk from where she lived. By time she reached the school, she was breathing heavily but the dog wouldn't slow down. It walked straight into the decaying building.

The abandoned school was rumored to be haunted, and Lilith knew this. It was said that a teacher once murdered a student, and if you wandered in you would never come out again.

"Wait..." she called out to the dog. It didn't wait. Her gut told her to follow the dog, that there was something she needed to see in here. Slowly, the front creaked open. She stepped inside, searching for the dog. But it was lost among the shadows. Lilith ventured a step into the building, whistling for the dog to come. Suddenly, the door behind her slammed shut. She tried to open it again, but found she couldn't.

Now she was really scared. She cursed herself for following the stupid dog to this stupid building; she should've just waited at home for her dad, who was probably just getting home now and worrying about where she was. She checked her phone, but it was dead. This confused Lilith rather than scaring her. Her phone had been at 70% when she left her apartment.

Figuring she had nowhere else to go, she walked further into the building. Each ominous step on the tiled floor echoed around the empty building. At the end of the hallway, she saw a pinprick of light. She walked cautiously towards the light, half expecting to find a murderous ghost swinging an ax at her.

What she saw was ten times more terrifying.

There was a group of what appeared to be humans huddled in a semi circle around the dog. When they heard Liliths near silent footsteps, they all looked up at her with searching eyes and she found they were not exactly human.

They had the basic build of a human—two arms, two legs, and a head attached to a body that stood upright—but that was where the similarities ended. They had skin colors ranging from a violent shade of red to a soft gray.

The skin on their face was pulled tightly over high cheekbones, full lips, and large, dark eyes. Their ears were smaller than human ears, and their necks were slightly longer than the average human neck. Their fingers were tiny, an inch long at most. The tallest one, who appeared to be their leader spoke up in a soft melodious voice. "We know who you are." This was not the most reassuring thing to be told in the middle of a supposedly haunted building by a group of strange creatures. Lilith gave a little shriek, and tried to step backwards but found she couldn't. She was frozen, held in place by those terrible eyes.

Then the smallest one stepped toward her. This one seemed like a child, its face filled with innocence. It reached out a hand toward her, and she backed away. When the child's face crumpled, she regretted it. It was still a child, even if it wasn't human. Gently, she took the child's hand. Somehow, this gave her the comfort and confidence she needed.

"Why and how do you know me?" she asked. "Because you are one of us. We have been looking for you for a long time." The tallest creature replied. Seeing the look of confusion on her face, he elaborated. "There are very few of you, but it is not altogether impossible. You don't have any idea who your mother is, correct?"

"Y-yes." Lilith responded, still a little shaken.

"Your mother was one of a generation of spies that were sent to your planet. She was lucky; not all of us who came to earth were able to blend in as she was. She found your father, had you, and almost forgot about our planet. Then, when some were sent to bring her back to her home planet, she resisted. She had spent the majority of her life on your Earth, and had forgotten all intentions of spying on your planet."

"Spies...what?"

"You see a few of your Earthen years ago, our queen ordered for an invasion. She sent an entire generation of us to Earth to spy on Earth. She chose a younger generation, which was her fatal mistake. They spent their entire teenage years on Earth, and became attached. Then, when they were called back, many of them resisted, refusing to be uprooted from the lives they had built. The queen became outraged, and ordered for them to be forcibly brought back to our planet to await trials. Many of them were executed."

"I'm the daughter of an alien?" Lilith asked, astonished.

"We prefer the term Universals."

Lilith shook her head. It was all so much to take in.

“Why am I the only person I’ve seen since I got home?”

Here, the alien—sorry, Universal—smiled.

“The queen has since died. Our new queen wishes to apologize and reach out to all those living on Earth who are even a fraction Universal and invite them to come live on our planet. We froze time so that only those who are Universal would be able to see out of the boundaries of the time freeze. We have come to bring you home if you would accept it.”

Lilith’s first instinct was to say yes; to escape the bullies, the teachers, all of it. But then she thought of her father, of her neighbor across the hall who would sometimes make her tea afters school when she was upset, of the animal shelter she volunteered at.

“I..I cannot accept. I am grateful for the invitation, but I belong here.”

The Universals nodded solemnly.

“We understand. We would not force you into anything.”

Lilith glanced at the little Universal who was still clutching her hand.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Aoife.” she replied seriously.

“That’s a beautiful name.” Lilith said kindly.

The Universal smiled shyly. The leader cleared his throat.

“We must leave you now. The time freeze will lift soon. You need to go home, where you will find your father waiting for you.”

“Thank you so, so much.” Lilith said quietly.

The Universals nodded. Lilith glanced around for the dog, and noticed it was gone.

“Where did it go?” she asked.

“It is a free creature; it comes and goes when it pleases, and does odd jobs for us occasionally.”

The idea that a stray did odd jobs for a bunch of aliens was the least shocking thing Lilith had heard all afternoon.

Lilith went home, and, just as the Universal said, found her father waiting for her. She never brought up Universals again for a long time, although she asked her father what he knew about her mother. Apparently, her mother never revealed her Universal status to him. School never changed, but Lilith did find hope in the animal shelter she volunteered at. She convinced her landlord to let them adopt a cat, who they named Bones. Eventually, she would try to contact a Universal. But for now, she was happy moving on with her life.