

# The Night Raven Chronicles, Part I

By Abigail Miller

“It’s been almost 700 years, Laurie. Do you really think they’re still looking for us?”

Alita asks, her voice trembling. A sharp *click* from the cast-iron latch of the graveyard gate permeates the silence. Alita jumps and Laurie rolls her eyes as she pushes the gate open, slipping through to the other side.

“Come on, Alita. Stop whining,” whispers Laurie through the gate’s iron rods. “You and I drew the short straw, so we’ve got guard duty this year. It’s just one night.”

“But it’s *the* night,” Alita frowns.

“Yeah,” Laurie laughs. “And we have a job to do. So, are you coming? Or are you going to make me do this on my own?” Laurie arches a brow and gestures towards the open gate. Alita sighs and shakes her head at the picked latch. Laurie has always been good with locks. That’s why Alita keeps her Book of Shadows hidden in the vent. The last thing she needs is Laurie snooping through her dream interpretations.

“I just...I don’t, know Laurie,” Alita hesitates, taking a step closer to the gate. “Shouldn’t one of the boys be here? We always send a witch *and* a warlock. Why is dad making two witches go this year?”

“Probably because it’s been 700 years, ‘Lita, remember?” Laurie groans, rubbing her temple. “This is just a formality, and you know it. Now, are you coming?”

Alita casts a nervous glance over her shoulder back towards the comforting streetlights of their small town. But a rustling of dry grass and footsteps has Alita’s heart racing as she turns back to see Laurie has already taking off into the massive graveyard. Scowling, Alita slips

through the gate and follows Laurie's lead, running to catch up with her cousin's bobbing blonde curls.

"Okay, fine, I'm coming," Alita pants as she catches up. "But Laurie," she whispers, keeping her voice low to avoid attracting the spirits from their nearby resting places. "Do you ever wonder if it's all just a story? A myth? Maybe...maybe we don't need to do this anymore," she says hesitantly.

Laurie stops dead, causing Alita to run into her and nearly knocking them both to the wet, muddy ground. Spinning around, Laurie stares at her cousin with flames in her clover eyes. "You know it's not a myth," she frowns.

"But how can we be sure?" Alita presses.

"The Grimoire."

Turning her back to Alita, Laurie continues down the oppressively dark graveyard path. Scurrying behind her, the two girls stick close to the tree-lined edge to avoid being seen.

"Okay, well, just because it's in the Grimoire doesn't mean it's true, Laurie," Alita whispers.

Laurie scoffs. "Name one thing in the Grimoire that's ever turned out not to be true," she challenges, never faltering in her stride.

Taken aback, Alita considers Laurie's claim. And she realizes that Laurie's right. The Grimoire had been passed down in Laurie and Alita's family for generations. Its leather cover scarred by hundreds of years of familial magick. Its pages are creased and withered from the many hands that have caressed its contents and added lifetimes of knowledge and experience. Their family relies on the Grimoire for the knowledge of their Craft. Alita has never known it to lie.

“Maybe you’re right,” Alita scowls. “But I hate the graveyard. And the in-between makes me uncomfortable.”

“The in-between makes you uncomfortable because you haven’t taken the time to understand it, Alita,” Laurie scoffs. “It’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Alita’s jaw drops and she nearly stumbles over her own feet. “You can’t seriously believe that,” she sputters. “The veil between our world and the Realm is at its thinnest right now. Every spirit, faerie and sprite could pull us in without a trace!”

Laurie lets out a frustrated sigh. “Just hurry up, Alita,” she says. “We’re running late as it is.”

It's as if the spirits can hear Laurie’s warning, as suddenly a bell from the church nearby begins to toll, its somber melody floats out across the graveyard in eleven long, uniform strokes. Alita whimpers, wincing at the loud ring of each bell before jogging to catch up with Laurie. Already halfway through the graveyard, she has no choice but to follow the fearless blonde into the sea of headstones. Sticking close to the edge of the path farthest away from the graves, Alita tries to hold her breath as they pass the crypts, her pulse pounding in her throat. Just because this graveyard has been the family hiding place for generations doesn’t make it any less creepy.

With a shiver, Alita speeds up to get closer to Laurie, reaching out and grabbing on lightly to the blue strap of her backpack. Even as cousins from the same bloodline, Alita and Laurie are very different witches. Despite being only two years younger than her cousin, Alita knows that Laurie is far more powerful than an average witch in her twenties. But Laurie has always been dedicated to the Craft in a way that Alita simply isn’t. Their grandmother had always said that The Goddesses had blessed her with a strong connection to the Fifth Element - "Spirit". More often just called "energy" - the source of magick.

Alita, on the other hand, has never been blessed with such gifts. Even after years of training, she has only just mastered basic energy summoning, whereas Laurie specializes in all manner of spells and incantations. Her grandmother often tells Alita that she can sense in her a strong connection to the Fifth Element. *“Not all magick can be seen, Alita,”* her grandmother had once told her. *“And not all magick comes to us immediately. Be patient. Your time is coming.”*

But Alita has always had a hard time believing her grandmother’s promises when a single incantation drains her energy. Some days, she wishes she wasn't a Keller. But Alita could never tell her mother that she’d rather live among the Outsiders. It would break her heart. So, Alita resigned herself to staying in the family, even it meant nights like tonight. Nights stuck spending Samhain in the graveyard to (allegedly) keep a vengeful spirit from returning from the Realm to kill the family Matron. Her grandmother.

“Alita, get back!” hisses Laurie.

Startled, Alita freezes. A cold hand grabs her wrist and suddenly she’s being dragged off the edge of the path and into the trees that line the edge of the graveyard. Thickets claw at her bare ankles she stumbles back into the brush, grabbing blindly at the low-hanging tree branches to keep from falling.

“What are you doing?” Alita hisses, regaining her balance against the trunk of a tree.

“Are you crazy?!”

“Shh. Look,” Laurie whisper, pointing at a bobbing light in the distance, drawing nearer.

Squinting, Alita spots the security guard making his rounds and her blood runs cold. She and Laurie were running late, but she hadn’t considered that running late meant running into the guard on his patrol.

As the guard's footfalls grow closer with every step, Alita's pulse picks up speed. She closes her eyes and holds her breath, afraid that the guard will be able to hear just how loud her heart is pounding. As the swaying light of the flashlight gets closer, Laurie tenses and tightens her grip on Alita's wrist. As Laurie's fingers dig into her skin, ready to run, the flashlight beam skips across the dry leaves that still cling to the tree branches, passing over the two girls hidden in the shadows of the coppice. Keeping still until he passes, Alita cringes as he begins whistling on his way. A bad omen.

"Come on, let's go," Laurie whispers after several long, quiet minutes. "We're almost there."

Stepping from the underbrush and shaking off the tiny sticks and crumpled leaves in her hair, Alita follows Laurie past the massive Sullivan Family Mausoleum. The quiet is heavy here. Alita shudders, keeping her eyes averted from the massive structure. She has always found the mausoleum's silence, and the way its white marble breathes in the moonlight, disconcerting. For a home of the dead, it is certainly the most alive thing in the graveyard.

Scurrying down the path, Alita realizes that the distant sounds of children trick-or-treating has faded away completely, and she knows they're getting close. Finally, the girls reach a tall row of well-kept primrose hedges. The groundskeepers maintain them religiously to keep teenagers from sneaking into the Cremation Garden. Many of the local high schoolers used to try and spend the night here on Samhain - an incredibly stupid thing to do. Alita knows it's pure luck that the spirits here are docile. For the most part.

"Alita, help me with this."

Laurie points to the only break in the hedges. The one that their family uses each year to avoid walking past the guard shack. But the greenery is thorny, and it takes one person to hold

back the prickles while the other steps through. Grabbing her gardening gloves from her back pocket, Alita slips them on and reaches into the shrub until her hand finds the edge of the branch inside. Pulling back the greenery reveals a small path for Laurie to slip through. Laurie then holds the greenery open for Alita.

“Ugh, this place is the worst,” Laurie says with a shudder. Alita can’t help but chuckle. Unlike Laurie, Alita is always relieved to leave behind the Mausoleum and its looming gargoyles. She enjoys the Cremation Garden, with its orange roses and decorative stones that glimmer like geodes. Alita doesn’t know why Laurie prefers the gloom of the headstones.

“We’re almost at the cave,” Alita laughs. “Come on.”

Grabbing her cousin’s hand, Alita interlaces their gloved fingers and pulls her behind along, feeling a new and unexpected surge of bravado as she guides the two of them through the garden and towards the small lake in the distance. On the other side is a set of natural caves that no one had ever tried to remove. Leveling the ground would require a massive disturbance to the surrounding graves, so maintenance and landscapers leave them well enough alone. And those caves, left quiet and undisturbed, are where the Keller family has hidden the remains of Petronilla de Meath for the last 300 years, ever since the family immigrated to the States, bringing her with them.

As they near the entrances, Laurie pulls her hand from Alita’s to dig several trashbags out of her backpack, slipping them on over her sneakers. Alita does the same, using them to wade through several inches of water until the two girls reach the larger of the two caves. Alita glances to Laurie and jerks her head towards the pitch-black depths of the cavern. Her temporary bravado has faded. There’s no way she’s going first. With a huff, Laurie grabs a flashlight from her backpack, passing its beam over the cracks and crevices of the stalactites hanging a few feet

above. As kids, this place felt enormous, but now Alita could reach up and touch the ceiling – although she never would; too many spiders and cave crawlers.

Alita follows Laurie as they move through the winding tunnels, relieved to reach the back which widens into a small, natural chamber. Laurie passes her beam of light over ground in the center of the cavern. A ring circling the buried remains of Petronilla de Meath sit undisturbed. Good – no one has been here since last Samhain.

“Help me set up Alita,” Laurie says. “Start by lighting the candles.”

Laurie tosses Alita a box of matches. Lighting all thirteen candles in the ring, a faint, warm glow settles over the cavern. Casting a glance back at Laurie, Alita’s eyes widen as she notice several vials of her own potions laid out on the ground.

“Laurie,” Alita asks, pocketing the matches. “Did you empty out my stockroom?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I hope you don’t mind,” Laurie says. “You’re much better at potions than I am. And, well, I don’t know. I just felt like I should bring them. In case.”

“In case?” Alita questions, palms turning clammy. “In case of what?”

“I don’t know. Nothing, probably,” Laurie mumbles, averting her gaze and glancing back down at the vials on the ground.

“Laurie,” Alita says sternly. “Why did you bring my potions?”

Laurie exhales and pushes up from her knees to stand. “Listen, Alita,” she says. “Don’t freak out. It’s really nothing. I just...got a weird feeling about this year.”

“A *weird* feeling?” Alita questions. “A *bad* feeling, you mean?”

“No, just, ugh,” Laurie groans, tossing her hands up. “I don’t know what kind of feeling, okay? But better safe than sorry.”

Alita's stomach churns as the color drains from her cheeks. The Goddesses had also blessed Laurie with the gift of premonition, and although she's still honing her skill, whenever Laurie has a bad feeling it's usually spot on.

"Maybe I should call my dad," Alita says.

Laurie shoots her a frown. "No, 'Lita. Everything's fine. Would you just go stand on the other side of the circle please?"

Alita hesitates, fingers itching to pull out her phone and make the call. But Laurie's stern point over to the other side of the ring of candles has her obeying with a huff. Laurie follows and pours a warding potion on the ground at Alita's feet before retreating to the other side of the ring of lit candles and doing the same to the ground beneath her own feet. With what's left, she pours it atop the buried remains of Petronilla de Meath, muttering an incantation under her breath. Once the warding potion has been spilled, Alita reaches out her hand to take Laurie's to begin the summoning ritual – a necessary step before casting any spells or enchantments. But Laurie ignores her hand and begins whispering below her breath. As she speaks the candles glow brighter. The cave slowly fills with an incredibly bright, white light. It remains until Laurie finishes her quiet incantation, fading slowly. And while Alita should be relieved that the protection wards have been cast, she finds herself nervous.

"Laurie, how did you do that?" Alita questions. "We haven't...wait, did you summon *before* we left?"

Ignoring Alita and maintaining her silence, Laurie grabs two more vials – one of the more potent banishing potions and a strong toxin. She slides them into her back pocket. That scares Alita.

"Laurie," Alita hisses. "What in the Goddesses is going on?"



Laurie chews at the inside of her cheek, casting Alita a guilty look. “Okay, don’t freak out,” she finally says. “But I had a dream last night.”

Alita exhales sharply, staring at Laurie. She swallows the lump in her throat, realizing that Laurie had a full-blown premonition. That is, after all, how they came to her. In her in dreams.

“And?” Alita demands, furious that Laurie is only telling her now. “What did you see?”

Laurie hesitates, rolling a vial full of regeneration potion around her fingers. “I’m not sure,” she answers. “But I there was a big, black bird standing right here. In the middle of the ring of candles.”

“You took a lucidity potion on Samhain eve? And you didn’t tell anyone?!” Alita seethes “Are you crazy?”

“Calm down, Alita,” Laurie huffs. “I also took a lucid dreaming potion last night, so it could mean anything. You know what those things can do to me.

Alita shakes her head, pacing. “I think we should call my dad,” she says, reaching for the cellphone in her pocket.

“It’s too late,” Laurie says. “Let’s just focus on setting up, okay? We need to be ready for the midnight toll.”

Alita’s thoughts race. A voice inside screams at her to call her father. But Laurie would get in serious trouble for taking a premonition potion on the eve of Samhain. During this time of year their powers are already enhanced. Everyone knows it’s dangerous to further feed them without letting anyone know.

“Fine,” Alita relents. “I won’t call. But you have to promise me you’ll tell them what you saw when Killian and Chloe get here in a few hours to relieve us.”

“Deal,” Laurie says, extending her hand. Alita hooks her pinky in Laurie’s and the two girls kiss their thumbs the way they did when they were little. Alita feels a little better knowing the promise was made. “Now let’s start,” Laurie says. She scatters a few handfuls of dry rosemary and rue in a wide circle around the ring of candles. Following behind her, Alita grabs a small pouch of black salt and alder ash, allowing the grains to fall in a neat, tight pattern.

Once the ring is complete, Laurie kneels beside the candles. Alita takes her place opposite her cousin. They reach for the other’s hands, taking them silently as they each begin their own private grounding rituals and cast their spheres of protection. It takes Alita only a few short minutes to finish her ritual. When she looks up, she finds Laurie has already finished. She cocks a brow at Alita and Alita nods, indicating she has completed her ritual.

"Goddesses Three, I call to thee," Laurie says quietly, tightening her grip on Alita’s hands. As Laurie starts her summoning, the air in the cave thickens and a chill runs down Alita’s spine. Laurie is drawing more power than usual tonight. Through their connected hands, Alita can feel Laurie’s body filling with the magick she pulls from the Fifth Element. As Laurie’s body fills, so does Alita’s. The Spirit Laurie is drawing spills into Alita through their hands.

“Beings of light far and wide, protect this spell and keep it tied,” Laurie mumbles, eyes closed and focused as she starts her incantation. “With Rosemary, Rue, Ash and Light I banish evil from my sight.”

The sizzling electricity from her incantation fills the space with a charged energy as the ground starts to vibrate. The circle of ash, herbs and salt around the girls gives off a faint golden glow. But Alita stays focused, urging her own stores of Spirit into Laurie’s body, amplifying the power of her cousin’s spell. In the distance the church bells begin to toll once more. Laurie needs to hurry.

“By Air and Earth and Water and Fire, I bind these remains to my desire,” Laurie whispers, the golden light filling the cave growing stronger. “By hers and mine, these remains I bind, to keep their spirit far from mine. By Moon and Sun, my will be done. By Sky and Sea keep harm from me.”

Alita’s gaze flits nervously towards the front of the cave as she counts to tolling of the bells. Eight...nine...ten.

“Cord go round, your power be bound,” Laurie says, speaking quickly. “Our light revealed, you shall be sealed. From Samhain till-!”

Laurie’s final part of the incantation is drowned out as a strange wind blows angrily through the empty cave, extinguishing each candle as an unfamiliar force pushes Alita back, tearing Laurie’s hands from hers and sending her flying across the cavern, her back slamming roughly against the cavern wall.

Gasping for air and trying to catch her breath, Alita winces as she uses the wall to help herself stand. “Laurie!” Alita cries, trying to find her cousin in the dark. But without that golden glow, the cave is too dark. “Laurie! Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Laurie groans from somewhere nearby. “I think so. Just bruised.”

Alita stumbles forward toward the sound of Laurie’s voice until she nearly trips on Laurie’s leg. “Was it your incantation? Did something go wrong?” Alita questions breathlessly, dropping to her knees to help her cousin sit up. “What happened?”

“You were reckless,” a cold, accented voice calls from the mouth of the cave.

Alita glances towards the source of the voice, her still adjusting to the pitch-black cave now lit only by the weak tendrils of seeping in from the entrance. But even in the dark, what she sees sends a burst of adrenaline through her body as her fingertips tingle. There, in the mouth of

the cavern, stand the eerily still silhouettes of the three figures. As soon as she spots them, Laurie reaches for her backpack and pulls out two small camping lamps, flicking their switches and tossing them on the ground, once more bathing the cave in light. Above them stand two women and a man, all three dressed in black, the symbol of a raven embroidered on their chests.

"No," whispers Laurie in dread as Alita's blood runs cold.

They found us. The Night Raven Coven.

The woman, clearly their leader, advances while snarling down at Laurie. When suddenly Alita's cellphone starts vibrating from the side pocket of Laurie's backpack. The woman's eyes narrow and she steps forward, violently tearing the bag from Laurie's grasp and digging around before pulling out Alita's phone, and sliding it into her own pocket with a triumphant smirk

"After all these years," she croons in a sickeningly sweet Irish lilt. "How nice to finally meet the Kytelers." Laurie's look of shock turns into an angry scowl as the woman cocks her head, studying the two girls on the ground. "But you don't go by that name anymore do you?" she questions. "No, you're the *Keller* family now. How American," she sneers in disgust.

"Riona, focus," says the man in the middle with a similarly strong Celtic inflection. When he speaks Alita shivers, a warm current running through her. She looks up, unable to stop herself before making eye contact. The man's viridescent gaze locks with hers, and Alita's heart stops. Something about him feels...*familiar?*

"You're both lucky that Shay here has more patience than I do," Riona frowns.

"She's there, Riona," the man – *Shay* – says, tearing his gaze from Alita and gesturing towards the ring of candles.

Laurie lets out a laugh. “You may have found us, but you’re too late,” she snarls. “I’ve already bound your traitorous Coven Sister to the Realm. She’s not going to make it to the party this year.”

“Traitorous?! Why you little -!” growls the second woman as she takes an aggressive step forward. But Shay stops her from advancing by holding out his arm. She bristles, but steps back as Riona advances, a wretched smile crawling across her face as she crosses the cavern towards the ring of candles. Shay and the second woman watch Riona intently as she kneels, muttering a quiet incantation over the remains.

“Laurie,” Alita whispers as the three are distracted. “Don’t antagonize them.”

But Laurie shoots her cousin a meaningful look. One Alita recognizes. One that tells her Laurie has a plan.

“No,” Alita whispers. “No, just...just stay quiet, Laurie.”

But Laurie shakes her head, eyes widened as she makes a subtle gesture to her back pocket. The pocket with the banishing potion.

Alita shakes her head, pleading silently with her cousin. But Laurie slowly slips her hand into her back pocket, pulling out the glass vials.

“No, Laurie, please,” Alita whimpers, frightened. “I’m not leaving here without you.”

“You don’t have a choice,” Laurie whispers.

A sudden, pained hiss from Riona shatters the quiet in the cavern as both girls glance up to see her pull her hand away from the dirt covering the remains. “That bitch!” Riona cries, cradling her burnt hand and turning back to her associates. “She’s poured some sort of warding potion over the remains.”

With Riona distracted, Laurie pulls the vials from her back pocket. “Now!” she screams, throwing them at Riona’s feet. All three Night Ravens recoil as the potions attack their senses, temporarily turning the air around them toxic. Riona falls to her knees, coughing and gasping for air. Shay and the other woman begin choking out a shielding spell. And Laurie begins casting once more. The cave begins to shake, and the ground around the three Night Ravens transforms into liquid sand. But Alita can feel Laurie’s energy fading - she's running out of Spirit.

“Go Alita!” Laurie shouts through grit teeth as a bead of sweat rolls down her face. “Get your dad!”

Left with littler choice, Alita jumps over Laurie’s quicksand and pushes past the three Night Ravens as they struggle to crawl away from the earth morphing beneath their feet. Alita runs and doesn’t turn back as a terrible scream tears itself from Laurie’s lungs. Running as fast as she can, Alita focuses on nothing but the feeling of the pavement beneath her feet as she sprints back towards town, praying to the God she knows doesn’t exist that she gets back in time to find help.