

## Chapter One

The dead girl lay on her back facing whoever had ended her life. Her left arm curved around her head in a plié and her right knee bent out towards the street.

“All right, Krenshaw, do your thing.” Mike Waxell gave her a nod then went back to surveying the scene. Mike was the lead detective on the case tonight. She’d worked with him a few times before.

Abbigail sucked in a deep breath and blew it out through her nose. She already had her latex gloves donned and cloth booties covering her shoes. The booties weren’t always necessary, but in this case there was so much blood the whole team had to wear them. Everything would have to be processed. With stabbing victims the murderer often cut himself too so the his or her blood may be on the ground too.

First, Abbigail took in the scene just as the detectives would do. It helped her to get an idea of how the attack took place. She was new at this, still had a lot to learn, but she was pretty good. She’d had an excellent mentor who’d trained her under his wing and helped her to get this job. God, she missed Stan.

They’d already determined the girl to be a shapeshifter from a local pack who’d gone missing two nights before. An elderly woman walking her poodle before she went to bed found the body at the back of an alley between two brownstone city apartment buildings. The residents of the Green Tree apartments peered down at her from their little windows up above. Others, mostly curious neighbors passing by, watched the team work from behind the yellow tape closing off the crime scene.

The alley was typical with A/C units and small windows facing each other from both apartment buildings. This path was only here for maintenance men who needed to work on the A/C units or for the utility companies to check their power lines. A six-foot tall fence stood at the back of the alley, and the girl’s body was found right in front of it on a patch of concrete.

Abbigail looked back down the path where the faces watched with morbid, avid curiosity. She noted the alley to be only about twenty feet wide with the AC units taking up a good four of that from either side. A small pathway. She’d spotted the large community-sized dumpsters as she’d pulled into the lot. Why hadn’t the killer just dumped her? Did he want the body to be found? Was he interrupted and had to be quick about it? If he just happened upon her here and killed her that’d make sense. Except that a shapeshifter being out this far away from her pack alone didn’t make any sense. Shapeshifters stuck in groups, or at least the females did.

Abbigail squatted beside the girl. She had brown hair, the natural kind that had hints of blonde from being out in the sun. Her eyes were open, her face tilted towards the alley. The majority of the blood had spilled from a neck wound. Abby leaned down to inspect it. Could be a throat cutting or garroting, but more blood covered her abdomen wetting the girl’s brown t-shirt to her skin. A cartoon cowboy riding a horse and lassoing a whip above his head sat on her shirt. Above it in pink scrawling text it said: Ride me cowboy! Abby cleared her throat and moved in with her inspection.

One shoe had come off which had been found at the beginning of the alley. The shoe probably came off during a struggle.

As associate medical examiner for the paranormal unit of the Fort Collins Police Department in Colorado, Abbigail got to touch the body first. She shouldn't even have the job she had. She was too young, but she'd graduated high school a year early then went through a special FBI program, a brand-new unit on studying supernatural cases. She'd been surprised to find her classes not filled to the brink. Who wouldn't find learning about the supernatural beings of the world utterly fascinating? Apparently many since her classes had sat half empty. That's when she met Stan Haubermann, a middle-aged detective turned behavioral profiler who'd started the program. He'd taken her under his wing and taught her everything he knew. Not that she was special; he'd done it to other members from her graduating class. She was just the only one to already have a job practicing his teachings.

Abbigail gently pushed the victim's head back, to the left, and then right. The cut was deep and clean. Not a serrated blade, and the wound wasn't thin enough to be from a garrote.

"Definitely a blade," she called out. "Rigor mortis has set in. She's been here at least four hours but probably no longer than twelve." Her skin had already begun to turn a purplish hue. Her muscles were beginning to tighten.

Abby arrived at the scene at a quarter passed eight. That meant the girl had been killed during the night.

The detectives quieted and came closer. Detective Mike leaned down next to her as his keen eyes professionally scoped out the body. Abby pressed her fingers around the neck to feel for splintered or broken bones but found none. She lifted the shirt and the detectives leaned over to peer.

"Stabbed her a good four times then took out her neck I bet," Mike said.

"That'd be my guess," Abby agreed, eyeing the deep red cuts in victim's abdomen. "Arm bent that way, I'd say he was holding her from behind and she'd reached back to try to get his hair or pull his arm away, something. That's when he slit her throat. She fell down just like that, still reaching for him."

"Check her hands," Mike said.

Abby lifted each of the victim's hands paying specific attention to her nails, fingers, and palms. "Defensive stab wounds." They happen during knife fights or on victims of knife homicides. The victims throw out their hands to try to dodge or block the swinging blade and their own hands get cut in the process. Blood was caked under the victim's fingernails making them look murky brown.

"How old do you think she is? The local shapeshifter alpha said the girl they're missing is about seventeen." He glanced down at his notepad. "She fits the description. Went missing last night."

"Yeah, I'd say that's right judging from the size of the body, the facial features, and her teeth. Definitely a teen. I'll know more once we get her back to the lab."

Mike stood, pulled out his notebook, and scribbled down some notes. “Anything else for us?”

Abbigail looked back down the path. “Definitely got stabbed at least the first few times at the beginning of the alley. Blood drops lead us back here to the body. He dragged her here and she lost her shoe in the struggle. She fought back, maybe even got away from him for a few seconds when he started slashing at her giving her the wounds on her hands. Eventually he got her turned around and slit her throat for the final killing blow.”

“All right, we’ll have the body sent down for processing. Let me know if you get anything else,” said Mike.

“Will do.” Abbigail walked down the path then removed her bloodied booties and gloves, handing them over to another crime scene investigator who held open a trash bag.

“Any luck?” he asked.

Abbigail shrugged. It was too soon to say.

She headed to her car and saw that it wasn’t even ten in the morning yet. Time to head home and try to get a quick nap before they got the body down to the lab. She let out a jaw-cracking yawn then took off for home.

## Chapter Two

Alrik lifted his knee high to his chest then slammed it down. His heavy boot caught the demon's chin smashing its bony skull into the ground with a fleshy crack. The *idummi* squealed a heinous, ear-piercing sound before Alrik let his boot connect with the demon's face again, ending the squeal.

Dragging in a heavy breath, Alrik turned to the temple and surveyed the grounds. The seer's home was a decrepit stone structure with two rock pillars in front acting as an archway to an empty, dark doorway set behind them. The home, if one could call it that, looked like a small rock hovel. The outside of the house was formed from hundreds of jagged rocks that varied in size and color. With the full light of day on it you could see chalky white areas and shiny black ones that glinted in the hazy sky's pink glow.

The one-story abode had no door but did have a dirty brown curtain that billowed in the breeze. Alrik checked his surroundings once more then ducked inside the temple.

His lip curled. The one-story temple was anything but what he expected. Magic reeked in the place; it saturated the air like fog. The rocky structure was a hoax, a glamour created by the seer. Inside, the room traveled back for some distance, something not possible when judging from the outside of the temple. The floor and walls were made of flat, sanded-down stone, and torches burned brightly to chase back the shadows. The scent of burning wood and smoke hit his nostrils.

Alrik gripped his bloodied sword as he made his way down the long hall at the back of the room. The tunnel went on for some distance with no end in sight. No light lit the way and no light could be seen at the end of the tunnel. He hated these games but it looked like he'd have to play them. He did not come this far to not get the answers he sought.

Stepping lightly he made his way down the blackened tunnel. He kept his ears alert, all of his senses ready. He didn't make it far when a voice spoke and sounded as if came from all around him.

It sounded chipper as if it was laughing. "Found me at last have you, fallen king? Took you long enough."

Alrik's lips peeled back. To the darkened tunnel, he demanded, "Stop playing games with me seer. You'll speak to me—"

"Or else what, fallen king? You'll kill me too? As you did to that demon outside?"

"He was rummaging around your temple. I saved you from him."

The voice came back heavy with sarcasm. "Hardly necessary. No one gets in here unless I want them to."

Alrik's neck muscles flexed as he clenched his shoulders, but he didn't roll his head to ease it. "Then speak to me, old man."

The voice, that of an old man scratchy with age and hoarse, laughed again. The jolly sound only fueled Alrik's anger.

“The fallen king is desperate, his heart filled with anger. I’ll tell you now that isn’t the answer.”

Alrik stopped walking down the endless tunnel with no light in sight and spun his head around trying to track the seer’s voice. “I haven’t even asked a question yet, seer.”

“Ah, but I know what you want to ask.”

“Then give me the answer!” Alrik shouted, his voice bouncing off the tunnel walls and echoing down the long corridor until he was surrounded by the shout. After many seconds, the echo faded leaving him in heavy silence.

He heard a long sigh which sounded laden with disappointment. “Very well,” the voice said.

The walls around him shimmered and bubbled as if looking through the clear water of a waterfall as it fell to Earth. The dark walls became bright as if it was suddenly illuminated. Alrik turned and saw the black tunnel wall dissipate completely to reveal a large room complete with a large burning fireplace, a long wooden table covered in silver plates and golden goblets, and large iron rods around the room that held thick waxy candles that flickered orange light.

In front of the fireplace sat an old man sitting on a deep orange rug woven with magical symbols and Demonish words. Alrik stepped into the room. The old seer sat with his ankles crossed and knees pointing out. His long dark hair was pulled high atop his head in a curl and he wore a blue and red robe that shimmered in the firelight.

Alrik started for the seer.

The seer lifted his head from the floor and his eyes met Alrik. Alrik froze at the sight of those eyes, and he’d never seen anything like it. Black eyes with a brilliant blue center. He’d seen many demons in his life of varying colored skin, hair, and eyes, but never anything like this. However, the rest of the seer looked very human. Dark brown skin, dark hair, but those eyes were something different.

“So you’ve found me, fallen king Alrik.”

“Not easily.” Much blood had been shed, and even more time spent trying to find the seer. It had better be worth all the trouble. He was his last hope, and the only one capable of helping him on his quest.

“Nothing worth doing is ever easy.”

“Spare me the proverbial talk, seer.”

The seer looked up towards the ceiling, his expression dreamy with thought. “I must correct myself. Nothing *important* worth doing is ever easy. Seeing as how much you need me and my guidance and how important that will change things for you, I’d say it’s going to be very important for you.”

“Enough of the bullshit, seer. You know what I’m here to ask.”

The seer looked at Alrik and smiled, his white teeth dazzling against his dark skin. “Shall you ask anyway? People like that. They don’t enjoy knowing that I already know what they’re going to say. I believe it makes them feel more comfortable.”

“Where is my mother?”

The seer jumped up to a stand, surprising Alrik with his agility. The man sounded as if speaking was a chore yet he hopped up with the spring of a child.

The seer was guessed to be older than the kingdom of *Harumina* itself and yet he looked no older than Alrik did. Surely, he was a *shahoulin* demon like Alrik, because they aged much slower than some species of earth.

Still smiling, the seer walked to a cupboard hanging on the stone wall and grabbed something off the shelf. With a few more movements, the seer walked to the candle standing in the corner of the room, and with a smoke pressed between his lips he breathed deeply as the candle sparked. The smoke's end lit brightly as he inhaled.

"Smoke?" the seer asked without glancing at him.

"No," Alrik said, his patience waning fast. "Answer my question, seer."

The seer pulled the smoke from between his wrinkled lips and stared at the tip before turning it back around and casually sucking from the end. The scent of burning herbs reached Alrik's nostrils. The odor was not unpleasant but close to it.

"You're asking the wrong question, fallen king."

Alrik squeezed his sword then deposited it back in the scabbard across his back. "Stop calling me that."

The seer's dark eyebrows flew up in surprise, and Alrik wasn't fooled. The seer wasn't surprised by anything. "What? The fallen king? You are fallen, aren't you? Were you not banished from your home for all your...horrible deeds?"

Alrik's blood pumped hard with the need to lash out. The need to tear across the small space, wrap his hand around the old seer's throat, and squeeze—squeeze until his eyes rolled into the back of his head and his wheezing breaths stopped. He didn't do that though. Instead, he released a strangled breath and bared his teeth.

"Where is my mother?"

"Ah, yes, the fallen queen," the seer said, still smiling and puffing away at his smoke. "That's not the right question to ask. Try another, fallen king."

"How can I find my mother?"

The seer rocked his head side to side as if contemplating.

"You are very close to death right now," warned Alrik "I'd answer if I were you."

The seer tossed his head back and laughed a hoarse, wheezing sound. When he looked back at Alrik, his grin was broader and his dark eyes bright with amusement. "You can't kill me, fallen king."

"Want to bet on that, seer?"

The seer spread his arms out wide until his body formed a T. "You need me."

Alrik looked away. It was either that or risk tearing the seer apart limb by limb. God, just the thought of it sent a rush of pleasure through him. The howl of his screams would fuel him better than any food, the sight of his spurting blood like a balm to his heart.

"Answer the question," he said slowly, his eyes closing as he enjoyed the mental image of killing the seer with his bare hands.

Silence met him. Alrik pushed back the dark thoughts and opened his eyes to find the seer watching him, no longer smiling.

“How you can find her or where you can find her is not important, and you already know the answer.”

“All that I know, seer, is that she’s in the rift.”

The seer shrugged a slender shoulder.

“I’m sure you know how big the rift is, seer.”

“She’s here. You’ll find her eventually, but you already know that. You don’t need me for that.”

Alrik frowned. “Then why the fuck else am I here?”

Again, the seer smiled. “Because you don’t know how to kill her.”

Alrik’s body stilled, each muscle tensing. “I’ll slice her head off with my blade and if that doesn’t work, I’ll turn to magic as she has.”

The seer laughed then sat back down on the rug at the fire, leaving a trail of smoke behind him. “But you can’t kill her.”

“What do you mean I can’t kill her?” he asked slowly.

That’s all he’d thought about, all he’d planned for *years*. He’d been searching for her for years, always either one step behind or completely off her trail through some form of her treachery. He was done. This would end soon. He’d make sure of it.

The seer looked him up and down. “Your curse won’t let you. The queen isn’t stupid. When she cursed you she made sure that if you ever learned of her deceit you couldn’t kill her. Since surely you’d want to.”

‘Want’ was such a lame word. He didn’t want to kill his mother, he needed to. He needed to as much as needed air to live.

“How do I break the curse upon me then?”

“By killing her, of course.”

Alrik’s fists clenched until his blunt nails stabbed into his skin. He felt the skin give and blood bead. “But you said I can’t kill her.”

“No, you can’t.”

Alrik nearly saw red. “Then how do I kill her?”

“It’s not a how so much as a who. See, you’re not asking the right questions.”

Alrik blinked, the only sign he gave to show the shock in his body. “Who can kill her?” The thought of anyone else ever delivering the killing blow to his mother had never, not even once, crossed his mind.

The seer laughed and rubbed his hands together. “The most unlikely person, naturally. A woman, a human woman.”

Alrik took a hard step forward and pointed a hard finger at the seer. “Stop messing with me, seer. A human, let alone a woman, could never kill my mother and you know it.”

“But this human is a witch.” His eyes turned into a faraway look, unfocused and hazy. “Though there is a bit of a problem with that.”

As if this wasn't a problem already. "And what's that?"

The seer didn't respond for several moments. His eyes were lost in thought. Finally, the haze left him and he tossed the end of his smoke into the burning fire. "She hasn't used her magic in a very long time. She shuns it."

Alrik shook his head. "This is ridiculous. You mean to tell me that the only way to kill my mother and lift the curse from me is through a human witch who doesn't even practice her skill?"

"Precisely!" the seer said with a smile.

Alrik looked away, lost in his own thoughts. "You're certain she is the one?"

"Oh yes."

A human witch. If she could kill his mother then she must be very powerful indeed. The human aspect would be a downside. That means he'd have to go to the surface to get her and she'd have a harder time adjusting to the environment in the rift. But, it could work. The fact that she doesn't practice her own magic would have to be remedied right away. He needed her power at its fullest for when they reached the queen.

"What is her name?"

The seer's lips lifted into another smile. "Abbigail Krenshaw."

Alrik frowned. "That's a strange name."

"Maybe to her your name is strange."

"Maybe so. How do I find her?"

The seer shrugged but a smart glimmer in his eyes said he did know. But he stayed silent. God, the surface. He hadn't been there...in ages. The last time was before the Great War and even then he preferred his richer, brighter colors of the rift than the dull colors of the earthen-realm.

"Fine." Alrik turned without a goodbye and headed back towards the hall. He'd just stepped foot onto the dark path when the seer spoke.

"She'll die in the process."

Alrik looked over his shoulder at the seer. "Then so be it."

The seer's merry laughter echoed around him as he stalked away with his next quest on his mind.

## Chapter Three

Abbigail stretched her tight muscles as she got out of the car. The sun was entirely too bright today...like it was trying to sear her eyeballs. Stupid sun. It wasn't the sun's fault she hadn't been sleeping well.

She'd never been a great sleeper because she woke at the slightest of noises. Her mother said it was paranoia. Whatever it was she had a hard time sleeping and it didn't help that she lived alone. At least with a roommate she felt some added comfort and could sleep mildly better.

Abby pinched her eyes into slits to hide the brutal sunlight and grabbed her mail from the mailbox. She pulled out a stack of mail and flipped through the envelopes as she strode back to the house.

"Bill, bill, wrong address, junk, junk, more junk..." she muttered.

She paused as her gaze landed on the last envelope. The envelope was tinted yellow, the paper thick and scratchy like parchment. It certainly didn't look like any kind of envelope she'd ever received before. Then again, companies that sent out junk mail did seem to be finding more creative ways to get people to open their trash mail.

The tall black cursive letters on the front read: *To Abbigail Krenshaw* then listed her address below in the same unique scrawl that looked like something from an older era. No return address, and just a stamp. She flipped the envelope over and her brow drew down in confusion. A black seal made of wax covered the V-closing of the envelope.

Apparently, this was no envelope you licked closed. Certainly not something you'd see from a credit card company trying to get you to apply for a high-interest, low-limit card. She fingered the material and touched the seal feeling the waxy material under her fingertip. Some symbols marked the seal, but it was hard to make out. It just looked like something official. There were two poles curving left and right on the outside with a regal bird's head in the middle. Peering closer, she corrected herself. Swords, not poles. She could just make out the handles and the edge of the blades if she looked hard enough but not any details of the bird's head.

"What the..." she said under her breath.

Just to make sure she flipped the strange envelope back over and ensured that it was indeed her name on the letter. Yup, sure was. A strange feeling filled her, starting in her gut and working its way up to the back of her neck until the little hairs stood on end.

She had to sit down for this. Heading back to the house she plopped down on her sofa. Dropping the rest of the mail on her chipped coffee table, she propped her feet up on it and leaned back to inspect the letter.

She hadn't noticed something before. She had been taking in too many other things on the letter: the handwriting, the seal, but now she noticed it. The worn look to it. As if it'd been crumbled again and again or passed between many hands. Where the envelope should be smooth and firm, the paper was wrinkled and weak, and one corner was bent.

"I'm stalling," she muttered.

Taking a deep breath, she flipped the envelope over and peeled back the seal; it popped off with a soft snapping sound. A heavy ball formed in her gut. It was almost as if she knew what it was before she even pulled the letter out, which had to be impossible. Maybe a part of her did know, could feel it.

She pulled the yellowed letter out of the envelope, folded thrice. It too was wrinkled and crumpled. This paper was much thinner than the envelope and softer but not as wrinkled like the envelope. The front and back were covered in handwriting of the same elegant, heavily inked hand.

It took effort to keep her hands steady, but she managed it as she parted the folds and opened the letter.

She read it slowly, her feelings so confused she didn't try to control or understand it. As she read the last word on the page, her chest twisted so tightly that her heart felt like it was being wrung like a wet rag in someone's hands. She took deep breaths and read it again.

*Dearest Abbigail,*

*I've started this letter so many times only to throw it away.*

*What does a man say to his child? His child whom he's never met, but watched from afar. I'm afraid, dear Abbigail, that there is no way for me to tell you any of this gently. I only hope that you read this and that you can understand.*

*I met the love of my life many, many years ago and I lost her. She was taken, stolen from me. She's been lost for a long time. I was nearly lost to despair, even with my own three girls to raise. I think that made it even harder. I couldn't break down like my heart wanted to. I couldn't hide or leave them to search for her. I had to be here because they'd lost someone special too. That woman was my wife, my Protector, Mary Bellum.*

*One day a new light entered my world. It was so unexpected. I don't know if I could even describe it. My children made me happy. They filled me with love, but there was and always will be a gaping hole in my heart. Nothing could fill it, or so I thought. The day I met your mother all of that changed. It was as if I could breathe a full breath of air for the first time in so long. I wanted to fall to my knees before her and cry in joy. Naturally, that wouldn't have been very brave of me, so instead I asked your mother out and she said yes.*

*She said yes. She changed my life.*

*Then, something else that I'd never thought possible happened. She had a child. Our child.*

*I can still remember the feeling. It was like so much happiness and joy had been shoved into my chest it might burst. I didn't know if I could contain it. However, things can never be perfect. I missed my mate dearly. Even though I loved your mother dearly, she could never fill the whole in my chest fully. No matter how much I wanted her to.*

*This is where I falter. What to say next? Nothing could ever replace my not being there for you, though from afar I was. I saw your pictures as you grew up, could hear your small voice in the background when I called your mother on the phone. I heard and watched you grow up*

*into a lovely, smart, and charming young woman. A man and a father, dare I say, could never be prouder than I am of you, dear Abbigail. Please believe that.*

*The day your mother told me you punched a girl in the face after she started a fight with your shapeshifter friend, I grinned in pride. The day your science project won the highest reward in both high school and college brought me to tears. Your mind, darling girl, nothing, and I mean nothing, is more beautiful than that.*

*Now, for the hard news. I wish I didn't have to tell you like this. Just once in my life I wanted to pull you into my arms and feel you there, to sit across from you and hear your voice in person. It breaks my heart to think of it. Maybe I should have done more. God, it's something I've struggled with every single day since the day you were born.*

*However, I have one fatal flaw. I've loved one woman in my life and she is gone. Nothing and no one can replace that. I hope one day you understand that feeling.*

*You need to know that if you're reading this letter then I am no longer on this earth. I have met my Great Death and moved on to the next life. Perhaps it's my own cowardice waiting until now to send this letter, but I didn't know what else to do.*

*The point of this letter, the point of my writing you is to tell you that I love you. I love you so much that just writing the words on a piece of paper can't possibly show you just how much I feel or explain how I can love someone so utterly and dearly without ever meeting them. But I do. How I do, Abbigail. Please, if nothing else in this letter, believe that. Believe me. I love you.*

*I want you to know you have three sisters. Chloe, Willow, and the youngest Lily. You have sisters. If you're as courageous as I think you are then I know you'll seek them out, and I sincerely hope you do. It's my hope now that you can be a family together in a way I could never provide. I hope you can find it in yourself to forgive me.*

*With all my love,*

*May 15, 2011*

*Francis Jeremiah Bellum*

Tears formed at her eyes. She blinked and two dropped onto the letter splattering wetly across the words. She rubbed gently at them as she sucked in a ragged breath. She made sure to be careful, not wanting the wetness to smudge the ink.

She sat the letter on the cushion next to her and stared off at the wall, her mind turning slowly trying to put the pieces together. After some time, her mind returned to normal speed. Her body slowly relaxed and the weight on her chest gradually released. The tight knot in her gut faded. Her body relaxed as best it could considering what just happened.

She knew what she had to do. She just wasn't sure she wanted to do it. But she had to.

She went to the kitchen, picked up the phone, and dialed the numbers she called many times a week. Her mother answered on the second ring.

"Hey, baby. How you doin'?"

She could hear the sounds of people chattering in the background. The soft Celtic music her mother always listened to playing gently. She was at work.

“I got a strange letter in the mail.”

Silence. Abby’s gut feeling came roaring back to life. She gripped the counter in her hand, squeezing tight to the surface until her knuckles locked and blanched. Her eyes fixed on some indescrpt point on the white stucco wall of her kitchen.

“Mom?”

“I think we need to talk,” her mother said gently. She heard her mother’s voice break. The sound crushed her heart as if a fist gripped it. She could never stand the sound of her mother crying without feeling the same emotional pull inside her.

Abby’s fist clenched tighter around the lip of the counter. “About what?” she managed to ask over her own clogged throat.

“It’s about your father.”

It was then that Abbigail Krenshaw’s life changed.

\* \* \*

By the time Abbigail arrived at her mother’s magic shop aptly named *Magic Shoppe*, her mother had cleared out all guests, sent the employees home, and closed shop. This left the parking lot completely empty except for her mother’s green Volkswagen Bug parked off to the side. The shop didn’t have many employees, and mom had two coworkers under her. Both were witches who practiced magic in the same circle as her.

Her mom even managed to pull in a decent amount of profit from her shop. Abbigail thought the idea was hilarious when her mom first told her some eleven years ago that she’d be opening a “new age” store. She stopped laughing when her mom sold her fifty-year old home with bad plumbing and shoddy insulation and upgraded to a brand new two-story house in the suburbs. It was far from a mansion but wasn’t close to being a dump either.

She’d done well because of the “new age” fad that had come and gone but wasn’t really gone. Her brand and business had stuck around well enough in Fort Collins even among the local humans.

Humans knew about magic, though some still didn’t believe in it. Some even knew about demons, shapeshifters, and the vampires of the world. Most ignored it because if they didn’t then they’d have to accept something most weren’t ready to. So most humans stayed out of the paranormal business, except for the fundamentalists. Whenever they got involved, things always got bloody. A slain vampire here, a dead shapeshifter there. Abbigail knew all about it. ‘Course it went both ways when humans wind up dead, but that wasn’t the area Abbigail worked. It didn’t help that she got to see it more often than other folks.

Abbigail stepped inside her mother’s shop and stopped. She didn’t want to do this, but she needed to. Her stomach twisted with nerves, and her hands fidgeted no matter how hard she tried to still them. Even her legs felt weak like she could fall down at any moment. The music was off leaving the shop quiet except for the soft whirr of the A/C unit. The A/C was a bit of a strange thing in the North of Colorado. Usually by now, the temperature had dropped and people

were preparing for the cold wet weather to come with winter. Instead they'd had a surprising amount of heat that still lingered in the air.

"Abby, is that you?" her mother called from the back of the store.

This is it. She couldn't turn back now. All those years of never knowing who her father was, of asking her mother repeatedly for answers only to get shut down time and again, this was her chance. She'd never told her mother, but that was the reason she'd shunned her mother's craft. It was petty, she thought, looking back on it, but no matter. That's just how it turned out.

Her mother was a practicing grey witch which meant she could dabble in magic that could heal or hurt. Abby had the same power in her blood, but it seemed that each year that passed growing up, each new birthday she had, each holiday that came and swept away without knowledge of her father, she pushed her mother further and further away. Until now, she only saw her mother on those holidays and birthdays, and only talked to her on the phone a few days a week. Even the phone calls they shared didn't last long—Abby made sure of that. She just couldn't stand to be around her.

And now she knew who her father was. What she didn't know was how to feel about it or how to feel towards her mother. Her mother's soft footsteps came out of the office and Abby closed her eyes. Anger, she certainly felt some anger but that wasn't the overriding emotion surprisingly. No, she wasn't *very* angry with her mother.

"Abby, is everything all right?" her mother asked, her voice closer, wary.

Abby kept her eyes closed and focused on just herself and the emotions scattering and darting around inside her as if they too didn't want to be figured out yet. As if something terrible might happen if she did figure it out—something awful maybe. Abby felt as if she was swimming through her own heavy emotions, searching to figure out which one she was feeling. Her breath caught as she found it. It wasn't anger, surprise, or confusion she felt. It was pain. Pure and not very simple, pain.

The words came to the tip of her tongue, laden with every ounce of emotion riding her. Abby spoke before she lost them. "After all this time, I needed to know. I *had* to know and you couldn't tell me. Not once. Not after all the begging and the tears and the pleading." Her voice cracked, tears slipped out of her tightly squeezed eyes, but still she went on. "And now that he's found me and I've found him, he's dead. I know who he is and I can still never know him. And I can never talk to him, never hug him, never *know* him."

Abbigail wanted to drop to her knees and curl up in her bed and let her numb body find itself again. She wouldn't do it, and her pride wouldn't let her. She only let one sob escape before she clamped her lips shut, slammed her eyes closed, and just rocked on her feet with arms wrapped around her waist. He'd wanted her to know about him. He hadn't wanted her mother, which hurt on a level of its own.

"I wish he wouldn't have even sent the stupid letter," Abby said, slowing her rocking. Her mother was oddly quiet, all things considered. "You know, mom, it feels like there's a knife in my heart that hadn't been there before. It's like I'm being taunted. 'Oh by the way, I love you

and would have loved to be in your life. Too bad I'm dead now.' And the stuff he said about you. I don't know if I hate him or..."

Finally her mother spoke. "Let me see the letter, honey."

Long engrained to answer her mother's commands, Abby pulled the letter out of her back pocket and handed it over. She kept her eyes averted unable to meet her mother's sad eyes.

A few minutes passed while Abbigail listened to her mother's breath catch and tears clog her throat as she tried to control it.

"I'll tell you everything," her mother said.

Anger started to poke its head up. *Now you'll tell me*, Abbigail's inner conscious yelled. *Now, after it's too late to do anything about it! Isn't that fucking convenient for you, mother.* But she didn't say any of those things that she was thinking. Instead she got up, her back muscles feeling stiff like they hadn't been used in a while and went to her mother's office to take a seat in front of the desk. Her mother followed and sat behind her beat up wooden desk that was covered in a disarray of pamphlets advertising the store, eschewed paperwork, pens without the caps on, pencils with broken points, three cups of coffee that were probably days old, and God knows what else.

"H-how do you want me to start?"

"Just...at the beginning, mom." Abby temples pounded against her skull. She pressed two fingers to the spot and rubbed circles as her mother began to tell her the very thing she'd been begging for her whole life. Funny, but she wasn't relieved or excited to hear it now. Not like she'd thought she'd be.

"I met him twenty-six years ago. He was so handsome and charming. There was something old world about him, you know, as if he came from a different time. I felt something special about him and when he pursued me, I agreed. I realized he was an incubus then. I fell in love with him fast. So fast..."

Abbigail's chest felt like it was going to explode. That meant she was part succubus? *Oh my God.*

"Mom," she cut in, "can you skip to only the most needed details please?" She couldn't handle hearing the falling-in-love story of her mother and father. Not right now anyway when everything felt so raw, and especially after hearing how her mother had just been second best.

"Oh, okay, anything you want honey."

The knife in Abbigail's heart twisted even deeper at her mother's favorite endearment for her. It had to be unfair that she felt angry with her mother, right? Except for the fact that she'd asked for more than twenty years to know who he was and she never received an answer. She had to find out from a letter from a dead man.

"Well, um, I got pregnant. Pretty quickly actually, and, well, I know you know about it from the letter, but it's still hard to say. He had three daughters already. They were all so precious to him. I mean he worshipped them. Their mother was his Protector. You know how they are, they get that one person who is sort of like a mate to them and they stay together forever. He loved her. They don't have to love their Protector but he did—so much."

Abigail turned her head to stare at a green metal shelf that held cardboard boxes, stacks of printer paper, more paperwork, and a bunch of her mother's witchcraft knickknacks. She tried to focus on the paper she saw and to read the words there, but it didn't distract her enough. She couldn't remove herself from this situation because she needed to hear this. She just didn't want to, not really.

"I was afraid. I *knew* that I could never compete with that. He never actually said it but we spent many years together, and he never asked for us to move in. He never asked to see you. He never wanted to marry me. After his wife went missing, he never stopped looking for her. I'm sorry Abby, but we were always the outsiders."

Abigail finally turned to look at her mother. She had her head buried in two hands and her shoulders were sagging forward. She looked much older at that moment. Her mother looked at her with wet, sad eyes, and a frown.

"I was always second. I had no choice but to be that. I didn't...I couldn't..." she scrubbed her hands over her face and shook her head as if to get rid of a bad thought. "I'm sure I was wrong, but it's like...he was holding back something from me so I...so I..."

Oh my god. So that was it, Abby thought. "He held back part of himself from you, so you kept me from him. Talk about petty, mom."

Anger sliced in her mother's eyes. "It wasn't quite like that. He never pushed to see you at all. I'm not the only one who's petty, or who's made mistakes. At least I sent him pictures."

Her mother's words hit home just as she wanted to. She'd never become a practicing witch like her mother wanted her to. She'd never carry on her mother's legacy, and yes she actually had a bit of one. And yes she did it just to spite her mother.

"Yeah, I guess we're both petty, mom."

Abby stood up, but couldn't meet her mother's eyes. Her mother started to say something, but the phone in Abby's pocket buzzed.

She took it out and answered it.

"Yeah?" she said. "Got it." She closed the phone and pocketed it. "I gotta go. A case."

She left her mother in silence and rushed out to her car. That was good. For the best. She loved her mom no matter what and all of this would have been different if only her mom had told her who her father was. She didn't deserve to find out in a fancy letter written by a dead man.

Warm air had gathered in the car, and it suffocated her in its heat. She started the engine then rolled down the windows to let in some cooler air. The breeze made her sigh as the tight muscles in her back relax. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't keep from crying.

## Chapter Four

Night set by the time Abby got home from the lab. The dead shapeshifter case was going to be a hard one for detectives since they had no witnesses. Either that or anyone who witnessed the crime wasn't coming forward. Some people get scared in situations like this and don't want to come forward. It could be to their benefit or demise in cases where they recognized the killer. The knife used to commit the murder still hadn't been found and until all the blood and evidence was processed, nothing could be done. It was a waiting game until they got another hit.

"What a day," Abby said as she unlocked her front door and stepped into her house. It wasn't really her house; just a rental but she loved it all the same. It had three bedrooms, two baths, and a single-car garage to boot. Going from college dorms to the small apartment she shared with her friend Jenna after college to this was like hitting the lottery.

Her stomach growled. She hadn't eaten since breakfast that morning but her body was so tired she just wanted to pass out and not wake up for a week. She couldn't do that though, nope. She had to face her problems. She needed to contact her step-sisters.

She wondered: what would they think of her? Would they like her, accept her? She doubted it. She couldn't say she'd be so agreeable to accept a step-sibling that she didn't know about until now. Still, she had to try. As soon as she got some sleep she'd do some research and find some addresses. A spark of hope filled her that maybe, just maybe, they'd be wonderful. She'd only ever had her mom and no one else. She'd had friends but that wasn't the same as family. Jenna was always there if she needed her, but they weren't as close as they'd been while in college.

Abby set her lab bag on the kitchen table, snagged a yogurt out of the fridge and spoon from the kitchen drawer, and then headed to the bedroom. She needed to get a pet, a cat or maybe a dog. Something so the house wouldn't feel so empty every time she got home.

She scrubbed her face and changed into her pajamas as she finished her yogurt and tossed it into the trash bin. She'd just pulled down the comforter, ready to let her exhausted bones rest, when a bang came at a door.

Not a knock, a bang.

She jumped, her heart starting a fierce pounding beat in her chest. Her hand went to her chest, and her eyes flew wide open. She checked the clock: ten o'clock. Who the hell would be banging on her door like that? That sounded like the knocking SWAT officers used before breaking down the door when they had a search warrant.

Getting control of herself, Abby opened her nightstand drawer and pulled out her gun. She had a permit for it and she knew how to shoot. The banging persisted. *BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM!* It never relented, never paused.

Abby crept down the hall on the balls of her feet as her heart thundered in time to the knocking. She kept her thumb over the safety on her gun, ready at a moment's notice to flick it off and use it.

Just as she reached the door, the banging stopped. She froze, straining to hear something. No whisper of breath, no sound of movement; she only heard the cacophonous thud of her own heartbeat. She breathed as quietly as she could as she tried to slow her racing heart. She was glad the lights were off in the house. Maybe whoever was there would assume she wasn't home and leave.

Then the banging came again, this time even harder. She flinched, her hand tightening around her gun warming the cool metal as the door shook in its sturdy frame. God, whoever it was must be strong. She wished like hell she had a peephole or even a window at the door but she had neither. The nearest front window only showed as much as the driveway. The front of the house blocked the doorway from view.

Only a door stood between her and the person knocking.

*BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM!*

Finally finding her voice, she called out in a hard voice, "Who's there?" Well, she'd tried for a stern voice but it still came out sounding scared, alert.

The knocking stopped as if it never happened. Only a resounding echo and her racing heart showed she wasn't crazy.

She heard a muffled voice, deep, unintelligible.

"What?" she said, yelling louder through the door. She wasn't stupid enough to open it. Hell no. Her thumb traced over the small safety lever on the gun, itching to release it.

"Abbigail Krenshaw," the deep voice said.

Her stomach fell to her knees. Fuck, what did she do now? Somehow this man, it was definitely a masculine voice, knew her name and that scared the shit out of her. She looked around, feeling as if dozens of eyes were watching her but she didn't find any. Only her empty dark house stared back at her. The green clock from the kitchen stove still lit the kitchen up in a dim glow and nightlights in the hallway and living room were dim but showed enough light to see that no one waited to jump her.

"What do you want?"

The voice didn't answer. All went silent. Abbigail swept her gaze around her house again as if, at any moment, a window would burst and some crazed maniac would jump through her window ready to gut her like the victim she saw this morning.

"Open this door." It was a command, an order.

Abbigail had no intention of answering it. Instead, she slowly raised her gun, keeping her thumb near the safety, and pointed it at the door. Quietly, she backed up towards the kitchen and to her phone.

*BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM!* The knocking started again, unrelenting.

Her breath caught at the sound of cracking wood. Her eyes darted around the door trying to see a crack, but she couldn't see any broken wood. She could have sworn she heard it crack. He knocked again, louder, the banging sound ringing in her ears amidst more splintering sounds. God, he's breaking down the doorframe, tearing it down!

She turned and ran to the phone. She faced the door, gun ready as she dialed. Her fingers slipped in their haste, and she had to end the call and try again twice before she got the three digits dialed—911.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

“A man’s trying to break into my house,” Abigail whispered, but her voice sounded just as panicked as she felt. The knocking continued, never stopping. “Oh my god, do you hear that?”

“What’s your address ma’am?” Abby related it quickly. “Ma’am, get to a back room with a lock on it and lock yourself in there. Stay on the line. Patrol officers are on the way.”

Abby started towards the bedroom then stopped as she felt the cord to her phone pull taut. “I can’t take the phone with me. It’s not wireless.” God, she felt really stupid now. She thought the corded, old-fashioned phone was cute and trendy when she bought it. It was one of those vintage, dark yellow ones that hung on the wall. She liked it because it came from the fifties and had a certain flair to it.

“Then set the phone down but do not hang up if you can. Patrols will be there shortly.”

No sooner than the operator declared that the door shook violently.

“He’s kicking it,” she said, part in fear and part in disbelief.

Abby waited no longer. She turned and ran for the bedroom just as she heard the door burst open in an explosion of splintered wood. The front door bounced off the wall with a resounding crack just as she entered her bedroom, slamming the door closed and flipped the measly turn lock.

Her thumb swept the safety off her gun and she sprinted into her bathroom as another bang came at her bedroom door. No way would that weak wood door last nearly as long as the front door.

She slammed the bathroom door shut, locked it and moved as far back as she could in the tight space by wedging herself between the toilet and shower. Shaking and scared out of her mind, she raised her gun, index finger poised over the trigger and waited.

*BAM! BAM! CRACK!*

The bedroom door slammed open. She heard it beat against her nightstand with another blow. She started praying for the police to come, and she didn’t want to be another body like the ones she found for a living. Her arms shook. As she looked down the peephole of the black gun, the hole wavered, wobbling around in waves that she tried to steady but couldn’t.

She kept waiting for him to come, kept waiting to hear the banging on the bathroom door. But it never came. A minute passed. Then another. And another.

A part of her told her to check the door, open it just an inch and peer outside. Maybe he was gone and she did have a gun after all. She could shoot if he charged at her, but the smarter part of her mind told her to wait there. Wait for the police. They shouldn’t be that long. After all, she lived close to her job and her job which was with the police department.

Sure enough, another minute passed and she could hear the faint howling of sirens in the distance. As they got louder, her heart rate slowed and her muscles relaxed, but she never dropped aim no matter how hard her arms shook.

She heard men entering her house.

“Abbigail Krenshaw!” a voice shouted.

She’d never been more relieved to hear another person’s voice in her life. She collapsed against the toilet. “Mike, I’m in the bathroom!” Footsteps bounded in her bedroom but something made her stay in the bathroom. As if she had to be certain it was safe and this wasn’t all some gimmick.

A soft triple knock came at the door. “Abbigail, are you all right?”

Mike’s voice was tense, not that she was surprised. He was a sweet guy. A good cop and she’d probably just scared the shit out of him with her call. She stood on legs that didn’t feel like her own and unlocked the door. She opened it slowly, peering out as she’d wanted to before. She met his dark blue eyes and light head of hair then let the door open all the way.

He had a hard look in his eyes, the kind he used when surveying a crime scene. “You okay?” His eyes traced her quickly from head to toe ensuring all parts were accounted for.

She nodded and before she knew it, he wrapped her in his arms. It was beyond unprofessional but she hugged him back. After the insanity she just went through, the least she deserved was a hug, right?

She pulled back first and gave him a tight-lipped smile.

“Now tell me why your doors are busted in and what the hell happened.”

Abby shrugged then told him what happened. His frown got deeper and deeper as she continued. No matter how hard she tried to describe how terrifying it all was, she couldn’t. No words could describe that.

“Stay in a hotel tonight. Use cash.”

It was Abby’s turn to frown. “What? No, why?”

He lifted a dark blonde eyebrow at her. “Because you don’t have a front door.”

Her face flushed and she nodded. “Right.”

She packed a bag, being sure to put her gun in there, and changed out of her pajamas. As she left her house, she saw the detective unit making a crime scene out of her home.

Mike watched her walk to her car from the front door. She didn’t like his scrutiny or that she’d needed help like this. These were good cops and had much better cases to be working on then spending time in her house. However, Mike insisted.

This whole thing was all so bizarre. Too many questions rang in her head: who had beaten in her door, and why did he want her?

She opened her car door and tossed her hastily stuffed duffel bag into the passenger seat. Strange, she didn’t feel tired now. She felt as if she could run a mile at a full on sprint and not even be out of breath.

“Damn, hey, Abby.” Mike took a step towards her, but then stopped.

Abbigail blinked. What the... he didn’t stop, he froze. No, not just him, everything had frozen. The air that had been stirring the hair around her face stopped. The strands dropped flat against her. The trees swaying from the breeze stopped up and down the street leaning in mid-way as if reaching for something. The voices in the house ceased. All went quiet, dark.

She felt him before she saw him. A roar filled her ears. She turned around and leaned back against the car for support. Time seemed to slow or maybe it was just her adrenaline pumping that made it seem like time slowed. What was that sound, the roar? Shoot, it was her heart racing.

“Mike!” Her one last chance for help, she called out. She darted a glance at Mike and saw him still frozen with one foot forward, his body in mid-step, and eyes locked on her, unblinking.

It dawned on her then...magic. The man coming for her was using magic. She should have realized it sooner, but she was so out of touch with it.

She felt him coming.

Spinning around, she stared at her neighbor’s dark house. Her neighbors were older and paranoid and they always kept their outdoor lights on and several inside the house at night. Now the house sat completely dark and empty looking. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she realized the streetlights were off too leaving everything dark with only the moon light to guide her eyes.

The man appeared before her very eyes. A cloaking spell to disguise his presence,, that took strong magic. He didn’t move towards her, just faced her from her neighbor’s yard.

Her breath caught, heart stuttered. The first thing she noticed was his eyes. The darkest eyes she’d ever seen, too dark to be human. Pitch black. Her eyes moved away from his face. Curiosity had her digging to learn more about him. Just who was this and what did he want with her?

“Abigail Krenshaw.” Her stomach trembled at his deep voice. He had a deep voice. It could be sexy if it wasn’t so terrifying. The way he said her name was unusual too, *Abb-ee-gyle Kreenshaw*.

She sensed the question in his voice though she hadn’t heard the upward inflection normally there in a question. Maybe it was fear or the strangeness of everything, but she answered. “Yes.”

He started towards her. Coming closer, out of the shadows, she could see him more clearly. His long, dark hair was as black as the empty pit of his eyes. His hair came down to his shoulders but was cut unevenly at the ends, not straight. She saw ebony skin that was so dark it was to the point of being black not brown. He wore a strange looking shirt that reminded her of a tunic. It was black, knitted, long-sleeved but with an open collar, black pants, and tall black boots. None of this kept her attention for very long because as he came closer, she saw the glint of metal on his back. Two weapons, swords actually, were strapped in an X pattern across his pattern.

“What are you?” she whispered. He was handsome, tall, and looked strong enough to pick her up and snap her in two she’d bet. He also didn’t look entirely human.

He stopped so close she could feel the heat from his body. For some reason, she found she wasn’t scared anymore. Maybe it was finally seeing her pursuer, but she didn’t get the vibe that this man would slit her throat and leave her for dead. It might be dangerous, but she trusted

her instincts on this. She craned her head up to see his face. No, he wasn't handsome. He was stunning.

His hair formed from a peak at his broad forehead. He had a brusque, distinguishing nose and high cheekbones that gave a hollowed definition to his cheek line. Dark stubble covered his jaw line and chin, but underneath that she could see he had a hard, jutting chin. He had full, masculine lips with the top just thinner than the bottom. They weren't perfect but that's what made them even more intriguing. All of his features on closer inspection were too perfect, and they shouldn't have formed a good-looking face. He should look too fierce, too sharp but somehow his features came together in a way that drew the eye.

"Demon," he answered.

His voice drew her out of her inspection. She'd forgotten she'd asked him a question. He's a demon? She knew about them. Most humans just pretended they didn't exist or only did in a religious or mythical way, but she knew about the supernaturals. Heck, her best friend Jenna could shapeshift into a panther, and Abby had once autopsied a vampire. However, she'd never met a demon. To say they were uncommon would be an understatement.

Her mother had spoon-fed her lore of the great wars fought by the vampires against demons long ago. Weapons manufacturer and wealthy tycoon, Telal Demuzi had come out publicly when heat grew on him about his strange appearance some years ago. He'd admitted to being a demon, he'd embraced it, said he was over a thousand years old, and it'd shocked many humans. You wouldn't think they could be shocked. Vampires were all the rage—real ones anyway. They were slowly coming out but most still lived in secluded communities across the globe. Many more had called him a liar and still believed he used makeup and hair dye to achieve his unique look. They said it was a marketing gimmick.

But, Abigail knew better. Her best friend Jenna was a shapeshifter, something else many humans pretended didn't exist, however many knew. Humans just didn't seem as interested in the beings who could shapeshift. Abby had seen Jenna shift before—it was one of the most frightening and beautiful things she'd ever seen in her life.

Yet the creature before her was neither vampire nor shapeshifter nor witch for that matter. He was the stuff of nightmares.

"What do you want?"

His answer came fast. "You."

Her stomach knotted then dropped right out of her.

A flutter moved inside her. Pleasure.

*Oh, don't be silly, Abby. He's probably going to kill you.* She should seriously not be flattered that a good-looking demon said he wanted her. It had to be hormones because she could feel the beginnings of a blush stir.

Before she could say anything, he wrapped a strong arm around her shoulders pulling her close and then she felt the earth sway at her feet. Darkness enveloped her eyes, and she went blind. Then she felt nothing under her feet. She was falling in space, seeing nothing but empty

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blackness and hearing nothing but her own fast breaths. The strong arm holding her drew her in tighter as her heart thumped louder in her ears.

## Chapter Five

The human was different than he'd expected. The presence of magic surrounded her like a bright cloud. How could she not be using it if it was wrapped around her so? She must still be practicing. The seer must be wrong and this meant only good news for him. This meant she'd be ready to kill his mother much quicker than he'd originally thought. Perhaps with a little additional training from him she'd be ready in no time. They could leave to track the queen in as little as a week if luck stayed with him.

Alrik shifted the slight weight of the human girl in his arms—she was a light thing—and scanned the area around him before swimming down into the lake and resurfacing in the hidden cove that lie under the slope of the beach. He rose with the human, water dripping from their hair and clothes. Thanks to the effect of porting, she still slept. Many couldn't handle it especially for their first time.

His boots splashed in the ankle-deep water as he made his way into the blackened cave that'd become his impromptu home. He'd had many 'homes' since being banished by his brother Telal. Sometimes on his travels, he would find a desolate shack or old farmhouse that he'd steal a few nights away in, but the further he'd gone from the kingdom the less he saw of other people.

Not much lived outside the kingdom, and the kingdom offered the only protection against *idummi* attacks. They had a highly trained militia of *shahoulin* demon warriors—the best in the rift. The lethal venom *idummi* carried in their fangs would kill anything it bit unless treated promptly by someone who knew what they were doing.

Alrik hadn't slept well in years it seemed. Since he was forced from his crown, his journey seemed to stretch on endlessly. He had no one. He'd never known how much he craved companionship, even just idle conversation, until he no longer had it.

He couldn't even relax let alone get a full night's rest. Not when the *idummi* targeted him like he'd be their next juicy snack. He'd interrogated enough *idummi* before ending their lives to learn his mother stood behind the attacks. He couldn't say that surprised him. She knew he was after her and that he was shunned from his kingdom. Which only meant that she knew he wanted to kill her. Alrik had prepared the best he could for her because few were smarter and more cunning than his mother. She'd set a target on his back the moment she learned of his banishment. Now it was just a matter of time to see who died first.

Just how many *idummi* she'd managed to rally to her cause, he didn't know. If his mother was one thing aside from insane, it was smart. She might have an army bigger than he could imagine. He'd just have to prepare for the worst. He did have one benefit on his side—determination. He wouldn't stop. Nothing would get in his way until her royal wet blood slipped between his fingers.

The cove he'd chosen to use was off a small, freshwater lake in the rift. The cave was well hidden around sharp rocks and a dangerous, steep slope that led down to the water. From atop the slope it looked like it went down into the water and nothing else, but when one actually

walked down the slope and swam down, the slope actually gave way underneath to a large, cavernous space.

The human mumbled to herself, her head lolling left and right. Something tightened in his gut as he looked at her. He didn't like it. Gazing upon her stirred something deep inside of him.

Alrik cursed.

Who was she to try to compete with his Arianna? She was no Arianna. Arianna was a goddess. Beautiful, shining, dark black hair fell down to her slender waist and a graceful figure and demeanor that could only be obtained with the best of *haute*, aristocratic blood in her veins. This human looked nothing like his Arianna. She had hair the color of wet dirt. It looked thin and not heavy like Arianna's hair. She had wide hips and more curves than Arianna, but Arianna didn't need blatant curves. Her graceful figure brought about attention alone.

Simply put, she wasn't his Arianna.

Then why did his gut clench just looking at her?

Too long without a woman, maybe. His gaze trailed over her form once more taking in the slight span of her waist and the flare of her hips. The sight stirred something hot buried deep inside him. He wondered how she'd feel pressed tight against him...bare skin to bare skin.

His cock hardened like steel.

Enough!

Alrik charged into the dark cave. He didn't need his sight in his place; he knew it like the edge of his sword. He went far back into the cave, sidestepping the fire pit he'd made before he'd left to find the human. Then he dropped the human on the sandy floor. He wasn't gentle about it and she gave him the response he'd been looking for. Her eyes shot open, mouth forming a big circle as pain pinched her features. She let out a low, husky groan that did nothing to alleviate the pressure in his groin.

"What the hell," she groaned, turning on her side to rub her back.

"We will talk now."

She hadn't been aware of him, he realized. Now she was. Slowly her head fell back, her eyes turned up to meet his. Recognition dawned slowly. Her eyes darted wildly around the cave filling with panic and fear. She stood in a rush then wobbled on her feet. Panic had her in its grip. She swung her arms out, found the wet cave wall with a hand and then leaned towards it to steady herself, pressing both hands against it.

"What the hell's going on? Oh my god, where am I?"

"Be quiet. I will talk and you will listen. Do you understand?" He hadn't met a human in years. In his previous experience, some were smart and others not so much. He hoped his salvation didn't lie in a daft girl who looked entirely too young to have the amount of power the seer spoke of.

She turned and glared at him. The spark of anger was good, and the cleverness he spotted in her eyes even better. Good, she wouldn't be daft.

"Excuse me? How about you tell me who you are, *demon*, where I am, why I'm here, and what you want with me?" She crossed her arms and set her light green eyes on him.

Alrik had the distinct urge to stalk over to her and tower over her just to see her quiver in fear. She will learn her place soon enough. Her attitude would go even quicker. He was a king, and some lowly human would not treat him like a servant.

Alrik straightened and let the darkness in his heart bleed out to the air around him, stifling it, biting out the oxygen she so desperately need. The human sensed his magic. Her eyes traced the air around her as if she could see it. Maybe she could.

Then she gasped, choking. Her hands flew to her throat as she gagged, her lungs working hard to suck in air. Her knees buckled and only then did he release his magic. Stepping close to her, he looked down at her puny form with a sneer. “You do not order me around, human. Stay down or what you just felt will only be a taste of what I’ll do to you.”

When she looked up at him it wasn’t with fear as he’d expected but...anger. Alrik took a step back, then another. He had to stay away from her. Maybe she was more dangerous than he’d originally given her credit for. She had fight in her. She wasn’t stupid and she wasn’t easily scared. Hmm... Maybe this could turn out to be in his favor. Having a strong witch under him, a smart one even, would be much better than a weak one. She wouldn’t cower in fear when she saw her first *idummi* demon, which she surely would see many of during their journey.

“Good, your lack of fear gives me some confidence that you’ll do after all.”

“For what?” she spat, her eyes glaring fiery hatred at him.

He loved the look. His body absorbed the hatred and when he sucked in a deep breath, he almost felt fuller, more whole, and some feeling close to happiness. He loved the hatred as much as it loved him. He smiled bearing his teeth. “You’ll aid me in killing my mother.”

She choked in surprise, her eyes flying wide and jaw dropping. He could see the edge of her pink tongue and jerked his gaze away as a blaze of something wrong flew through him. Kneeling by the fire pit, he set to work stacking logs and began lighting them with a quick spell. He needed something to do other than stare at her. Something unsettled him when he looked at her.

“Excuse me, camp master, but I’m not helping you kill anyone. Where am I?”

He waited until all the logs caught and the orange glow lit up the cavern. His gaze caught on her face. She wasn’t beautiful like Arianna, but something about her was pleasant to look at he just couldn’t put his finger on it yet. Overall, she almost looked plain, simple even, but something about him stirred him.

“You’re good to look at too that will make things easier,” he said.

Her face scrunched, then relaxed, and then scrunched again. “What?”

He shrugged and then pulled his swords off his back laying them next to him, but away from her in case she got any ideas. “A pleasant face is easier to look at than an ugly one.”

Her mouth dropped open again. She did that a lot, he noticed. Her entire face was active, flashing from one emotion to the next at any moment. It’d make her easy to read. He smiled into the fire. The seer might just earn a reward after his mother’s ashes were burned to crisp. He’d chosen a worthy witch it seemed.

“Answer my questions, demon,” the little witch said. A hint of threat lingered in her words. He’d tolerate her insolence for a little longer. She’d realize her place soon enough.

“Stay silent and hear me well, human—”

“I have a name,” she cut in.

His fists clenched. “Do. Not. Interrupt. Me.” He waited until she slumped against the wall before he continued. “I was told by the seer that you will be the one to kill my mother. I thought I could do it, but that’s not the case. With the curse on me—”

“You’re cursed?” She didn’t look angry so much as curious. Her eyes skimmed over him leaving him unsettled. He fought the urge to cover up his darkened skin, to turn away from her.

“Don’t look at me.” He hadn’t meant to say it. It had been a knee-jerk reaction. He could do nothing to take back his words though.

She scoffed. “Really, I can’t do that either? Get real, demon.”

Inwardly, he breathed a sigh of relief that she didn’t notice his revealing words. “I am very real, I assure you, human. My name is King Alrik and you will call me thus. As to where you are, leave it said that you’re in the rift—the demonic nether-realm.”

Her head fell to the side. “A king? Really?” Her eyes rolled in a way that sparked irritation. “Come on just take me home and I won’t press charges.”

Now Alrik frowned in confusion. “How do you press a charge? You’re speaking nonsense, human.”

Her face flashed with annoyance, her small shapely mouth pinching together. “That means I’ll go to the police, you know the authorities.”

God, maybe he had been wrong. She might just be daft after all. “Abbigail Krenshaw if you think your human *police* as you call them could ever contain me, you’d be very wrong.”

She started to say something, then slammed her mouth closed and leaned back against the wall with a defiant cross of her arms.

“Fine, continue your little story then.”

He stiffened as anger flowed through him. She thought to speak to him as if she had control of this situation? He took a deep breath as anger filled his blood thick and hot like syrup, warming his cold body. The rush of it went to his head like a bolt of lightning, quickening his senses. “You will kill my mother.”

“Why?” she shot back.

“To remove the curse that binds me.” He’d already considered the other part of the seer’s words and figured it better not to reveal the probable ending to the human’s life. Knowing she’d die in the process would not help her decision to join his cause.

“What kind of curse is it?”

Alrik jerked his sword into his lap and pulled out a smooth rock from his pocket. Bending over the blade in the firelight, he began pressing the stone to the edge of the blade and slowly dragging it down in long strokes. The soothing motion of sharpening his blade helped him to think. He hadn’t planned to reveal his curse to her. It brought about too many problems, problems he didn’t want to think about. His blade hissed over the metal.

“One that I must remove. That is all.” He left it at that.

She shook her head in disbelief. “Fine, but I’m not doing it.”

His gaze shot across the fire to her. She flinched. Good, he thought. “You might want to rethink your words, human. I know of someone very precious to you. Someone whose life I could take as easily as I stole you from your home.”

She shot to her feet. “My mother?” she yelled, her cry echoing off the walls.

Alrik let out a stuttering breath as her anger caressed him like a soft hand. His eyes fluttered closed, hand flexed over the hand of his blade. “Yes, I know who she is and where she is. If you are wise you will abide me on my journey. After, you can return to her unharmed both of you will live.” He let his lie hide beneath his dark eyes. He couldn’t stop from noticing the way her heavy breaths moved her quite full breasts up and down in the most erotic way. He jerked his gaze away and stared into the fire, focusing on banishing the unwanted, lustful thoughts.

“Let me get this straight, if I help you kill some woman I don’t know then you’ll return me to my mother?”

“Yes.”

“I’d sooner believe I could throw you through this wall than a bunch of horseshit like that.”

Alrik tensed. He needed her to believe him or this would never work. Standing tall, he stepped into her, backing her into the wall. Her chest flattened against his and he stifled a groan. Quite full breasts indeed.

Her gaze darted anywhere but at his face, but he stared down at her until finally, without a choice, she lifted her chin and met his stare.

“I do not lie.” *Lie*. “You do this with me and I’ll protect you every step of the way.” *Truth*. He needed her alive. “After the deed is done, I’ll return you to the earthen-realm and you’ll never hear from me again.” *Partial-truth*. She’d never make it back to the earthen-realm.

He tried to read her eyes—*did she buy it?*—but they revealed nothing other than a stony stare.

“Get away from me,” she said. Did his ears betray him or was that a tremble in her voice? His chest expanded and his gaze fell to her mouth. Her lips looked soft, welcoming. A soft sound caressed his ears... a hitch in her breath. A hot knot formed in his chest and shot down to his cock at the sound. Those shapely and pouty lips beckoned a man like a sin.

Before he did something to hurt his cause, he stepped back and took his seat by his weapons.

Picking up his whet stone, he scraped it hard across his blade. For the millionth time he wished things were different, that *he* was different, but he couldn’t change what was. Couldn’t change who he’d become. But he could kill his mother and hopefully right some past wrongs.

With an edge to his voice he said, “You will help me or I’ll slit your mother’s throat before your eyes. I’ll force you to help me anyway and kill you after the deed is done. You have your choices, now decide.”

The human pressed a hand over her heart. The pained expression on her face hit him strangely in the chest. For some reason the look didn't fill him with a rush; instead, strangely, guilt ate at him. He didn't have time to study the emotion he hadn't felt in so long because he ruthlessly shoved it away.

The human straightened her spine, lifted her chin, and stared down at him with a loathing he welcomed over guilt. "I'll do it."

"Good choice."

In a flash, the look on her face changed. Her arms flattened to her sides, fingers spreading open to the earth. He had only a moment to feel the magic swirl around him before he felt invisible binds wrapping around his body, locking him into place in less than a matter of seconds. Under different circumstances, he might have been overjoyed to see her magic skills used so well. She didn't even need to speak a spell to cast magic, but he wasn't overjoyed now.

His eyes flashed to hers and found her light green eyes shining bright like a light in the cave. The binds twisted tighter around him, binding his legs together, his arms to his side, snaking around his chest and squeezing just enough to make it difficult to breathe.

"Stop this, witch," he warned, his own eyes beginning to glow.

Her body relaxed and she stumbled backwards hitting the wall. She winced, then ran up to him. He sucked in shallow breaths through the invisible binds as he brought forth his own magic. He started chanting the words to break the binds as she picked up one of his swords. She started to lift it but she'd underestimated how heavy demon steel was and dropped it back in the sand before taking off on a sprint.

The last of his spell left him and the binds loosened the magic around him. "Abigail!" he roared.

He surged to his feet with blazing fury roaring through his veins as he charged after her.