

CHAPTER 1

“TANI, IS THAT HIM?” Keena whispered.

Tani nodded. “It is. He looks exactly like the drawing Master Kelhar gave us.”

Keena sighed sadly. “Must we do this?”

“It is our duty.”

Tani swallowed hard against the bile rising in his throat. He had to remain strong. He couldn't let his partner know of his own misgivings. On his world, Harvesting was a duty held in the highest regard. Because he was chosen, his family was treated almost like royalty, receiving money from the Crown and the monastery, being invited to the most exclusive parties, living in luxury. Tani couldn't take that away from them.

This world was strange and sometimes terrifying. The buildings towered so high as to be almost mountainous. The last time he had come through the gateway, he had nearly been crushed by some sort of motorized conveyance. It moved much faster than the steam carts the wealthy people on his world used. Keena had been frightened and wanted to go back through the gateway, but Tani had wanted a closer look. He could see no evidence of a steam engine on the strange contraption and he wanted to know what made it move so quickly and smoothly.

He wondered what this world looked like in the daylight hours. A Harvester always worked at night, cloaked in the protective shadows of darkness.

Tani shook his head, unwilling to get distracted as he moved closer to the man who was walking slowly in front of him. It was quiet and no one else was in the vicinity. A gentle breeze blew through the leaves

of the few trees planted along the sidewalk. The night was warm, much as it would be back on his world.

Tani crept quickly and silently, moving behind the man, who didn't even turn around. He could barely hear Keena as she followed close behind, ready with the magical stones that would open the gateway back to their home world.

He tightened his grip on the club in his right hand. The man in front of him walked through some deep shadows. Tani lunged forward and brought the heavy wooden club down on the back of the man's head.

* * *

"So what do you have for me?"

Detective Elliott Robins pulled on gloves as he talked to one of the cops on the scene. He ignored the gawkers straining to get a better look at the body.

Bloody vultures.

"Male, Caucasian, name is Gerald Forbes," the cop said.

Eli wracked his brain, trying to remember the cop's name. He'd seen him half a dozen times throughout his seventeen-year career, but the man's name eluded him.

God, I need a drink.

"Cause of death?" Eli asked.

"It's a toss-up between blunt force trauma or multiple stab wounds, take your pick. We'll know more when the medical examiner does the autopsy."

"Detective, I found something."

Eli glanced to Sherry Abeyta. The petite medical examiner looked like a child kneeling next to the body. He walked quickly toward her, his six foot, seven inch frame easily covering the distance. Eli sidestepped the little yellow flags with the grace and ease of many years of experience working in the field.

"What've you got?"

"I took a closer look at the stab wounds and noticed something interesting." Sherry unzipped the body bag and pushed it open. "Notice anything about the placement of the wounds?"

Eli took a minute to examine the victim. The man was lying face up. His skin was covered in blood and there were several deep wounds to the abdomen. His chest was opened wide, like he had undergone open-heart surgery. Eli carefully turned the body, so he could see the side and part of the back.

"Large gaping wound to the chest and a single wound on the posterior side of the back directly above the kidneys. Can I assume there's another slash mark on his right side?" Eli asked.

Sherry nodded, but refused to say another word.

Eli peered into the chest cavity and hissed in revulsion.

"Are you kidding me? The perp took the man's frigging *heart*?"

"And both kidneys." Sherry covered the victim's body and rolled easily to her feet.

"Who knows about this?"

"Just us."

"Let's keep it that way. Make sure the press doesn't get wind of this."

Eli pulled his gloves off, grimacing as he wiped his sweaty palms on his slacks. Working crime scenes in the summer was the worst. He left to find the first officer on the scene, so he could get the names of the next of kin. He needed to call and tell them their loved one had been brutally murdered.

It's gonna to be a long night.

* * *

The alarm blared and Eli shoved it off his nightstand, anger elevating his heart rate when the annoying peal continued unabated. He forced his body to move despite the wave of nausea that rolled through his midsection. He couldn't afford to be late, not today. He had a half dozen witnesses coming to the station to be questioned about the gruesome murder from the night before.

He stumbled to the bathroom, fighting his rebellious belly. He quickly showered and headed to the kitchen. Eli grimaced at the empty bottle of whiskey on the counter, grabbed it, and tossed it into the recycle container. He opened the fridge, hoping to find something that was even remotely appetizing. The random condiments and half-empty jar of jelly mocked him.

Eli grabbed his keys and badge off the side table before leaving his tiny house. The shrubbery and rose bushes in the front needed a good trimming and the yard was mainly dandelions, their cheery yellow heads irritating him more than the alarm had.

There had been a period of time when he thought he had it all. Promising career, gorgeous wife, a big house in the suburbs. He'd wanted to be a detective for as long as he could remember and he worked toward that goal with a tenacity that would propel him to the top of the academy and through the ranks to become one of the best detectives in the city, probably the whole country. His peers often joked that he was psychic or had some kind of sixth sense when it came to dealing with crime scenes and perps.

When he had come home early one day to surprise his wife, Vicki, he hadn't expected to find her in bed with another man. And he damn sure didn't expect that man to be his neighbor.

And with one swift stroke, his perfect world came crashing down around his ears.

Eli refused to listen to Vicki when she pleaded with him for forgiveness. He went straight to the lawyer and filed for divorce. His wife ended up with half of everything, including his paycheck. Even though the financial assistance was temporary, he still felt the pinch. They sold the house in the suburbs, split the meager proceeds, and he moved into the city. He considered renting, but rent was sky high, so he looked into other options and was surprised that he qualified for enough to buy a small house.

He walked around the house to the carport, shoved his key in his used SUV, and gunned the engine. The bright light of the new day hurt his eyes, even through the aviator sunglasses he always wore. He pulled into the light traffic that was typical for this time of day and headed for the precinct. Eli stopped by a coffee shop close to the office and grabbed an espresso and a bagel. His stomach protested, but he knew he would need the energy to tackle the day.

Questioning witnesses was his least favorite part of his job. Well, his second-least favorite part. Filling out the endless amounts of paperwork was worse.

"It lives."

Eli grunted at Detective Janice Connors. He took a large swig of coffee and a huge bite of his bagel.

"You would look like this if you'd been on that case last night," Eli said.

"From the sounds of it we have a real sicko on our hands."

"You're telling me. I've never seen anything like it. Gunshot wounds, stab wounds, beatings..." he shook his head. "But this. This is something beyond anything I've ever seen." Eli rubbed his face.

"By the way, captain wants to see you."

"Do you know what about?"

Janice smiled, a twinkle in her green eyes. "Oh gee, I remember him saying something about a new partner." Janice said as she turned back to her work.

Eli stared at Janice's back, unable to believe his captain was going to saddle him with a new partner. He preferred to work alone, did better work when he was alone. He groaned and walked to his captain's office, knowing that it was better to get this over with. As he got closer, he could see someone else in there with Captain Platt. Whoever it was, they had Platt laughing.

"You wanted to see me?" Eli asked, refusing to look at whoever it was Platt wanted to saddle him with.

"Eli Robins, meet Ava Aguilar." Captain Platt tilted his head in the direction of the chair facing his desk.

Eli turned and surveyed the young woman sitting in the chair. She was tall, but still shorter than him, with long dark hair pulled back in a ponytail and brown eyes so dark they looked almost black. Her skin was a lovely shade of mocha. Unlike the other detectives on the force, she wore a skirt. Ava met his look with a little smirk on her face, clearly not intimidated.

He turned to face his captain, but the man spoke before Eli had a chance.

"I don't want to hear a word about this. You need a partner and you will work with Ava or I'll suspend you without pay, understood?"

Eli met Captain Platt's icy blue eyes and he knew he couldn't push on this. He'd been given a long rope after the divorce, but he was close to choking on it.