

# CHAPTER ONE

Blood painted the walls. Great, vibrant swaths of crimson. The blood spoke to her, an epic poem of violence. Of murder. Hero touched her tongue to the back of her teeth, sucking in a shallow breath. The air held the bitter tang of copper. Luckily, the tastes and smells lacked the rancid foulness of decomposition. There was still time to Speak with the recently departed spirits. One of them might know the answers she'd been called upon to find.

She moved deeper into the house, a multi-storied affair in a prestigious neighborhood known for its fancy dwellings and wealthy families. A family of five lived here. *Had* lived here. Three of them were dead on the floor – the mother, the father, and the eleven-year-old daughter. A fourth victim, the teenaged son, was in the sanatorium barely clinging to life while the fifth member of the family, the eldest daughter, wept outside with a trio of peacekeepers holding back the curious public. The girl had returned from a trip to visit her grandmother only to discover her entire family slaughtered. Shocked and grief-ravaged, she would be questioned thoroughly once she'd calmed down. Hero had given her a glance as she'd entered the domicile. The hysteria had seemed genuine.

So far there were no suspects, and the peacekeepers were at a loss. This was a good neighborhood. Nothing had been stolen, which should have been the first logical expectation – a robbery turned foul. But to Hero, at least, the violence told a different story. She trod carefully on the fancy woven rug, worth more than she made in a year, then stepped around a tipped ottoman, scattered cushions and spilled lamps. Blood

had soaked into the rug and she crouched by it, sniffing deeply. Everything was cast in a haze of softness by her green-tinted, wire-framed glasses, and she slid them down to the tip of her nose to get a clear look.

The other peacekeepers in the room shifted uncomfortably as they observed her at work. With her glasses concealing the color of her eyes, they could at least pretend she was fully human, but once those green-tinted spectacles were lowered, her true nature was undeniable. A softly muttered prayer slipped from one of the PKs, and Hero wrinkled her nose. She knew what they thought of death speakers, her especially. The demented nun. Demon sister. Cursed half-demon arsonist.

Perhaps they'd hoped she would come in, wave a hand, immediately announce the identity of the killer, then politely piss off? It wasn't quite that easy. But it had been just one killer here; she already knew that by the feel of the place, the echoes left behind. Her demon half could sense evil intent like a hound smelled a fox. Evil intent smelled delicious. And the person who'd killed this family had been motivated by selfishness and lust, traces of which hung in the air as clearly as the blood painted the walls.

"Sister Viridian," said one of the peacekeepers, a young, uniformed bloke with narrow eyes and a baby face. "Have you found any answers? The captain said..." He let his words trail off, stuttering into silence when she turned her gaze upon him. That baby face took on a pasty hue and she smiled, letting her slightly elongated canines touch her lower lip. They weren't exactly fangs, but they weren't *not* fangs either. A look from her had that effect on people. No one cared to be under the scrutiny of a red-eyed she-devil.

"Inspector," she said. "Inspector Viridian."

The man blinked and removed his custodian helmet as if she were a lady he was courting. He bowed. "My apologies."

"And your captain will get his answers right after I do."

"Yes, yes, of course, Inspector Viridian."

Without the shield of her glasses, she could see the room, as well as everything and everyone in it, far better. The blood and corpses screamed their story in a glance. The murders had been carried out by a single individual. A surprise attack. The father had been stabbed in the heart while he slept on the sofa – the

pink velvet cushions were sprayed with blood. The mother had been ambushed from behind, her throat slit, as she'd sat at her sewing machine in the corner, and the middle-aged woman was now slumped over it, the dress she'd been mending soaked in her blood. Her foot still rested on the pedal.

Hero stood, moving to the third victim. The child. She had fought back, and it was mostly her blood painting the walls. It was clear where she had stumbled over the footstool while trying to flee. Hero didn't even need to speak with the girl's spirit before deducing the cause of her demise. Defensive wounds on the girl's hands indicated the violence of her death, but it was the righteous anger searing Hero's eyes which revealed the truth. She had fought, both angry and terrified at the unexpected attack. The terror was over now, but the rage remained.

"The boy, the one who survived," she said, straightening to turn to the peacekeeper in charge – an older woman, trim and proper in her deep-blue uniform, a nightstick at her belt and a saber on her hip. Standard issue. "What is his condition?"

The woman, unfazed by Hero's blood-red gaze, cleared her throat before answering. "Beaten bloody, Inspector. Stabbed eight or nine times. He fought like a wildcat from what we can tell."

So. The boy and girl had managed to fight. Good. Though how the boy had survived, Hero had no idea. The will to live had to be strong in that one.

The authorities could have waited and questioned him when he awoke, but most seemed certain he never would. And you couldn't have an entire family laid waste and not bring a suspect to judgement. Not in Evergreen Heights. Important people lived here. Rich people. Doctors, barristers, judges and police chiefs. Bishops and politicians. Titans of industry.

Bloviating assholes, in Hero's opinion. The absolute dregs of society. But these were the neighborhoods where her talents were put to most use. When someone was murdered here, the city actually gave a shit.

"Hmm. The boy and the girl managed to fight back. Poor planning on the part of the murderer, I'd say. Left a mess behind, which makes it that much easier for me, praise the Goddess."

The peacekeeper – Bresnahan? Brennan? – rubbed her chin and cast her eyes around the room, looking uncomfortable at Hero's comment, the predatory gleefulness of it. The "mess" was a room full of corpses and blood-splattered walls. The PKs had wanted to move the bodies, take them to the morgue, but Hero had forbidden it. Spirits tended to linger near their old shells – for a time, at least; you had to get them fresh. Why call her at all if they wanted to do things the old-fashioned way, with forensics and questioning of the living and all of that nonsense? She was trained for such work – a condition of her service – but her peculiar skills were innate, even if it was her demon blood which gave her the power and not the Goddess Infinite or her Branch.

Death speakers were rare, of course, and their abilities varied. Some could barely get a word out of the dead, or none at all, only sensations or echoes or vibes. Being half demon and not just possessing a little demon blood somewhere in your ancestral lines, like so many posers out there, made Hero special.

So special, in fact, that her own mother had tried to gouge her eyes out when she was a defenseless child. Again and again. No one liked looking into those swirling crimson flames which passed for irises, especially the woman who'd been raped by a roving incubus and given birth to a half-demon monster.

Hero remembered every one of those incidents vividly – the fear, the pain, the healing. Her eyes always grew back, like obnoxious weeds, sending her mother into fits of rage and driving her father to drunken benders. Such a lovely family. The attacks stopped only when she was old enough and big enough to fight back. She didn't have to fight for long. The day after she punched her mother in the jaw and broke it, she was sent to the abbey two towns over. Out of sight and out of mind.

Hero went to the dead girl first, ignoring the two adults, whose deaths had been shocking, certainly, but not terribly traumatic. Their spirits milled about in a fog of confusion, half believing they still lived, judging by their futile attempts to talk to the peacekeepers crowding their fine parlor. When had they ever let so many commoners into their gilt-edged, rosewood-furnished, velvet-wallpapered abode? Was this some charity event?

An errant whisper from the father distracted her from the slaughtered girl. A mention of a “dirty-necked boy daring to think he might be good enough.”

Hero’s ears pricked up even as she prepared to open the Gate to the Underworld and Commune with the girl’s shade. Did the father’s stray comment bear some meaning? Was there a clue in his words? To the identity of the murderer, perhaps? She would know more once she reached the Land of the Dead. Righting the overturned foot stool, Hero took a seat and prepared to hear what the dead had to say.

“I need silence,” she ordered the officers processing the crime scene. Her words were hard, clipped. “Disturb me and don’t be shocked when Hell pays a visit.”

It was best to invoke Hell when seeking compliance; the Underworld, even the Land of the Dead, didn’t inspire dread the way mention of Hell did. Most of the living envisioned a land of eternal suffering, fire and brimstone and tortured spirits. In fact, that wasn’t far from the truth – the flames and brimstone, anyway – but Hell was merely a passageway for most shades on their way to their final rest. The only real threat in Hell was demonic in nature, and she tended to avoid Pandemonium if she could help it. No need to poke the hornets’ nest.

The shuffling steps and murmured conversations ceased. A wise bunch, these particular peacekeepers. Hero settled her cane across her knees, straightened her scapular and removed her glasses entirely. She focused on the dead girl’s body and called upon the fires of Hell.

PK Commander Tyka Brennan watched the death speaker at work with a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. Demons were evil, pure and simple, an affront to Creation and the enemies of the Goddess Infinite. Yet here one sat, communing with the victim. Disturbing the dead, more like. Forcing a child to relive the worst thing that had ever happened to her. And all she herself could do, a decorated commander and skilled investigator, was stand in mute witness to the travesty.

The half-demon was so obviously not *one of us*, Tyka wondered how she managed to walk down the street without being accosted, spit upon or punched, or what have you. What

was one supposed to do to walking evil? Cast a few warding signs in her direction? Call a priest?

Though her face was unlined, the inspector's hair was pure silver, wrapped into a sleek chignon at the base of her narrow skull. And she was tall, too tall for a proper woman. Lanky like a lad, almost sinewy. She moved like she had no bones. Smooth like a serpent. Her skin had a porcelain cast to it, an alien paleness. It made Tyka's skin crawl – proper skin, skin with tones of pink and brown, skin with flaws. Real skin, not a facsimile.

Tyka could have overlooked all of that, if the half-demon speaker had at least acted human, but her supercilious attitude, her strange enjoyment of blood and death, and her manner of dress brought out a deep hatred, a natural hatred of an *other* – an other who chose to mock religion and comport herself in a sacrilegious way. She dressed like a Celestial nun, or some twisted version of one, in a simple cream-colored shirt under a long scapular paired with wide, flowing pants gathered at the ankles. All in shades of emerald, cobalt and ivory rather than the canonical white, black and crimson. It was an odd mishmash of fashion that set her apart as much as her strange hair, physique and – blessed Branch – her eyes. Her Goddess-cursed eyes of crimson flame.

*I would have gouged them out, too, if my child had such eyes.*

The mother never faced charges for her cruelty, Tyka knew, and she understood why. Most mothers would have killed a demon-bred child. Most *decent* mothers. What she should have faced charges over was shipping the girl-child off to an abbey, her eyes covered as if she were merely blind and not a devil incarnate. Those poor nuns raised the girl in the faith, gave her a good home, a roof and food and education, trained her as a heavenly Shield of their finest battle order, only to discover her demon half by accident. Only to have their abbey burned to the ground.

For that, Death Speaker Hero Viridian had served ten years in prison.

*And now she works for us. As a damnable inspector, no less.*

PK Commander Tyka Brennan had never been able to pass the qualifying test to be raised to an inspector.

Not that she was bitter about it.

Her nose had an itch, but Tyka didn't move. She wanted to – oh, how she did, to shift a bit and run a hand across her face. As much as she disliked the inspector, she also had a healthy respect for her ability. When Hero Viridian warned you about Hell, you'd be a fool not to listen. Who would know best about Hell but a disgraced, half-demon ex-nun?

The air had a subtle tension to it around the speaker. She herself was absolutely still, holding on to the cane across her knees – it hid a slim sword; Tyka had seen such covert weapons before – and staring at the dead body. A lurid light shone from her creepy eyeballs and the tip of her tongue protruded from between her red, red lips like a cat's. The moment, the silence, the tension stretched, grew rigid, then snapped.

Hero smiled, her fangs on full display, and Tyka thought they might have gotten longer. The inspector turned to her, and Tyka shifted at last, scraping at her itchy nose while she gave a quick, respectful bob of her head. The other PKs around her shuffled and sighed, as relieved as Tyka was to be given their freedom back – and relieved that the ex-nun had turned her cursed eyes on Tyka and not them.

“Send in the survivor,” she said, sounding satisfied and eager all at once. “I need to talk with her a bit.”

“The other daughter?” Tyka exclaimed. “Why, she's quite traumatized, Inspector.”

Hero chuckled and rose to her feet, unwinding with feline grace. She stretched her arms above her head, her cane held high, as if she'd just woken, then collapsed back into a normal stance and leaned on her cane. “Yes, I imagine plotting to have your entire family slaughtered will traumatize a girl. Send her to me. And start looking for her friend, James Durram. He'll be trying to get rid of a bloody knife, I suspect.”

Murmurs of doubt and surprise erupted from her fellows, but none of them were looking into the woman's damnable eyes. Tyka was. She saw the truth writ large within them. Her lips pressed together and she nodded sharply. “As you command, Inspector.” She turned to an underling. “PK Gris, bring the girl inside. Now.”