

The Origin of All

In the beginning, the gods planned their Creation, and the god of Death planted in it a seed of himself.

When the god of Life saw that his creatures were dying, he was angered and called forth one of his most powerful allies, Mother Nature. Together, they conceived beings who were impervious to death, the protectors of humanity and the world. To better understand their charges, each being was granted the ability to turn into the form of one created beast, and all were able to shift into human form and speak human languages. Their powers were determined by their role in Creation, and by the four natural elements they ruled.

Three such species arose. They were called *Nature's Immortals*:

The *Dragons*, whose element was Fire.

The *Weres*, whose element was Earth.

The *Faes*, whose elements were Air and Water.

The Dragons were the oldest and most powerful Immortals. Their role was to keep the world safe from destruction.

The Weres were large, four-legged, furry shape-shifters. Their ability to communicate telepathically with other Weres helped them in their role as great protectors in their region.

The Faes were the most peculiar of all Nature's Immortals. They took the form of birds and fishes, blending in easily with the mortal world. But when threatened, they would shift into fairies: tiny, humanlike creatures with wings who possessed magic. Vast in number, sharing their habitat with mortals and Immortals alike, the Faes watched and listened closely. Their role was to communicate what they learned to Nature's Immortals around the world.

The god of Death was jealous of the Dragons, Weres, and Faes, and demanded conditions under which Nature's Immortals would belong to him. The god of Life and Mother Nature thus conceded that while Immortals could not die of old age, they could be killed by a wound to the head or heart beyond their body's healing capacities.

As time progressed, some Nature's Immortals decided to make a home and build a human family. They had to forsake their gifts, including their immortality.

When humanity learned of the existence of Nature's Immortals, they came to fear them. Weapons were developed to capture and destroy those who had been put on Earth to protect them. DragonPhoenix, the Wise One and the most powerful of all the Immortals, called forth the meeting of Elders. Together they banned Nature's Immortals from revealing themselves or socializing with humanity.

As time passed, humans forgot about the presence of Nature's Immortals. Memories became stories that turned into legends, which became myths. However, Mother Nature didn't neglect her own. She kept the gifts of those who had surrendered them and hid them at random inside their female descendants. She called the heirs to these powers *Human Immortals*.

Among humans were sorcerers and shamans. Sorcerers claimed to have the gift of second sight. They cast spells to inflict misfortune, and even death. Whenever one of these spells were executed, the god of Death would claim a piece of sorcerers' soul, which in turn allowed them the access to more evil power.

While shamans could perform dark magic as well, they knew better. They were healers, and their tools were nature's herbs, knowledge, and experience.

In times of war and crisis, ordinary humans turned to sorcerers and shamans for help. However, as time progressed, the sorcerers were more and more sought out. Never had the god of Life been so disappointed. Good people were dying, wicked people gained wealth and power, and sorcerers prospered. The god of Life grew angry with them for meddling in his affairs. He decided to raise all those who had died with a curse. In retaliation, as a parting gift, the god of Death hid inside the raised ones a piece of himself: the angry beast who thirsted for blood. On the outside, they were indistinguishable from humans. Inside, there was nothing human about them. This is how gods and sorcerers created the Immortal beings we know as *Vampires*, or *The Cursed*.

Vampires couldn't procreate, but they learned to control minds and turn humans into their own kind. It was then that the god of Life put an end to the creation of Vampires through sorcery.

Today, every kind of Immortal, Dragon, Were, Fae, and Vampire, is searching for those special females leading ordinary lives: women who are unaware of the powerful gifts hidden inside them, the Human Immortals.

Together, all these Immortal beings make up the *Mythical Creatures*.

Chapter 1

Dan entered the bar and blinked a few times to adjust his vision. To his left was a long hallway. Two little signs and an arrow pointing north were hanging from the ceiling, directing people to the washrooms. To his right was a short line to the coat check. A couple waited by the counter while the clerk checked out a large bag. Dan briefly focused on the couple. The woman was much younger than the man she was with. She had an accelerated heartbeat and the look of a fawn. Insecure and scared. The man was protective of her, telling little jokes to put her at ease. His heartbeat was accelerated too, and he smelled like arousal. Perhaps their first time together. She was in no danger. Just nervous. They'd clearly come from the dining room. He had filet mignon with baked potato, sour cream, bacon bits. Chardonnay. She had fish with rice and vegetables—salad with Italian dressing, and a glass of Chenin Blanc. No dessert.

Dan was getting hungrier by the second. He picked up another scent. Time for his own meal. His hunt.

The bar was in the centre of the room, about thirty feet away. A few random tables were scattered around, booths lined up against the walls. An archway behind the bar led to another area—yes, a dining room. Under the loud music and chattering, Dan could hear the minute scraping of forks and knives on plates.

He casually walked over to the bar and leaned onto it. The bartender gave the counter a quick wipe and smiled at him.

“What can I get for you?”

Dan pointed to the bourbon and showed two fingers.

“Double?”

He gave a short nod. Took the glass, emptied it in one shot, signalled for another.

It took him by surprise. The scent. It was overwhelming. He'd never experienced such an overpowering smell. He smiled and inhaled deeply. He could tell it belonged to a *she*. *Sweet mercy*. Her scent penetrated through him, pooled deep in his core and slowly spread through his body. The beast inside him was on alert, and if he were a little younger, less controlled, his fangs would slide right out and he'd be drooling all over himself. The human in him found it surprisingly enjoyable. *This is going to be a fun night*.

He took his glass and turned in the direction his senses led him.

He couldn't figure out why.

He liked them good-looking—she was plain.

He liked them well dressed—she wasn't.

He liked a little mystery—she looked dull.

He liked to play cat and mouse—she didn't seem worth catching.

He surveyed his options. A few were eyeing him already. A pair of them sitting together didn't even try to hide their interest in him. Too easy.

For many, many centuries, the man and the Vamp within had a kind of mutual understanding. The Vamp conceded to blood bags and tolerated animal blood, but once a week insisted on the real thing: the hunt for fresh human blood. The man indulged the beast, but insisted on choosing the source of his liking.

Not this time. This time the Vamp broke the code. The man was in control most of the time, but this was not one of those times. The beast made a choice and wouldn't let go. His senses were taut like guitar strings.

This time he'd have to work hard to get her attention. He'd have to reinvent himself to get her to leave with him. Then again, she could be a challenge. Challenge *was* a game. He studied her for a moment.

She was young—and tiny. About five foot four, barely a hundred and twenty pounds, no more. Thick chestnut-coloured curls cascaded down to just below her chin. He couldn't see her eyes because big black glasses covered half her face. She had small yet full lips. There was a pen stuck between her teeth, a horrid look. An oversized plain T-shirt draped down her body to her thighs, making her look like a twelve-year-old boy. Under that obscenity, leggings and running shoes.

Her eyes were glued to her laptop. On occasion, she took the pen out of her mouth and wrote something down. She was in her own world, busy with her thoughts.

He was going to have to intrude, get shut down, try again. Oh, she would cave, he knew that. One way or another. He didn't like to use compulsion. On the other hand, if someone like her could—would—let go, it'd be exciting.

He felt tingling on the palms of his hands. Didn't have to look to know his claws had come out. He slipped his tongue over his teeth to make sure his fangs weren't showing, then turned back to the bartender.

"Hit me again." Dan flashed two fingers, and the bartender served him a double.

He focused on her inner being with his mind. Coconut body wash. Smelled nice, but that wasn't it.

He wondered if the man could fight the beast within.

Maybe.

The man was known to win.

Maybe he could.

He penetrated his senses deeper into her skin and flesh. He inhaled again.

Oh yeah. That's it. Dan could feel the power of *her* presence seeping into him.

The man could fight back if it weren't for her scent.

The Garden of Eden wrapped up in a woman. So small yet so powerful. How did that human saying go? The tiniest bottle contains the deadliest poison.

Hmm, would a little dose of her be enough?

He didn't think so.

A waiter walked over to her booth and leaned close to her.

Dan's nostrils flared and his muscles tightened. His claws extended an inch, and *they* snarled—man and Vamp as one.

His human was on board.

Anyone else at this point would be—unsatisfactory.

A disappointment.

The beast knew what was best for both of them.

Dan closed his eyes and focused, searching deeper. Her steady pulse enveloped him, the *complete* him, man and beast.

Oh, he was feeling her, the rush was all over him, and yet he felt... anchored?

Suddenly, as if she'd sensed someone watching her, she lifted her head and looked around the bar.

Dan smiled inwardly. *Interesting.*

This was all new to him. Surprising, because there weren't many things he hadn't encountered over his lifetime.

He turned back to the bartender and pointed to her.

"Is she a regular?"

The bartender looked in her direction. "The one in the corner booth?"

"Yes." *The one who makes me want to sink my teeth into her and die of shame because of it.*

"Never seen her before," he said, drying a glass. "She was here when I came at three."

"What is she having? Drinking or... eating?"

"Earlier, she had nachos and orange juice. Just now, she ordered coffee."

"Bring her all of that again, and get me the same, plus a shot of vodka. Put it all on my tab. I'll be sitting over there." Dan pointed to an empty table. He clenched his hand hard around his glass and walked away.

"Coming right up," the bartender called behind him.

Dan sat down and focussed again. Her heartbeat was steady. He could almost taste the lusciousness of her blood. He swallowed and bit down hard to regain control.

He couldn't open his fists. His palms were bloody.

Chapter 2

Nina was so involved in the project she was working on, she forgot where she was. She tuned out the music and the laughter and focused entirely on the task at hand.

A sudden feeling of being watched came over her—no, more like having her privacy invaded. She looked up. All around her, people were chatting and having a good time. No one in particular stood out. *Great, now I'm imagining things.*

Her head was exploding from a headache. All day staring at the computer, and she was still no closer to finding a part-time position near campus. Still, it was good to be back in Metro Central after a long summer away. She'd been working as kitchen help at a children's camp until mid-August, then quit to give herself enough time to get a new job somewhere close to her dorm.

School was the important thing. That, she knew, thanks to her adoptive, and foster parents number five. Her real parents had died in a car crash when she was just a baby. Until she was ten, her adoptive parents were Rosella and Matthew Wright, but the same kind of accident claimed their lives too. Nina was put back into the system; no one wanted to adopt an eleven-year-old. So it was only seven years and four foster families later that she got a new shot at life. Her last pair of foster parents were relatively good people. They brought back memories and values of her adoptive parents and reinstalled in her the value of education. Life was tough, but at least she could turn to school, and create a chance for a better future.

When she'd started her university studies at eighteen, they'd let her rent out their attic space to keep living in. The rent was reasonable and she had privacy, with her own entrance at the back of the house. In the winter, the place was cold, and in the summer, it was incredibly hot, but that was life.

The first two years, she worked two part-time jobs on top of her studies, but the commute was brutal, so when she landed a full-time job for the summer and put in a deposit for a dorm on campus, she let go of her attic apartment and said goodbye to her ex-foster parents. She stored her belongings in a junk car her neighbour wanted to get rid of and paid to keep it parked in a cheap public garage. After that, she packed her bag, and off she went to camp.

Most of her tuition was covered by government grants. The leftover balance and the dorm, she'd pay with her savings from her summer job. Now, she just needed a part-time position to keep her afloat with food, phone, and other expenses.

Concern for the future made Nina ignorant of the present. When the waiter brought over a tray with nachos, orange juice and coffee, she realized two things: she was starving and she was running out of time. She needed to secure her spot in the dorm at the registration office, and it was closing at seven. Tomorrow was the last day, and if anything went wrong, she could lose her spot. Anywhere else would be more expensive, and she didn't have money to throw around. Also, she still had to call her friend Nicolle, who'd told her she could crash at her place for a few days until the dorm became available.

"I'm sorry. I'll have to take it to go," she said with a smile.

Pointing out a man at a nearby table, the waiter said, “The gentleman over there ordered it for you.”

Without thinking, she skimmed her gaze in that direction.

The man smiled and nodded.

“Oh, I didn’t even order it.” She murmured to herself. “ Well, it doesn’t matter. I’ll still take it to go. Bring me the bill, please.” She said louder, stuffing her laptop into her knapsack.

The waiter shifted a little. “It’s taken care of.”

“What? By whom?”

“The same gentleman who ordered this also paid for it.”

“Why would you let him?”

“What do you mean?” He shuffled his feet, obviously uncomfortable.

“Why would you let someone cover my bill without my permission?”

“Well, if a patron insists on paying for someone, he is welcome to do so.”

“Why? I don’t know him and I don’t want to know him. What gives you the right to create the opportunity?” She scrunched her face, obviously annoyed.

“Well, if you insist, you are welcome to pay the bill too,” the waiter said, with somewhat less patience.

“Ugh.” She grabbed her purse and knapsack. “I asked you to pack it to go,” she snapped back.

The waiter took the tray away and returned with a bulging plastic bag. Nina headed straight for the offending table to put things right.

Chapter 3

Sitting at his table, Dan was drinking his orange juice spiked up with vodka and snacking on nachos. Of course, he'd overheard the conversation between the girl and the waiter. Her voice was a little deeper than he'd imagined. It carried just enough rasp to tease him and raise goosebumps over his skin. He relished it. He couldn't help but admire her fighting spirit. She had sass, and he liked it. He didn't even try to hide his grin as she walked toward him all serious with her lips firmly pressed together and everything.

She dropped a twenty-dollar bill on the table.

"Thank you, but I can pay my way."

He clenched his jaw to control a sudden urge to drool.

She was already leaving when he reached out and took her hand.

"Hey, hey... slow down. I meant no disrespect." His smile had less to do with charm and more to do with the rods of electricity that her touch sent through him. He bit down hard to regain control.

Her face was beautiful. Each feature perfectly proportioned to the rest. Her eyes were a deep green rimmed with black, set off by long dark eyelashes underneath her glasses. Breathtaking. She was tantalizing.

Nina pulled her hand back.

The jolt she felt shocked her. It radiated through her, then nested somewhere in her belly. She was mystified. *His touch felt familiar and—safe? No, it couldn't be. He's a stranger with an agenda.*

Dan stood up, lifting his hands in a placating gesture. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to invade your personal space." He took a step back. "I didn't know how to approach you. You seemed so involved in whatever you were doing..." He shrugged. "I didn't want to miss the opportunity to meet you."

Her look was expressionless.

"I'm Dan." He gave her a sheepish smile.

He was tall, just over six feet, well built, and handsome. His thick brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail. If it were loose, it would probably reach down to his shoulders. He had deep dark eyes, and his touch was warm and gentle. His nose was straight, and his mouth full. A charismatic smile revealed a set of perfect teeth. He wore light brown pants and a tan shirt with a couple of green stripes across the chest.

Deep down, her gut was telling her it was okay to befriend him—that he was genuine.

Her mind was saying, *Are you crazy? Get away from him.*

"I'm Nina." She smiled to soften the blow. "I don't mean to be rude or ungrateful, Dan, but I'm late for an appointment."

Nina. He bit down hard, swallowed and checked his watch. It was past six.

"Ouch!" he yelped with a smile. "Appointment? That hurts." He put both hands on his chest as if his heart was in pain.

“No, really,” she said, “I’m in the process of moving and I have to pay to secure my dorm. The office is open until seven, and if I don’t make the payment, I might lose the room and my deposit.”

“Oh, you were serious.” He was surprised and happy. He picked up the twenty-dollar bill she laid on the table and handed it to her. “I can help you get there faster.” *Nina*. He swallowed, again.

“No, it’s okay. You take it.”

“We both know I won’t, and it’s way too big a tip for that waiter.”

She laughed and took the money.

It was utterly mind-blowing how her laugh affected him. He felt it inside his bones. Just like her name. If he said it out loud, he’d start slurring. That’s how mouthwatering everything about her was. She completely disarmed him. And she was a lot more fun than he’d given her credit for at the bar. He knew he’d win her over—that wasn’t the problem. How he’d say goodbye to her tomorrow morning... that was the real mystery.

Sweeping his hand toward the exit, he said, “Shall we?”

For the life of her, *Nina* couldn’t figure out why she felt such a deep connection to this guy, but she did. It wasn’t just attraction.

Oh yeah, he was attractive—very.

But that wasn’t it.

If anything, his looks worked against him.

She always thought handsome guys were all about the short game. Not *him*. *He* was different. Like she *knew him* and more. Like *he* was her safe place.

Naturally, her brain was raising red flags in all directions.

Naturally, she ignored it.

“Maybe we could get together for a drink sometime and chat. That way, we aren’t in such a rush.”

“I’d love to,” he said. “Let’s sit down right now and talk over a couple of drinks.”

“Unfortunately, right now, I don’t have time.”

“I’ll tell you what, let’s do it anyway, and then we’ll get a cab. My treat.”

“Hmm, what if I don’t want you to come with me?”

He smiled. She was so adorable. There was no way he’d let her slip away.

“I’ll still cover the cab. Fifteen minutes.” Dan pulled out a chair for her.

“Ten.”

“Deal.” He went to the bar and came back with more orange juice.

He sat down, leaned his elbows on the table and said,

“Shoot.”

“Who are you, Dan, and what are you doing here... tonight?”

He arched his eyebrows and chuckled. *She* was the sweetest thing ever. Oh, he was so going to love her—tonight.

“My name is Dan Noble, and I’m just passing through town. I came here tonight hoping to meet a girl inclined to spend some quality time with me. Dinner, dancing, anything she’s up to.” He smiled. “Does this put you off?”

She was surprised and disappointed by his answer. Also really pissed at her gut. It would’ve been nice if it had been right and this guy *was* her safe place.

“Well, I guess if it’s up to the girl, then I’m okay with that,” she said, then added. “So where are you headed, Dan?”

“I’m taking some time off to travel. Started with an Alaskan cruise, went through Canada, and now I’ve been here for a few months. Soon I’ll be going down to South America, then to Europe.”

“Wow, that’s ambitious. Are you one of those kids whose rich daddy pays for their whims?”

“No, not me. I worked hard and figured I deserved it.”

“Worked hard?” She scrunched up her eyebrows. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-one, what about you?”

“I’m nineteen.”

“University student?”

“Third year. You?”

“Graduated. History and Languages. What are you studying?”

“French and Kinesiology. You graduated on time and earned enough money for a trip around the world.” She smiled. “Impressive.”

“I’m gifted. I finished my master’s a while ago.”

“Oh.” That was unexpected. “What are you planning to do after your trip?”

“I’m going in for my Ph.D. I’ll be writing my thesis.”

“Well, that is impressive.” She checked her phone for the time. “Oh my goodness, it’s past six thirty. I... have to...” She looked at him.

“The cab is outside, waiting. I told the bartender to make the call.”

She peered at him more curiously. “Way to go, Dan. Any felonies?”

He chuckled. “No, no felonies.”

They both stood up and Dan offered her his arm. “Shall we?”

She ignored it. He chuckled and fell into step with her. He took a deep breath and her scent washed over him. He couldn’t wait for her surrender.

The ride to campus was brief. While Nina jumped out of the cab with her bags, Dan leaned to the driver, paid him and said,

“We’ll be back in fifteen. Keep the meter running.”

When he came out, Nina was practically running on the spot.

He braced himself, then took her hand. “Let’s make a dash for it.”

Her touch crippled him for a moment. To alleviate the pain, he tapped into his powers and released a little speed. She picked it up and went with it.

Unbelievable!

He was fascinated by her.

They burst into the office, laughing.

“Wow, did you see that?” Nina exclaimed, catching her breath. “I felt like I was flying.”

The receptionist looked at them over her glasses, positively annoyed.

“Sorry,” Nina said, handing over her student card.

Once she had transferred the money for three months’ rent and received her dorm key, Dan asked her, “So? Where to?”

She still wasn’t sure she should be accepting the company of this quasi-stranger. On the other hand, her stomach was growling, and he’d been a perfect gentleman so far. She spotted the cab and headed toward it.

“Why me?”

“What?”

“There were quite a few single, good-looking women over there,” she motioned with her head somewhere behind her, indicating the bar.

He trained his gaze somewhere over her head and inhaled deeply. Her scent enveloped him, entering every pore of his skin. He still wasn't sure if he could say her name without slurring. And he was damn sure control was going to be an issue tonight.

“You *called to me*.” He looked at her. “I can't explain it. It was either you or no one.” He shrugged.

“Psycho?”

He laughed. “No. I'm not a psycho.”

She looked down at the bag of takeout she was still clutching. Dan smiled and bent his arm at the elbow again.

“Where to, my lady?”

Nina hesitated for another second. Then she told herself she hadn't had a decent meal in a while.

What was the harm? He sounded a little vague, but honest nonetheless. *I called to him*... She snickered in her head. The weirdest thing was, she felt as if she knew what he meant.

She put her arm through his, and said.

“Let's eat. You pick the place.”