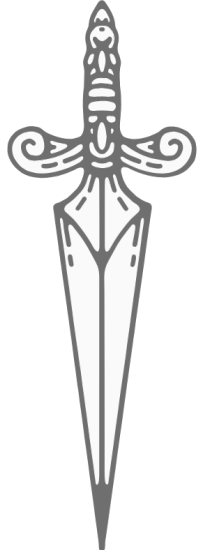


Chapter 1

The Cradle of Madness



The weather-beaten house stood crooked on its foundation. Even at its peak, it was a shadow of its potential. It was the house of a pauper and his small family, several miles outside of Sapphire City. The roof sagged, held together by the weight of years and layers of neglect. Rumpelstiltskin stood outside, his hand reaching for the doorknob. The door swung open, threatening to detach from its hinges. The faded yellow walls welcomed him, making his stomach lurch. Those same peeling yellow hued walls had given up on holding it all together.

Time had all but ravaged the place. What his father didn't, anyway.

Broken windows gaped like hollow eyes, some panes cracked, others missing. This allowed the wind to whip through, creating a chill through the rotting wood and long-abandoned rooms. He stood in the hallway's mouth, staring toward the string that would pull the stairs to the attic toward the floor.

The smell of mildew invaded his senses as he moved through his old home. Memories whispered to him, secrets that he'd long tried to forget. The screams of his mother and father filled his ears as flashbacks crashed into him like tidal waves. He shook off the chill that took over his body, remembering to keep moving. His eyes swept the abandoned space, falling upon weeds and bramble that had grown through the cracks in the worn-down floors.

His footsteps echoed through the empty home as he moved. In a few swift steps, he was looking up at the attic entrance and tugging at the string that would release the ladder. He ascended the steps, weary of falling through the old, dilapidated wood and crashing into the floor below. He pulled himself onto the floor of the attic and rose to his feet, listening to the whipping wind and rain that crashed against the sides of the house.

A blinding flash brought the forgotten childhood attic to life, dredging up demons from a past buried for years. The shadows haunted him in his sleep, often waking him from deep slumber. Many nights, he woke in a cold sweat, screaming out for his mother. Rumpelstiltskin's eyes wandered around the small room. The dust-laden corners and cobwebbed rafters cast shadows over his slender frame before the darkness stole his sight once again.

Something in this attic was tugging at his consciousness. Answers. Answers that would tell him why his fearful, miserable childhood was filled with abuse and an overwhelming desire to die. The marks on his body were

reminders of his past, the one he buried and now sought to unearth. He rubbed at the thick scars on his wrist from the many attempts on his life over the years.

Rumpelstiltskin stretched his arm into the air, his hand searching for the pull string that would shed some light in the small, dusty attic. When his fingers brushed past the woolen string, he fumbled to grab it before giving it a firm tug.

“Something is here. I can feel it,” he whispered to himself.

His left hand stroked the steel in his pocket as he felt a surge of power rush through him. The intoxicating feeling spread through his veins like molten fire. His skin hummed with ancient, dark, and potent energy as an unrelenting force shot through him. His heart raced, the blood in his veins throbbed with a rhythm of their own, and with each breath, a sharp and sinister hunger was left behind—a hunger for flesh, for blood, and knowledge.

The blade had given him the boost he needed to move forward. Rumpelstiltskin’s head jerked to the left as he felt a silent hum coming from deep within the corner of the attic. It was there, in the dark, that his mother’s trunk sat undisturbed and equally dusty.

As he walked toward the trunk, the floorboards groaned, adding to the room’s unsettling atmosphere. The contents of the trunk were a mystery, but he knew something within it held the very answers he sought. His hands trembled as they reached for the handles of the trunk.

The metal handles were cool to the touch, a stark contrast to the nasty, humid atmosphere of the attic. He gave it a tug and listened as the metal scraped against the floor. A thick plume of dust wafted into the air as he tugged the trunk out of the corner. Rumpelstiltskin grunted as he tugged on the chest, not out of struggle but determination. The weight of the secrets held within was heavier than the contents held within it. When the trunk came to a stop in front of him, caught on the ridges of the attic floor, he jiggled the lock on the front, prying the chest open.

The deep mahogany color caught his eye as he ogled the intricate carvings on the trunk's surface. Although faded with time, swirling vines, delicate flowers, and mystical symbols sprawled across its sturdy frame. Rumpelstiltskin choked as dust scattered across his aged face. The lid let out a loud cracking noise before falling backward with a thump. Energy rose from the chest, giving it the illusion of being alive. He was entranced by the single stack of letters that lay in the trunk's bottom.

A single ribbon tied the yellowed and fragile letters in the trunk together. The ribbon, like the trunk, had long lost its luster. Rumpelstiltskin reached into the trunk and removed the letters before sinking to the floor.

Rumpelstiltskin's heart skipped a beat as he ran his fingers along the ribbon. These weren't what he meant to find, nor open. But here he was. They drew him in, and something told him that even though this wasn't what he'd hoped for, it was what he needed.

His mother's handwriting stared back at him. The front of the letter displayed his father's name. His fingers pulled at the ribbon, releasing the letters from its hold as it came undone. Within the folded-up pieces of paper in his lap were love letters.

Confusion and hatred roiled through him. After everything his father said and did, his mother never flinched, never left, and never lifted a hand to protect herself. *Why?*

How could his mother love such a fucking monster?