

Excerpt from **Cast Into Shadow** - The Crucible Series Book Eight

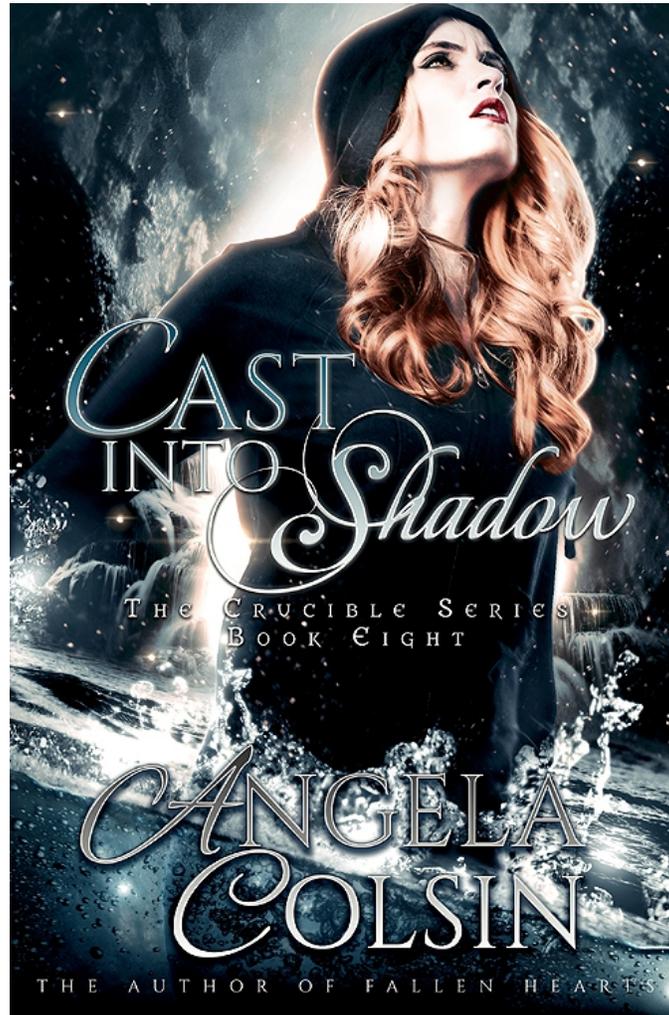
by Angela Colsin

Copyright © 2017 by Angela Colsin. All rights reserved by the author.

Cover designed by Angela Colsin.

This excerpt is a work in progress and is subject to change before the book's official release.

This document and the contents within are for entertainment purposes only and may not be sold or edited for redistribution. For more information, visit www.angelacolsin.com.



As an intelligence agent for The Bastion, Jennifer Kivsey usually works behind a desk, assisting other operatives from afar by supplying information whenever it's needed. But the one time she volunteers to travel during an investigation, her journey takes her much farther from home than anticipated.

After discovering a random portal, Kivsey is unexpectedly pulled through worlds and stranded in the dark, underground caverns of Ithelyon. In immediate danger, she'll need help if she wants to survive long enough to return home, and a random encounter with a Dok'aal Warlord could provide just that.

The problem? She's part elven, and Dok'aal are notoriously leery of elves.

Mikail is a Warlord serving the hidden, subterranean city of Satorala, and his highest priority is the safety of his people. So allowing a stranded human to wander about and potentially discover the location of his home is out of the question, meaning he has no choice but to help her find her way.

But despite their inherent differences, Mikail quickly discovers that Kivsey isn't the helpless human he'd expected. She's clever, witty, compassionate, and soon has him wondering if she could be the woman he's been dreaming of. Likewise, Kivsey finds the Warlord as sexy as he is suspicious, but how could a union ever be possible with two worlds standing between them?

• • •

"You could've been *killed*."

Drying her hands by wiping them on her slacks, Kivsey paused at Mikail's unexpected reprimand. He sounded extremely unhappy, and in glancing up, she spied a serious look in the Warlord's crimson eyes.

The stern expression revealed a startling truth she had no compunctions pointing out.

"You *do* care about me!"

In response to her observation, the Dok'aal flinched as if slapped, but wasted no time approaching until he was only a few feet away where he replied pointedly, "That doesn't matter. There was no need for you to endanger yourself when I was right around the corner!"

"Yeah, and while you were *right around the corner*, that wyrm was *right behind me*. I didn't have time to wait for you to come back! I didn't even know if you *would*!"

"Of course I would," he retorted as if her statement was ridiculous. "Those wyrms were only babies."

Kivsey's eyes widened, her gaze turning to the corpse before asking, "*Those* are babies? How big are the adults?"

She looked back up just as Mikail growled, "Don't change the subject, human, and *don't* put yourself at risk again."

Under normal circumstances, Kivsey would've angrily argued that her life was already at stake, so it wouldn't have mattered if she'd accidentally poisoned herself. But instead, she grinned, unable to help a sense of satisfaction in realizing the only reason Mikail was acting this way was because he did, in fact, care about her safety.

Why, she had no idea, and in that moment, she didn't need to know. Instead, she only wanted to enjoy the gratification his worry provided while pointing out, "Look, I appreciate the concern, big guy, but I'm not promising I won't do whatever it takes to save my ass when it's *already* on the line."

The Dok'aal growled, his look suggesting he knew there was no way to argue, and he didn't try.

Instead, he directed sternly, "Stop smiling like that."

"Like what?" Knowingly, she suggested, "Like I know you care?"

His jaw clenched, and at first, Kivsey thought he was going to erupt in anger and point out all the reasons he'd *never* care for a human, much less one with elven blood in their veins.

Yet the tension soon ebbed from his body with a look surfacing in his crimson eyes that almost seemed ... *enlightened*, as if sizing her up for something specific.

But it wasn't a menacing look—it was *devious*.

"Perhaps I do," he confessed sincerely enough, "and I may even be impressed by your ingenuity. I doubt another human would've fared as well as you did."

Kivsey was so stunned by the praise that she remained speechless as he leaned in close to add, "But if you keep smiling at me that way, I might have to take it *personally*."

She blinked, unsure what to think, especially when he implied a suggestive meaning to his comment by smirking.

The look was too sexy to ignore, his smile sensuous, grabbing her attention so thoroughly that when he stood straight again and started walking away, it took her a moment to follow.

But she soon snapped out of her stupor and rushed ahead to catch up, asking, "What does *that* mean? You'll kick my ass if I don't stop?"

"If that's what you want it to mean."

Kivsey narrowed her brows. Was he teasing her? Or just trying to drive her crazy with a vague response? His smirk made it hard to tell, but whatever the case, two could play the cryptic game.

So she promptly returned, "Oh, I don't think you'd like to know what I *want it* to mean."

He cast a brief, but curious look in her direction. "Why not?"

"Because you couldn't handle it, big guy."

Still walking, the Dok'aal immediately scoffed. "Is that so?"

"Yep."

"Fitting, because you likely couldn't handle a Dok'aal taking something personally."

There was a playfulness in his tone that Kivsey hadn't heard before—and she *liked* it. More and more, a clearer picture was forming of the man Mikail truly was, making it much easier to envision him as the type to laugh with those he cared about.

She also had the feeling she was close to actually hearing such a sound, and had no intentions of stopping their baiting game, announcing, "I guess that means I'll have to keep smiling at you to find out, then. Besides, it's nice knowing you care so much, so . . ."

At that, she cast the same smile up at him, and when he finally glanced in her direction, she punctuated the expression by blowing a quick raspberry.

Looking ahead again, Mikail's chest shook as if he'd just contained a bit of laughter before suggesting, "You should keep that sassy tongue in your mouth, or things are going to get *very* personal."

"Oh, I'm shakin' in my boots. The scary Warlord's gettin' *personal*."

Apparently, that was the last straw because Mikail suddenly changed directions to head straight toward her, his tall, muscular frame radiating intimidation.

But Kivsey didn't stop, and her smile never wavered, backing away while adding sarcastically, "Oh no, the tiny human is being confronted by a fearless Dok'aal Warlord. Whatever could he be planning?"

Despite his imposing stature, he looked amused. "Keep it up and you'll find out."

"Bring it on, big guy."

At her taunt, he reached to grab her, and she ducked to the side, squealing with laughter when he turned more quickly than anticipated and wrapped an arm around her waist.

Following the movement, he pulled her back and turned, cornering her against a nearby

boulder with his big arms blocking her path.

Kivsey snickered, wishing the sound wasn't so breathless. But his closeness was having a stronger affect than expected, or maybe it was the way he stared, his red eyes glowing with an intensity that made focusing a chore when he asked, "Do you enjoy trying to rile me, human? Or are you always so insolent?"

"Insolent?" Kivsey scoffed, striving for a neutral tone in replying, "I was just pointing out the truth. It's not my fault you don't like caring what happens to a human."

"And I wonder why that matters so much to you," Mikail returned drolly. "Perhaps it's because you care for me in turn."

"I've got no problems admitting I care what happens to you."

"No?"

"Of course not. I'm pretty dependent on your skills for survival right now."

"Yet you just escaped a wyrm all by yourself."

"I didn't say *fully* dependent," she countered. "Now move. We're wasting time just standing here."

"Ah, but I thought you wanted to learn what my *taking it personally* meant," he retorted.

Rolling her eyes, Kivsey realized he wasn't going anywhere, and decided to attempt gaining his cooperation by pushing at his chest—for all the good it did. *Feels like pushing a brick wall.*

So she tried harder, turning to shove her shoulder into him while grunting with her fruitless efforts. But no matter how much strength she put into it, he wouldn't budge, and merely watched with an amused smile.

"Give up yet, human?"

Grumbling, she finally stopped struggling, but only because she knew she'd never best him in a physical contest. Instead, she'd have to find another way out—and just happened to have the perfect idea in mind.

So she answered plainly, "Not quite, *Dok'aal*. I'm just changing tactics." *And if you were even remotely impressed by my great wyrm escape, you ain't seen nothin' yet, big guy ...*

Jennifer Kivsey was turning out to be much more than a typical human.

And Mikail *liked it*.

He'd called her insolent, but in truth, he found her sass beguiling, and though he'd talked a big game, he had absolutely no plan for retaliation in mind when he'd trapped her against a boulder. He only knew one of two things would happen as a result—he'd either intimidate that damned alluring smile off her lips, or she'd find some way to escape, and he was far too interested to see what she'd do to let her go.

And she didn't disappoint.

In response to her boast of changing tactics, he asked, "Oh? About to impress me with another spurt of ingenuity? Because I doubt you'll top that escape from—*mmph ...*"

His comment was unexpectedly muffled when Kivsey leaned up and pressed her soft lips to his in a chaste kiss.

It was a bold move, his arms drawing back in surprise as he forgot their conversation completely in attempt to figure out how to respond. But the moment she sensed the movement, Kivsey broke contact and slipped away, leaving him staring at the boulder in complete bewilderment.

She'd obviously meant only to throw him off, and he couldn't say she hadn't played her hand perfectly. He was enjoying their banter far too much to even consider the possibility that she'd kiss him, and even if he *had*, he wouldn't have believed she'd take that route.

But with his surprise came a sense of disappointment over how she'd teased him by slipping away before offering a true taste of her lips. Mikail nearly growled at the thought, but stopped in realizing what his frustration meant.

He *wanted* to kiss her.

His lips parted in astonishment. Kissing was an act he'd only ever considered acceptable to share with his mate. The gesture was simply too affectionate for anyone else, and the notion that he was willing to give Kivsey such attention made it difficult to know how to respond to her ploy.

And she compounded his uncertainty in stating, "Just so you know, I wasn't trying to top my escape, but if *that* impressed you, consider my ego stroked."

Turning to face her, Mikail spied the same victorious smirk she'd given after escaping the wyrm, proving she'd enjoyed *besting* him—and he could almost literally hear her calling him *dumbass*.

That's when it hit him. Not only had he seriously underestimated this female, he couldn't respond any other way than by simply being himself.

And that was precisely what he was going to do.

Walking over, his gaze narrowed in asking with the utmost seriousness, "You call *that* a kiss?"

Kivsey's answer was given immediately, and she specified it with a gloating smile.

"No, I call it a distraction."

"A distraction?" Drawing in closer, he retorted, "That's not what *I* call it."

"And what would *you* call it?"

"A *tease*."

Finally, that smug smile faded over the implication of his statement—and Mikail took full advantage of her distraction. *I never could let a tease go without a proper response.*

Clasping the nape of her neck, he leaned down and captured her mouth with his, causing Kivsey to tense in a way that made him think she'd pull back. But instead, she surprised him again, her small hands cupping his cheeks in a gentle caress that nearly made him forget the sole aim here was to one-up the human, not make out with her.

Yet he found himself purposefully dragging his tongue along her lips for a thorough taste, and let a ragged groan when her own sneaked out to flick his, leading him to a startling discovery—this didn't seem wrong at all.

By all the gods, kissing Kivsey felt utterly *right*.