

Chapter 1

The strong scent of blood and death that followed the two men crossing the street drew Rune's attention. She waited for them to pass between a set of buildings and out of view, before she stepped into the doorway of a closed shop. She crouched down on all fours and breathed slowly, her blood rushing through her body and roaring in her ears.

Her long mahogany fingers widened into paws as they disappeared beneath long strands of red fur. The clothes and school bag simply melded into the body of the wolf as if they'd never existed. The change wasn't painful, but the deep sensation of it affected her every nerve with a heavy vibration. As a child, assuming the primal form had required a great deal of focus to call upon the animal, and then continued concentration to maintain that shape. Now, it was as natural as breathing.

She followed the scent of the two men, her wolf feet padding across the alleyway. Her prey talked quietly, unaware that they had become the hunted.

"How much further, Jimmy?" simpered the smaller, brown haired man with the bulbous nose. The way he bent his head and shoulders as he walked beside the other man was a sure sign of deference to the taller man's position of dominance. "I'm hungry."

"Pete, stop calling me Jimmy." He tossed his hair and lifted his chin proudly. "It's Jumala now. You know Lord Cu Uladh gave it to me at the last moon gathering. You were there, you moron."

"Oh yeah, I forgot." Pete snickered in a nasally way. The wet sound of his laughter turned Rune's stomach. "So, how much further, Jumala?"

"We'll get there when we get there." Jumala glanced back, and Rune slipped behind a dumpster to avoid detection. Apparently satisfied they were alone, he turned his gaze forward and straightened the upturned collar of his tan coat. "And try not to say anything stupid or embarrassing once we get there. Galan and Farrell throw the best parties, and I'm not gonna be blacklisted 'cause you can't zip your lip."

"Okay, Jimmy." Pete grinned up at his companion, who only grumbled and shook his head in response.

Rune dodged a sea of white and red as students moved en masse down Johnson Street from the direction of Camp Randall Stadium. Badger game days were always chaotic, but evening games were rare and exceptionally rowdy. The humans regarded the red wolf as one might a stray — either with mild interest, or revulsion and nervousness. They were completely unaware of the other predators that pushed through their midst, but Rune knew the true nature of the parasites. The two vampires turned down Broom Street to avoid the chattering crowds, Rune in cautious pursuit.

This was not how she'd planned to spend her evening. She'd looked forward all day to going home to start the modifications on the 1970 Barracuda she was restoring. When Rune eventually finished veterinary school, her job would be working with exotic animals at a zoo or a wildlife preserve, but rebuilding old cars and motorcycles was her passion.

She hadn't scheduled crashing a vamp party into her evening plans, but her duty to protect her pack's territory came ahead of every other interest, so Rune followed the men for nearly fifteen minutes before they stopped at a red-brick duplex. The place was devoid of light and movement, but Rune got a strong scent of blood from the area. Past the old building music blared, and the men turned down the walkway toward the sound. Rune following at a distance.

At the back of the property was a two-story garage. From the second floor, lights and music burst out into the night, disturbing the stillness of the neighborhood. The two vampires Rune was trailing knocked at the side door of the garage. The door opened, and

Jumala leaned forward to whisper something to the dark-skinned man on the other side of the door. Even with her sensitive hearing, Rune couldn't catch a word of their exchange.

Pete and Jumala disappeared inside, and she looked around for a way to see into the upper floor balcony. The roof of the garage seemed the best option, but she'd have to shift back to be able to reach it.

She looked around to make sure she hadn't been seen making the change, and then Rune tossed her bag behind the building, out of the way. She tucked her black shirt into the waist of her BDUs and walked quietly around the garage. When she reached the west side of the structure, she laughed. There at its foundation, lying on its side and partially covered by overgrown grass, was a wooden ladder. A few rungs were damaged, but most of it still looked usable. She whispered a prayer of thanks to the Goddess Tyche for the lucky find and gently pulled at the plants that surrounded it until the ladder was freed.

Once she was in place on the garage roof, Rune pushed the ladder away from the edge and watched it fall back to the grass with a low thud. She wouldn't need it to get down and didn't want to draw attention to her presence. Rune hung her torso over the gable of the garage and peered into the window below.

Beyond the glass, one man walked across the room with his arms wrapped around a busty blonde. Past him, Rune could pick out five more women and another ten men moving about the flat. They all looked normal enough, but that was the trouble with vampires — as long as they fed well, the leeches looked just like everyone else. It was their scent — a rancid mixture of sweat and old blood — that made them stand out to a hunter like herself. Vampires didn't sweat, because they had no need to; neither heat nor cold affected them in any but the rarest of cases. The sweat she smelled was from the humans on whom they feasted.

Laughter from the back of the room caught her attention. A group of four vampires was gathered in a corner of the room. Above the din of the music, Rune could just pick out the sound of a woman's voice behind them. A vampire roared with amusement, taking a step forward, and Rune realized it was his laughter that had first drawn her attention. That was when she heard the woman scream.

Rune grabbed the edge of the gable and lowered herself, dangling by her arms. There was barely enough time to shift before she swung back and crashed through the window. She landed on the carpeted floor, legs bent and spread in a combat stance. She had not taken the form of a wolf this time. The eyes of many of the vampires widened with fear to suddenly find a werewolf in their midst.

Pandemonium raged as the smarter of the vampires hurtled for the door. The bouncer took a step back and the crowd scrambled past him, stampeding down the stairs. He glanced at Rune, the group in the corner, and back again. She braced herself for the charge that never came as he swore under his breath and dashed out the door.

Smart man. She grinned and turned back to those remaining.

The vampires fanned out from the corner and Rune glimpsed the three people on the floor. The man's body was stretched out on a wide strip of wood flooring just beyond the carpet, while his two female companions hugged each other and shivered, eyes closed.

"You know, Farrell, I've always wondered what shifter tastes like." The vampire ran a hand over his shaven head and licked his lips hungrily. "You boys help me bag this one, and we can all have a treat." Pete and Jumala glanced nervously at each other, but didn't move forward.

Her eyes narrowing malevolently, Rune snarled at the bald man, "You'll never live to find out, parasite."

Galan nodded at the two younger vampires, and a look of panic crossed Jumala's face. Pete grinned and charged Rune, pulling a lock blade from his back pocket as he ran. Before he even got a chance to open it, Rune snatched him by the throat and lifted him several feet off the ground. The knife fell to the ground as he squirmed in her grasp, and she snapped his neck with a casual flick of her wrist.

"You talk a tall order of bullshit and yet you're afraid to face me yourself, baldy?" Rune clicked her tongue against her long canines and shook her head. "What a bunch of pussies you boys are turning out to be."

"Bitch!" snarled the brown-haired vampire called Farrell. He moved toward her, and Rune laughed, releasing her grip on Pete's body and sending the corpse slamming into Farrell. Under the weight of the chunky man, the slender vampire was knocked to the ground with a loud grunt.

"I don't want to," Jumala whined as Galan pushed him toward Rune. Farrell pulled himself from under Pete's weight, and Jumala stared at his dead friend. "You didn't have to kill him. He was just stupid, not bothering nobody."

"Tell that to the people back there." Rune nodded toward the three humans against the wall. She couldn't see them clearly from her vantage point, but she could smell their fear and blood. "You both could have walked away, but you didn't. I'm taking those people out of here, and anyone who tries to stop me was dead ten minutes ago."

Rune's words came out as low growls, but the remaining vampires seemed to understand them just fine. At a nod from Farrell, all three rushed her. Jumala reached her first. Rune's claws dug into his blond-white hair, gripping tightly as she smashed his face into the heavy door behind her.

Jumala dangled limply in her hand, his nose shattered and his forehead caved in. The two older vampires knocked Rune against the wall. As Farrell lunged for her arm, she brought up Jumala's body to block the bite. "If you need a snack, chew on this asshole."

Farrell spat out a mouthful of his dead friend's flesh, and Galan's fist punched against Rune's jaw, snapping her head to the side. Elbow bent, she shot her claw up and out into Galan's face, tearing several gashes through his cheek and across his nose. Galan grabbed his face and screamed, giving Rune time to turn her attention to Farrell, who had just dug his teeth into her right arm.

"Alright leech, I'm done playing with you." Rune shot her blood-covered hand toward Farrell's face, her clawed fingers digging deep into his eyes. His death came quick after that. Rune barely had time to discard the body before Galan was on her again, snarling in rage and pain. He was stronger than the others had been, and Rune's arm was hurting badly.

They grappled, neither quite able to get a solid hold on the other. Rune stumbled over one of the dead vampires, and then ducked to one side as Galan lunged. Both moved in a frenzied blur, fist and claws tearing at their opponent's body mercilessly. He tired before she did, and Rune guessed she'd interrupted his meal just in time. A few moments more and they would have fed, become strengthened, and she would have had a much tougher fight on her hands.

Her foot connected with his knee and the crack echoed through the room like a whip. Galan fell to his side and she kicked the supporting arm from under him, breaking it, as well. He grabbed the couch with his uninjured arm, trying to pull himself to standing, but with a burst of feral energy she was on him.

The wall and windows were splashed crimson by the time Galan dropped to the ground in a heap of shattered bones. He squirmed, groaning in pain until she pushed the heel of her leather boot through his skull, shattering it. Not all of the blood that matted

her fur belonged to those lying dead around her. Vampires were not impossible to kill, but neither were shifters.

Glancing at the two women sobbing in the corner, their eyes tightly shut, Rune sighed. She had yet another job to do before the Clan "cleaning crew" could be called. Using a set of thick green curtains that hung from one of the window frames, she wiped off as much of the blood as she could before shifting back into her human shape.

Rune squatted down in front of the other two victims, and the woman with the short-cropped blond hair opened her eyes tentatively. "Don't kill us," she begged, holding the other woman tight. "Please don't kill us."

"I'm not one of them." Rune reached over to touch the neck of the man, grimacing at the paleness of his skin. His pulse beat weakly under her fingers, and she heaved a sigh of relief.

The blonde strained her head to see what Rune was doing. "Is he...dead?"

"No." Rune tore a cotton shirt from one of the dead vampires and ripped it into strips. "He's lost a lot of blood. I need to stop the bleeding before he's too far gone for anyone to help him. How's your friend there?"

"Bonnie? I think she's okay, just scared." She looked down at the woman with the black hair streaked with red, whom she held cradled in her arms, and then back at the pallid man. "Are you a doctor? Can you save her brother?"

"I can try." There were several wounds on his arms and inner thigh, which Rune quickly bandaged. The damage to his leg was the worst, and she applied pressure to stop the flow of blood. Rune pulled a cell phone from her pocket, then hit star and the number she needed. "I'm calling for more help."

Opening her eyes, Bonnie looked up at Rune, her voice trembling as she spoke. "The monsters...are they gone?"

Rune knew the woman didn't mean just the vampires when she said "monsters", but Rune simply nodded her head. "You're safe now."

Bonnie closed her eyes again and let out a long breath. "Thank God."

The phone rang a few times and then a man's irritated grumble required Rune's attention. "Now what?"

"Evening, Akuma." Rune turned away from the humans and lowered her voice. She knew Akuma hated to be bothered at work, but there was little choice tonight. She needed the Clansman's experience. "I catch you at a bad time?"

"I thought you were going home to study."

"I got sidetracked." Rune scanned the two women for injuries before continuing. "I need a clean up, and I have one man injured badly and two women that look to be very shaken up. Can you send a crew for a clean up and transfer?"

"My father and two of my brothers were at the game tonight." Akuma's tone was compassionate, but his manner was all business. "I imagine they're home by now. I'll give them a call. Where're you at, Nqumayo?"

Rune gave him the address and then closed the phone, turning her attention back to the women. "Someone is coming to take you three to the hospital. I'll have to ask you not to tell anyone what you saw here, at least not the monster part of it. They won't believe you, and it'll bring trouble to the ones trying to protect this city."

"You were the one who fought the vampires, weren't you?" The blonde's eyes widened. "The...werewolf, or whatever you were."

Without answering, Rune turned her back on both women. She rummaged through the pockets of the fallen vampires, but found nothing to give a clue about where more of their kind might be found. Their bodies would be burned and any possessions of value used to fund the Clan's work in Madison.

As long as the humans didn't tell anyone what happened, in a few hours they would forget tonight entirely. Their unawakened minds would make up their own explanations for the man's illness, and their lives would go on as usual. Rune's mother used to say that part was the magic of the Goddess that protected the Clan.

Rune hated the secrets, the hiding, but when the hunters were the hunted, they were left with few choices. The men would come, as they always did, to clean up the mess the warrior women left for them. It was the way of the Clan. Their men could not take the sacred warrior form, nor could they, once past the age of maturity, change into beasts. In the cities, the Clan males had their own special duties, one of which was to be the keepers of the shifters' secrets.

In less than ten minutes, the stomping of boots sounded on the stairs. A low whistle sounded from the doorway, and Rune looked over her shoulder to see Akuma's mountain of a father, Maa Efi, taking up the bulk of the doorway.

"Well, someone had a good time," Maa Efi said, his eyes scanning the room. "Just the four?"

"Yeah, just the four." Rune watched as he moved into the room. His two college-aged sons appeared in the door next. "Did Akuma tell you we needed a transport, too?"

"We'll take him down," the older of the brothers, Nathaniel, said solemnly. Each was over six feet in height and had to duck his head to make it through the door. The broad shoulders and stocky build of all three men were attributes of their Samoan heritage.

His brother, Kai, gave the women his signature boyish grin. "You ladies able to walk out of here on your own?"

Both women nodded and stood, and Rune watched them eyeing the two muscular, dark-haired, young men with interest. It never ceased to amaze her how those boys could turn a young woman's fears to lust with a dark brooding scowl or a charming smile. Maybe that was part of their power for keeping the secrets — distraction.

Rune helped Nathaniel and Kai get the humans to their van and lay the man on a pile of soft blankets in back. The man's skin was cold and clammy. She checked his eyes and found the pupils dilated. "You need to get him to the hospital quickly. I can stay with your dad."

"No need. Dijony and Mary are on their way to help him clean up." Kai grinned and pointed at a black SUV and motorcycle coming up the alley. "And here are the goddesses now."

The two vehicles pulled to a stop next to the garage, and Rune stepped away from the back of the van. Kai moved to take the place Rune vacated and closed the double doors behind him with a click.

"You're a mess." Mary got out of the driver's side and tossed a plastic bag to Rune. "Thought you might need these."

Rune nodded her thanks and, as Dijony opened the back of Mary's SUV, Rune climbed in. Rune stripped out of her bloody gear and changed into the blue jeans and t-shirt. "We've got civilians headed for the hospital. We covered?"

"I already called Peter and Leo," Mary called out from beyond the double steel doors of the SUV. "They'll meet the guys at the hospital to deal with the paperwork."

Rune shoved her bloody clothes into the now empty plastic bag and tied it shut, then thrust it into her own bag before climbing out of the van. With a goodbye wave to her friends and a cautious glance around to be certain the path was clear, Rune was once again headed home.

Yeah, crashing a vamp party was a great way to spend an evening.