

## Chapter 1

Kanyon raised the lid of the ornately carved box and peered inside at the treasures it held. She assessed the items, frowned, then quickly flipped the box, slammed it upside down, and lifted it, letting its contents spill over the kitchen table. “We risked our lives for some weird dominoes? So what, the world was going to end because some old guy wasn’t going to go play in the park with some other old guy?”

“Risked our lives? Really?” Daylen asked, exasperation evident in her voice. “We walked into a nursing home and asked for them,” she said flatly.

“Did you not smell all the Mentholatum and Poligrip? Any longer in there and we could have passed out. Our lifeless bodies would have been mere ineffective speed bumps for the crazy blue-haired lady in the electric wheelchair. I mean seriously, did you see her nearly take me out when they announced Bingo was starting?” Kanyon snickered as she sat four tiles upright, then flicked the first in time to watch them all topple.

Daylen laughed softly. “Whatever, and geez be careful. These aren’t dominoes.” She scrambled to pick them up and put them back in their box. “They are runes, ancient fortune telling runes to be exact, and they are over a thousand years old.”

Kanyon squeezed one of the tiles between her thumb and index finger. “So what does this domino mean?” She turned the marked side of the rune toward Daylen.

“I’m a Seeker, not an archeologist,” Daylen answered simply as she gathered the remaining pieces and placed them neatly back into their box.

Kanyon looked at the rune’s markings again. “It looks like a stick hippopotamus.”

Daylen rolled her eyes.

“It’s probably an ancient prophecy warning the world about a hippo with an eating disorder.” Kanyon danced the rune toward Daylen’s face. “Hungry, hungry, hippo.”

“Yes, I’m sure that’s it,” Daylen retorted as she plucked the last rune from Kanyon’s fingers and put it in the box.

They both turned as they heard footsteps enter through the room behind them. “Aunt Ruby.” Daylen held out the box to her. “Here you go. Another successful recovery.”

Ruby smiled and took the box. “You girls make quite the team. First the Blood Ring and now the Runes of Philia.”

“And Kanyon didn’t even burn down a house this time.” Daylen smiled.

“That happened ONE TIME!” Kanyon looked at her fingertips remembering the flames that had leapt from them. Though she had tried a hundred times since that night, she couldn’t so much as produce a spark. She snapped them a couple times for good measure.

Aunt Ruby reached out and laid a hand over Kanyon’s fingers. “I’m somewhat attached to my house. If you’re going to do that, go outside.”

“Right.” Kanyon dropped her hand. “So what’s next on the mystic lost and found list?”

Ruby moved to the kitchen table and lifted the lid of the box. “Why don’t we ask the runes?”

Daylen glanced at her aunt, then the runes. “You know how to read these?”

Ruby smiled and then like Kanyon, she flipped the box over letting the runes spill onto the table. “First you flip them all face down,” Ruby instructed as she slid into a chair.

Kanyon and Daylen took seats as well and once all the runes were face down, Ruby placed a hand over them. “Okay, lay your right hands on the runes.” They did as instructed as Ruby closed her eyes and lifted her face heavenward.

“You sure you don’t need me to get your swami hat before you tell me my life will take an interesting turn, or a dark stranger will enter my life, or I will soon have a meaningful relationship with...”

Ruby lowered her head and opened one eye at Kanyon. “A roll of duct tape?”

“Not exactly what I was thinking,” Kanyon murmured, chancing a glance at Daylen.

“Zip it,” Ruby ordered, then closed her eyes again.

Ruby was quiet for a few minutes, though she had only needed a few seconds to chant the awakening prayer to Philia. She enjoyed listening to Kanyon struggle with sitting still and being quiet for more than two seconds. After Kanyon’s fifth sigh and twenty-fifth foot shuffle, she lowered her head and opened her eyes. “Okay, with your

right hand select seven runes and lay them face down in front of you.”

“Looks like dominoes, plays like dominoes, must be-” Kanyon murmured until she got a kick to the shin from Daylen. “Ouch! Geez!” Kanyon reached down and rubbed her leg.

“Now, we put one in the center,” Ruby stated, selecting a rune and placing it in the center of the table. She then removed all the unused tiles, placing them off to the side. “Now flip over your runes in front of you, right to left.”

When all the runes were facing up except for the center one, Ruby glanced at Daylen’s runes: fate, love, passion, power, success, warrior and wisdom. She looked at Kanyon’s runes: fate, love, passion, power, success, warrior and wisdom. “Hmmm, imagine that,” Ruby smirked.

Daylen looked at her runes then to her aunt. “Imagine what?” she asked, missing the connection.

“Shhh,” Ruby instructed as she flipped over the center rune. The smile immediately slid from her lips.

Kanyon was oblivious to Ruby’s reaction, busy looking between the anorexic hippo which was in the center and the tiles displayed in front of her. “Allrighty, I see your hungry hippo and raise you a caveman with a spear,” she said as she selected the warrior tile from her pile and placed it against the hippo tile so it formed a T. Smiling in satisfaction, she looked up at Ruby who was transfixed on the center tile. Kanyon raised a curious brow as she turned to Daylen.

Daylen’s eyes slammed shut as she grabbed for the edge of the table.

Kanyon instinctively moved to Daylen's side, gently laying a hand on her arm. When her touch didn't provide Daylen any relief, she slammed a fist down on the table making the runes jump. "Ruby!" Kanyon yelled.

Ruby blinked several times, then forced her eyes shut as she shook her head in an effort to clear her thoughts.

"Ruby, you need to shield!" Kanyon ordered.

Ruby's eyes shot open to find Kanyon glaring at her.

"Shield, damn it!" Kanyon ordered again. "You're hitting her full on," she softened her voice though it was no less demanding.

Ruby followed Kanyon's nod and saw Daylen taking on the full weight of the emotions she was projecting. She lifted her shields immediately cutting off the stream of her emotions.

Daylen swayed as if the bindings holding her upright had just been severed.

Kanyon caught Daylen by her shoulders and held her as she softly spoke, "You're okay. You're okay. She's got her shields up. Can you get yours up as well?"

Daylen straightened in her seat and gave Kanyon's hand a gentle pat. "I'm good, thanks."

Kanyon took her hands off Daylen slowly, testing first that Daylen wasn't going to tumble one way or the other. When she was convinced Daylen was safe and shielded, she spun on Ruby. "What the hell was that?"

"I, I..." Ruby started, pressing her fingers to her temples, as the lingering memories and emotions were giving her a headache.

Not waiting on Ruby's explanation, Kanyon turned back to Daylen. "Are you sure you're okay?" She placed herself in Daylen's line of vision so she could look into her eyes for reassurance.

Daylen nodded, giving Kanyon a quick glance and a weak yet comforting smile. "I'm okay. Aunt Ruby, wh-"

"Daylen, I'm sorry. I didn't expect..." Ruby began but let the sentence die off as she looked back at the rune lying in the center of the table.

"Oh, no you don't." Kanyon shot her hand out and slapped it over the center rune. "That really *not-at-all* fun game is over," she advised as she swept the tile into one of the other piles. "We are so not having any more family game nights." Kanyon used an arm to collect all the runes in one smooth motion. Though her arm was already in motion, her curiosity didn't stop her from registering Daylen's seven runes before they got lost in the pile. *Daylen had drawn the same runes.* Or so she thought. She didn't have time to examine them side-by-side and she wasn't exactly sure she even remembered what she had drawn. There was a caveman with a spear, a crudely carved heart, and a fist. She glanced down at the pile in front of her. She ran her eyes over the runes but they were all mixed together now.

"Aunt Ruby, what did you see?" Daylen asked softly and reached out for her aunt across the table.

"Nothing," Ruby answered too quickly.

"It didn't feel like nothing," Daylen responded.

"Ahhh, sweetheart." Ruby took Daylen's hand. "I'm sorry. I never expected... I never would have..."

Daylen saw the pain in her eyes. “It’s okay. I’m okay.” She gave Ruby’s hand a reassuring squeeze. “Just tell me what caused-”

“You to go all emotionally postal,” Kanyon said talking over Daylen.

Daylen shot a *not now* look at Kanyon.

Kanyon shrugged in reply.

Ruby took in a deep breath and let it out in a rush. She couldn’t tell them, not now. Not until they were fully bonded, so they were at their strongest, which was hopefully strong enough that they could survive it. But she wouldn’t lie to them either, so she went with a partial truth. “It was something from my past. A fight. A fight I lost and it cost me...” she blinked away the tears that were threatening to spill.

“Uncle Jack?” Daylen offered softly.

Ruby confirmed with a nod as the memories of a fight he should not have been a part of; a fight she should have protected him from formed again. She had failed and now her niece was going to have to take on the battle. She looked at her niece now, tears beginning to break over the rims of her eyelids. “I’m sorry, Daylen.” She patted her niece’s hand still atop hers then reached for Kanyon. She prayed Kanyon could protect her, prayed that Kanyon would come to embrace the true powerful warrior she was, that Daylen would allow Kanyon, the warrior, not only to protect her but to love her; that they would allow themselves to love each other. She thought of the runes they had both drawn; fate, love, passion, power, success, warrior and wisdom. Fate had already played its role in bringing them together. The wisdom, she thought, they

both had, the love and passion, she hoped they'd find together as it would give them the power they'd need to survive. She smiled as she stood to go. "Thank you, Kanyon."

Kanyon nodded, watching Ruby until she was down the hall and out of sight. "Dramatic moment, emotional exit, and cut. Soooo, what the hell was all that about?" Kanyon said, turning back to Daylen whose eyes were still on the empty doorway.

"I don't know, but that was a heck of a sucker punch of fear and regret she threw at me," Daylen answered.

"You're okay?" Kanyon asked, giving Daylen another visual once over.

"Yeah." Daylen shook her head as Kanyon started to pick up and stack the runes in the box. "I'm fine. But, I think... no, I know she's keeping something from us."

Kanyon picked up the skinny hippo tile. "This?"

Daylen took the tile from Kanyon and examined it. "Yeah."

"What do you think it means?" Kanyon asked as she put the rest of the tiles in the box.

Daylen flipped it over in her hand. "I have absolutely no idea," she answered then held it out to Kanyon as she stood.

Kanyon took the tile and reexamined it. "Maybe she saw a vision of us getting eaten by a hunger-crazed hippo."

Daylen let out a weak laugh. "Yes. I'm sure that's exactly it."

"Hey, it could happen. I'm pretty sure hippos kill like five times more people a year than sharks or maybe it



was elk?" Kanyon waved a hand. "Either way they are mean bastards."

Daylen turned to face Kanyon. "You know what? I think you actually might just be on to something. My aunt hit me with a mega jolt of fear and regret because she's concerned that we're going to get eaten by a hippo." Daylen put a hand on her hip, a playful smirk on her lips. "In the middle of L.A."

Kanyon shrugged. "It could happen."

"You are so completely and thoroughly disturbed. But speaking of eating, do you want something?" she asked as she walked over to the refrigerator.

"Duh," Kanyon said.

"Sandwich?"

"Works for me," Kanyon said absently as she took a closer examination of the hippo carving. There was a small line underneath one of the legs. At first she thought it was just symbolizing the ground, but as she looked closer, it actually looked like the hippo thing was clutching it, as if it was a staff or a rod of some sort. There was also what seemed like rays or beams coming from the end of it. Actually, now that she really looked at it, it didn't so much look like a hippo, but a large headed creature of some sort with the body of a man on all fours. She couldn't tell for sure as the rune had been crudely carved and worn slick with age.

Daylen slid a sandwich in front of Kanyon. Kanyon took another glance at the rune. Whatever it was, she had a feeling she was really not going to like it; she replaced the rune in the box and closed the lid. "Thank you," Kanyon said, picking up the sandwich. "So, the runes are recovered.

What's next on the supernatural scavenger hunt list?" she asked through a mouthful of sandwich.

"Nothing of the supernatural variety that I know of, Ruby is the assignment giver here. But I'm not sure it's a great time to ask," Daylen replied taking a glance at the ceiling in the direction of Ruby's upstairs office.

Kanyon followed her gaze. "Probably not." She took another bite, chewed, and swallowed. "So now what?"

"There's always paperwork."

"Nooo..." Kanyon protested with a childish whine in her voice.

"We talked about this. You want to play, you have to pay. But, I'll let you choose. You can do the report on the runes' recovery or you can complete the background checks that have been sitting on my desk for a week."

Kanyon thought of the events of the recovery, not too horrible and shorter than the report Daylen made her write on the recovery of the Blood Ring. She then thought of the two-inch high stack of background checks sitting on the corner of Daylen's desk. "So door number one, death by writing. Door number two, death by data entry. I guess I'll take-" Kanyon's decision was cut off by a hard rap at the back door. "Door number three!" She stood quickly and went to answer the knock. She reentered the kitchen and threw a thumb over her shoulder. "Door number three, death by cheap polyester suit exposure."