

“He’s here somewhere. Find him!”

Rand Wilder stood silent in the desert darkness. Despite the moonless night, his enhanced vision allowed him to see the six vampires hunting for him.

The thump of music from the rundown highway bar nearby sounded like a heartbeat in the night. The lights of Las Vegas shimmered in the distance. The warm desert air brushed over him.

As did the vampires’ energies, prickling over his skin and pulsing under his heart.

*Anaharta.* Vampires ruled by the heart chakra. And ones who’d let their energy course out of alignment.

Unbalanced vampires were Rand’s favorite prey.

“Come out, come out.” The tallest vampire spun in a slow circle. “We know you’re here, hunter.”

One of the vampires came closer, his feet kicking up the coarse desert sand. Rand’s hand tightened on his stake—a shaft of pure titanium. The vampire’s jagged energy was evident in the creature’s jerky movements.

*Come on, just another inch.* Rand waited. His career as a vampire hunter had taught him patience. Against unbalanced rogues, it was his greatest weapon.

The vampire paused, lifting his pretty face to the star-scattered sky. It seemed a cosmic joke that such powerful, vicious beings were so beautiful. No doubt the Indian vampire goddess Kali had laughed when she’d created the first of her children thousands of years ago.

Vampires were ruled by the energy coursing through their chakras—energy they got from blood. Over time it improved their skin, trimmed their bodies and smoothed out their features.

But it didn’t hide their rotten insides.

Dark memories of his father’s blood running like a river across the floor twisted through Rand. A man who’d dedicated his life to protecting the innocent hadn’t deserved to be tortured to death. Rand tried to recall his father’s deep voice and booming laugh, but the sounds were lost to him. His heart thumped hard against his ribs. Time, and the blood of all the vampires

he'd killed, had dulled his memories.

Now he knew only rage and death.

The vampire inched closer, unaware his executioner stood within a breath of him. Rand thrust out his arm.

The stake sank into the vamp's heart, the executed seeing no more than a blur of shadow. He didn't make a sound as he crumpled to the sand.

Using his speed, Rand attacked the two closest vampires. They too died in silence.

"What the hell?"

"Alban and Jago are down!"

"Where is he?"

The frenzy of panicked voices echoed through the dark. Again Rand waited.

"It's The Darkness," one of the vampires moaned.

It was the name the vampire community had given Rand many years ago. The darkness hid him, was a part of him, one of his many hunter skills. He came from it when the vampires least expected him. It also filled his soul.

Long nights in the darkness had taught him that to fight the monsters, he had to become the monster.

But killing when he couldn't be seen was hardly a challenge. He wanted the fight to be personal. He wanted to see their fear, smell their terror, hear their ragged heartbeats...and if he got too close...well, it wasn't like there was anyone who'd miss him.

He strode forward, coming out of the dark like the predator he was.

"So, finally I meet The Darkness." The tall vampire stood flanked by his two remaining followers. His voice was composed but his fear stained the air.

Rand didn't say anything. He didn't talk to those he executed.

The air between them hung heavy, tension thickening like building thunderclouds.

The vampires attacked.

For Rand, time slowed. He heard every solid beat of his heart. Felt the touch of cool steel in his hand. Sensed the spike of pranic energy from the vampires.

He blocked the strike from the first vampire with a forearm. Took down the second with a smooth thrust of the stake. A hard kick sent the tall leader tumbling back into the sand.

Spinning, Rand moved lightning fast until he was face to face with the first vampire.

“No, please—”

His father had begged for mercy. But no one had listened. That long ago vampire had forced a teenaged Rand to watch as he'd ripped Brody Wilder apart.

Rand stabbed the stake through the vamp's chakra and didn't wait to watch him fall.

“Just you and me, *vishuddha*,” the tall vampire said.

Rand straightened and eyed his final foe. The vampire had used the formal name for Rand's kind. He was a descendant of a pure-blood *vishuddha*, the rare child resulting from the union of vampire and human.

Gifted with enhanced strength and senses, and a much longer life than humans, *vishuddha* made the perfect hunters of vampires.

He was doing what he'd been born to do.

They flew at each other and went crashing to the ground. At six foot five, Rand was bigger but the vampire was strong. They wrestled and Rand felt the scrape of sharp fangs on his cheek.

“I'll take your blood, Darkness. And I'll make it hurt.”

Fangs ripped at the side of Rand's neck and he felt his flesh tear. For a second, he relished the pain. Then he thrust a fist at the vampire's head.

Rand had never let a vampire feed from him and he wasn't starting now.

He'd been hardened in the blood and pain of many battles. One unbalanced rogue wouldn't be his undoing.

Raising an arm, Rand rammed the metal stake into the vampire's back. The tip pierced his heart from behind.

With a garbled cry, the vampire slumped forward, heart chakra destroyed.

Sucking in a deep breath, Rand rolled the body off him. He pushed to his feet.

Another monster dead.

He stared at his bloody hands and the stake resting in them. It was all he knew. Blood. Death. Darkness. What would his father think of him?

Before Rand could clean his stake, headlights cut across the desert, blinding him. A car jerked to a halt on the rough ground, doors opened.

“Police! Stay where you are and drop your weapon.”

*Damn.* Someone from the bar must’ve spotted them. He’d hoped when he’d lured the vamps out of the bar—and away from the humans they’d been planning to snack on—that no one would notice.

Rand didn’t move. He tried to avoid humans, especially the authorities. They knew nothing of the beings existing alongside them. And it was best it stayed that way.

Still, he wasn’t going to hurt them. He dropped his stake into the sand. He was damned good at killing but he wouldn’t injure an innocent.

“Cuff him,” one of the officers said.

A shadow moved forward. Rand’s eyes adjusted and he saw an older cop by the car, gun aimed at Rand’s chest.

A younger one approached him with cautious steps. Rand saw the officer’s eyes stray to one of the vampires. Dead, fangs retracted, they looked like humans.

How in hell was he going to get out of this?

The young cop swallowed. “You’re under arrest—”

“Now, you don’t want to do that, *chéri.*”

The female voice floated through the night like an angel’s song. It stroked over Rand’s nerve endings like caressing fingers, setting his body aflame.

She came out of the darkness like an underworld goddess. Tall, slender, pale skin glowing in the dark. She wore a white leather catsuit, which should have looked ridiculous, but only accented slim curves and feminine limbs. A fall of raven hair reached her waist.

Light in the darkness. Rand blinked, unable to look away.

She stopped, pressed a hand to her hip and looked at the cops. “I believe you were leaving. You saw nothing here that concerns you.” Her musical accent carried strains of France.

The older cop nodded. “Yes, ma’am. You’re right. Let’s go, Johnson.”

The younger man stared at her with glazed eyes. “We were leaving. Nothing here that concerns us.”

Rand fought his body’s instinctive urge to follow the men.

The woman sauntered forward, moving with a liquid grace that mesmerized. She patted Johnson’s cheek, then watched them get in their car and drive away.

Then she turned to Rand.

A searing pain hit him between the eyes. Her unearthly beauty struck him like a blow to the head and his body hardened. Her features were perfect—slim nose, sharp cheekbones, sensual lips and eyes the color of amethysts.

Eyes that held an impossible blend of experience and innocence.

*Innocence?* He snorted. The brow chakra belonged to the *ajna*. Those born to vampire parents, the equivalent to undead royalty.

The strongest and most powerful of all the vampires.

But even knowing what she was, his hands itched to run over her marble smooth skin. She pumped off sensuality like heat off a roaring fire.

Unblinking violet eyes watched him. “I’ve been looking for you.”

Rand watched her, his mind racing for a way to survive her attack. She looked young, but she felt powerful. *Ajna* were the only vampires strong enough to survive the rush of solar energy through their chakras and walk in the sun. They were damned hard to kill.

It’d been an *ajna* that had destroyed his father. Since then Rand had tangled with only one in his career and even with his enhanced healing abilities, it’d taken two months for him to recover.

She tilted her head. “Don’t you speak?”

“Not with vampires,” he growled.

She crossed her arms under her breasts, accenting her already mind-scrambling cleavage.

“Well, you will talk to me.”

Used to giving orders, this one. What the hell did an ajna want to talk to him for? “You think so?”

Her nod sent a ripple through her shiny hair. “I have a deal for you, Darkness.”