
BLOOD
RUNES
CHERYL MILLS

Blood Runes Part 1

Some monsters are born in darkness. Others are created by it. But the most terrifying monsters are those who learn to love.

The first time Evelyn Vale heard the dead speak, she was seven years old. It happened beneath the twisted branches of the ancient yew tree in her grandmother's garden, on an afternoon so still that even the birds seemed afraid to sing. She had been collecting feathers when a woman's voice breathed her name, soft and intimate, as though its owner were standing directly behind her.

Underneath, Evelyn. Where he left me.

Three days later, the gardener discovered human remains tangled amongst the roots. The bones belonged to a woman who had disappeared forty-two years earlier. The police labelled it a coincidence. Her parents considered it an overactive imagination. Her grandmother, however, looked at Evelyn with an expression that was neither surprise nor fear, but familiarity.

That evening, she gave Evelyn a small wooden box containing twelve stones engraved with ancient runes and a length of faded red thread.

"These symbols are older than the churches," she explained. "Some believed they could reveal things hidden from ordinary eyes. Life, death, destiny, sacrifice."

"Can they speak?" Evelyn asked.

Her grandmother's hands shivered.

"Sometimes, darling. But whatever you do, never answer them."

"Why?"

"Because not everything that speaks from the darkness is asking to be saved."

Twenty-nine years later, Evelyn would remember that warning as she stood over the body of a man whose blood was still warm upon her fingers, and she would wonder whether her grandmother had been warning her about the dead, or perhaps about herself.

The third body was discovered in an abandoned chapel outside York. Detective Inspector Daniel Mercer had spent seventeen years investigating violent crime, yet the scene before him unsettled something he believed his career had long since extinguished.

The victim lay upon a bed of black feathers beneath the decaying altar, dressed in an immaculate white shirt. His hands had been folded over his chest, and a thin length of red thread encircled his wrist. Above him, a single angular symbol was painted on the stone wall in blood.

ᛉ

"Algiz," Detective Sergeant Hannah Price explained. "A rune traditionally associated with protection."

Mercer stared at the dead man.

"Didn't protect him very well, did it?"

"The first two victims had different symbols. But the same arrangement, the same red thread. Whoever's doing this knows exactly what they're creating."

Mercer crouched next to the body. The man's expression was almost peaceful, which disturbed Mercer more than the wound beneath his collarbone. Something about the scene appeared to be intimate, as if the victim had willingly approached the person responsible.

"Who is he?"

"Adrian Holloway. University lecturer. Specialised in medieval mythology."

Mercer looked towards the symbol.

"Someone who understood runes."

"Apparently."

"And now someone has used one to mark his death."

Price hesitated before continuing.

"There's something else, sir. Another body was found this morning. Different circumstances, but the timing's unusual."

"Where?"

"An abandoned textile mill outside Leeds. The place was set alight. The victim was arranged beneath an inverted cross. Fire damage, theatrical positioning. Just like the previous two."

Mercer sighed. Two serial killers operating across Yorkshire within the same six-month period was already difficult enough to explain. One obsessed with ancient symbols, the other with religious imagery and fire. The newspapers had christened them the Rune Killer and the Devil Killer. The public was terrified.

The killers, apparently, were thriving.

"Any connection?"

"Nothing we've found."

Mercer studied the red thread.

"Then we'd better find one."

Evelyn Vale watched the news coverage from her immaculate kitchen, a porcelain cup of tea resting between her hands. She disliked the name the newspapers had given her — the Rune Killer. It sounded cheap, almost vulgar, reducing something revered to an act of meaningless violence. Her work was not random. She had selected every victim, considered every symbol, and performed every ceremony with extraordinary care.

She believed death was not an ending, but a doorway, and she had been chosen to open it, or at least that was what the voices told her. Her parents had raised her in a loving home filled with books, music and a love of knowledge. She had enjoyed every opportunity, excelled academically, and eventually established a successful career restoring historical manuscripts.

There had been no brutality in her childhood, no obvious tragedy to explain what she had become. Sometimes she wondered whether that made her more frightening. On the kitchen table lay a leather notebook filled with names, dates and meticulously drawn symbols. Three names had been crossed through. A fourth was left untouched.

Before she could examine it, the familiar pressure began gathering behind her eyes. Then came the whispering.

He is coming.

Evelyn closed her eyes.

"Who?"

The one who carries fire.

For months the voices had spoken about a stranger, a man they called the broken child, the black king, the devil without horns. Sometimes she dreamed of him standing before a burning house, his face veiled by smoke. And always the dream ended with the same words. You belong to one another.

Evelyn opened her eyes and glanced towards the window. A symbol had appeared in the condensation.

ᚷ

Gebo.

The rune of partnership. Of gifts exchanged. Of two lives becoming entwined. She touched the glass. It was cold enough to hurt.

Gabriel Cross believed fear was the only honest human emotion. Love could be manufactured, loyalty purchased and kindness exploited, but terror stripped people of their pretences. He had learned this from his father. Arthur Cross had been a violent man who ruled his household through intimidation and cruelty, while Gabriel's mother remained silent behind locked bedroom doors. By eleven, Gabriel understood that mercy was weakness.

By fourteen, he had discovered the satisfaction of becoming the person people feared.

At forty-one, he was wealthy, attractive and professionally successful. He developed luxury properties, drove an expensive car and possessed the graceful charm of a man who knew exactly what people wanted to hear. Nobody suspected that he devoted his evenings to constructing scenes of unimaginable horror.

He liked fire. Not exclusively its destructive power, but the way it altered things, reducing homes, possessions and human certainty to ash. His victims became elaborate displays of damnation; their bodies arranged amongst religious symbols and blackened ruins. He wanted the world to notice. Yet that morning, as he watched another report about the elusive Devil Killer, he felt unexpectedly dissatisfied. His latest murder had received less attention than the Rune Killer's newest discovery.

A woman, apparently. The police had not publicly confirmed it, but Gabriel was certain. The arrangements had a delicacy; an elegance he found infuriating. And intriguing.

His telephone vibrated. An unknown number.

Fire destroys. Blood remembers.

Gabriel frowned.

A second message arrived. There is someone who understands you.

He composed a reply. Who are you?

The answer appeared immediately. Tomorrow. The exhibition. Find the woman wearing the silver necklace.

Gabriel gazed at the screen. He should have been concerned. Instead, he smiled.

The exhibition was entitled Blood and Belief: Symbols of Death in Northern Europe. Evelyn had been invited to discuss the conservation of ancient runic inscriptions. She wore a dark emerald dress, her grandmother's silver necklace resting against her throat. She was examining a carved burial stone when a man's voice disrupted her thoughts.

"Do you think people honestly believed these symbols possessed power?"

She turned. The stranger was tall, dark-haired and exquisitely dressed, with unusually intense eyes and a smile that suggested confidence bordering on arrogance.

"Belief is powerful enough on its own," Evelyn replied.

"Even when it justifies murder?"

"Especially then."

He laughed softly.

"Gabriel Cross."

"Evelyn Vale."

When their hands touched, Evelyn experienced a sudden vision. A little boy hiding beneath a staircase. A leather belt. A burning house. A man standing amongst the flames, smiling as someone screamed.

She withdrew her hand sharply.

"Are you all right?" Gabriel asked.

"Perfectly."

But behind him stood a woman with soil spilling from her mouth. The same woman Evelyn had seen beneath her grandmother's tree. This one, the apparition whispered.

Gabriel studied her carefully. For the first time in years, he felt curiously exposed. Something about Evelyn's expression felt beyond simple attraction. She looked at him as though she could see every ugly thing he had ever concealed. And she did not seem disgusted.

They talked until the exhibition closed. They talked about history, mythology, morality, and the darkness people hid beneath civilisation.

"Do you believe people are born evil?" Gabriel asked over their second glass of wine.

Evelyn considered the question.

"I think some people are born capable of terrible things. Others are taught. But ultimately, we choose what we become."

"And what have you chosen?"

She smiled.

"Perhaps you'll find out."

He did.

Three months later, they were married. For the first time in their lives, both believed they had found safety. Evelyn adored Gabriel's confidence, his intelligence and the intensity with which he loved her. Gabriel found her calmness intoxicating, especially her ability to remain utterly composed when confronted with subjects that made others uncomfortable. They moved into a secluded Victorian house overlooking the Yorkshire moors.

There were four bedrooms, an enormous kitchen, a library, and a cellar that neither mentioned. Gabriel claimed he used it for storing renovation materials. Evelyn said she needed the space to restore ancient manuscripts. Neither questioned the other's frequent absences.

Until the night Gabriel returned home with blood beneath his fingernails. He found Evelyn sitting in the library, reading an article about a recently discovered body.

"The Devil Killer strikes again," she said conversationally.

Gabriel poured himself a whisky.

"Terrible business."

"Isn't it?"

She turned the page.

"Apparently, the victim was positioned inside an elaborate circle of scorched religious texts."

"Interesting."

"Not particularly. Rather predictable, actually."

Gabriel stopped pouring.

"Predictable?"

"Fire. Religious imagery. The same tired symbolism. Whoever he is, he appears desperate for attention."

A muscle flexed in Gabriel's jaw.

"Perhaps there's a deeper meaning you're overlooking."

"Perhaps. Although I suspect he's simply a frightened little boy pretending to be the devil."

The glass shattered in his hand. Evelyn looked up. For several seconds, they stared at each other. Then Gabriel smiled.

"Careful, darling. You might hurt his feelings."

Evelyn returned his smile.

"Perhaps I already have."

That night, while Gabriel slept, she entered his study. Inside a secured drawer, she found newspaper clippings, photographs of victims, and a collection of scorched religious objects. She studied them without horror. Without disgust. Only fascination.

Then she returned to their bedroom, leaned over her sleeping husband and whispered.

"Hello, my beautiful monster."

Gabriel opened his eyes. He had never been asleep.

"I wondered when you'd find out."

Evelyn kissed him.

"Whatever shall we do now?"

His smile was slow and terrible.

"Something extraordinary."

For six months, they were inseparable. Their marriage became a private theatre of darkness, built upon secrets that no longer needed concealing. They confessed their crimes, compared their methods and revelled in the freedom of being understood. Gabriel called Evelyn his angel of death. She called him her beautiful devil.

But love between monsters carries its own hunger. Gabriel grew jealous of the attention Evelyn's murders received. Evelyn despised his increasingly careless need for recognition. Their arguments began quietly and ended with broken glass. One evening, Gabriel arrived home smiling.

"I have a surprise."

He placed a newspaper on the table. The headline described the death of a prominent historian whose body had been discovered in a burned-out church. Evelyn became still. She recognised the name. Professor Nathaniel Reed.

Her next chosen sacrifice.

"You killed him."

Gabriel shrugged.

"I improved your plan."

"He was mine."

"People aren't possessions, darling."

She looked at him with something close to hatred.

"Coming from you, that's rather amusing."

Gabriel leaned across the table.

"I was getting bored watching you play with stones and feathers."

Evelyn's voice remained perfectly calm.

"Then perhaps you should have paid attention to what the stones were telling me."

He laughed.

"What? That your imaginary spirits are angry?"

Something changed in her expression.

"Never mock them."

"Or what?"

She looked towards the darkened doorway. Behind Gabriel stood the little boy from her visions, bruised and trembling. His mouth opened. He burns everything he loves. Evelyn closed her eyes.

When she opened them again, the boy was gone. And she knew precisely what she had to do.

Detective Mercer found the connection three days later. A silver charm had been recovered near one of the Rune Killer's victims, bearing the same distinctive engraving as an object discovered amid the ashes of a Devil Killer crime scene. Further investigation led to a specialist historical exhibition that both Evelyn Vale and Gabriel Cross attended.

A photograph showed them standing together, smiling as husband and wife.

Mercer stared at it for a long time.

"My God."

Price leaned over his shoulder.

"You don't think..."

"I think we've been looking for two monsters."

He turned the photograph towards her.

"And they've been sleeping in the same bed."

On the evening the police prepared their raid, Evelyn cooked Gabriel's favourite meal. The dining room was glowing with candlelight, and a fire burned in the marble fireplace. She had dressed in white, her silver necklace glinting in the light whenever she moved. Gabriel watched her pour the wine.

"What's the occasion?"

"Our anniversary."

"We've only been married nine months."

"Not our wedding anniversary."

She smiled.

"The anniversary of the day you first killed someone."

Gabriel's expression stiffened.

"How do you know that date?"

"The voices told me."

He sighed.

"Not this again."

Evelyn placed her glass down.

"Do you know what the runes have been showing me?"

"Enlighten me."

"That love is not always about keeping someone."

She rose slowly.

"Sometimes love demands a sacrifice."

Gabriel glanced towards the dining-room door. It was locked. He hadn't heard her turn the key.

"What have you done?"

Evelyn stepped towards him.

"Do you remember our first conversation? You asked whether evil was born or created." Gabriel attempted to stand, but his legs gave way beneath him. He grabbed the edge of the table as the room began to tilt. His eyes fell upon the wine.

"You poisoned me."

"Only enough to make you listen."

Outside, rain struck the windows. Evelyn knelt next to him.

"I loved you, Gabriel. I think a piece of me still does. But the voices warned me that you would destroy everything we created."

He tried to reach for her. She moved away.

"You killed Nathaniel. You spoiled the ceremony."

"You're insane," he whispered.

Evelyn tilted her head.

"Perhaps. But you married me."

She took a small ceremonial blade from beneath the table. Gabriel began laughing, although his vocal tone sounded thick and unsteady.

"You think you're better than me?"

"No."

She stroked his cheek.

"That's what makes this so beautiful."

A pounding came from the front door.

"POLICE! OPEN UP!"

Gabriel's laughter stopped. Evelyn looked towards the hallway.

"They're early."

The doors shuddered beneath a heavy impact. Mercer's voice rang through the house.

"EVELYN VALE! GABRIEL CROSS! ARMED POLICE!"

Gabriel dragged himself towards the fireplace.
j
"You stupid bitch," he snarled. "You've destroyed us."

Evelyn watched him with silent sadness.

"No, Gabriel. I saved us."

She drew the blade across her own palm, allowing the blood to fall upon the dining-room floor, where she had already inscribed a circle of runes beneath the table. The house seemed to tremble. The flames in the fireplace turned an unnatural tone of blue. From somewhere deep beneath the floorboards came the sound of a child cackling.

Mercer entered the dining room moments later. Gabriel lay unconscious beside the fireplace. Evelyn sat calmly at the table; her hands folded in her lap. Every candle had burned down to its holder, although Mercer could have sworn they had been lit only seconds earlier.

"Show me your hands."

She complied. Blood dripped from her open palm.

"Where's the weapon?"

"On the table."

Mercer signalled to the officers behind him. Then he noticed the symbols painted across the floor. Twelve runes. A circle of red thread. And between Evelyn and Gabriel, a thirteenth symbol, one he had never encountered.

"What does that mean?" he asked.

Evelyn looked down.

"Marriage."

Mercer frowned.

"You're both under arrest for multiple murders."

"I know."

"You'll spend the rest of your lives in prison."

She smiled.

"Do you think prison walls are capable of keeping everything inside?"

Before Mercer could answer, Gabriel began screaming. Not in pain. In terror. He stared towards the corner of the room, wherein the shadows had gathered into the shape of a small boy.

"Father?" he whispered.

Mercer followed his gaze. There was nobody there. But the room had grown impossibly cold. Then Gabriel screamed again. This time, the voice that came from his mouth was not his own.

Blood remembers. The fireplace erupted. Every window in the dining room shattered inward. And Evelyn began to laugh.

The official report described what happened next as an electrical fire, aggravated by a damaged chimney and an unidentified accelerant. Three officers suffered smoke inhalation. Detective Mercer sustained burns to his hands. Gabriel Cross died at the scene. Evelyn Vale survived.

She was later convicted of seven murders and sentenced to life imprisonment. During her trial, she showed little emotion, answering questions politely and occasionally smiling at members of the jury. When asked why she had killed her husband, she simply replied.

"Because he was never meant to leave me."

The newspapers called them The Devil Couple. Their story evolved into a national obsession. Psychologists debated whether Evelyn's visions were symptoms of mental illness or elaborate justifications for cruelty. Others questioned whether Gabriel's violent childhood explained his behaviour, or whether he had always possessed the capacity for evil.

Mercer listened to none of it.

He had perceived something that night he could neither understand nor explain. Something no official report mentioned. After Gabriel's body had been removed, investigators discovered a strange marking upon his chest, a rune.

ᚷ

Gebo.

The symbol of partnership. Except the skin beneath the symbol was unburned, and the surrounding flesh had been burnt to ash.

Nine months later, Evelyn gave birth to a son in the prison hospital. She had concealed her pregnancy during the investigation, and the authorities ordered the child's identity sealed to protect him from the notoriety of his parents. Evelyn held him for eleven minutes. He was beautiful, with dark hair and solemn grey eyes. She kissed his forehead.

"My darling boy," she spoke quietly. "You came back."

The nurse standing beside the bed frowned.

"Back?"

Evelyn grinned.

"His father promised he would."

The baby opened his eyes. For a moment, his gaze turned towards the empty corner of the room. Then he began to laugh. The nurse experienced an inexplicable chill.

"We need to take him now, Evelyn."

She reluctantly surrendered the child. As the nurse carried him towards the door, Evelyn began humming an old nursery rhyme her grandmother had taught her. Blood to blood and bone to bone, no child of darkness walks alone. What the father burns away, the mother's runes shall call to stay. The nurse hurried from the room.

Behind her, Evelyn's laughter resounded down the corridor.

The child was placed with a foster family under a different name. His new parents knew nothing of his origins. He grew into a quiet, observant boy who rarely cried and seemed unusually fascinated by patterns. At school, his teachers praised his intelligence, although they sometimes remarked upon his unsettling habit of staring at empty spaces as though listening to someone speak.

On his seventh birthday, he disappeared from his foster parents' garden. They found him beneath an old yew tree. He was kneeling in the earth, digging with his bare hands. When his foster mother asked what he was doing, he looked up with an expression of extraordinary calm.

"There's a lady underneath."

She felt the blood drain from her face.

"What lady, sweetheart?"

"The one who keeps calling my name."

He opened his small hand. Within lay a silver charm attached to a length of faded red thread; a single rune was engraved on it.

ᚷ

His foster mother stared at the object.

"Where did you get that?"

The boy smiled.

"Daddy gave it to me."

"But your daddy's inside making your birthday cake."

He shook his head.

"Not that daddy."

Then he turned towards the tree. Someone was standing beneath its branches. A tall man with dark hair and a fire-scarred face. Beside him stood a little girl in a white dress, her bare feet covered in soil. The boy reached towards them.

His foster mother saw nothing, only the branches moving against a windless sky.

"Come inside, darling," she said in a low voice.

The boy looked at her and smiled with such complete sweetness that, for a moment, she forgot her fear.

"All right, Mummy."

She took his hand. As they walked back towards the house, she failed to notice the mark beginning to appear upon the inside of his wrist. A thin red line. Then another. Until the lines formed a symbol.

ᛉ

Algiz.

It served as a symbol of protection, or perhaps, depending on who was interpreting it, a warning.

That night, after the house had fallen silent, the boy was awakened by the sound of a woman's voice beside his bed.

Underneath, darling.

He sat up. The bedroom was empty.

Underneath. Where he left me.

He looked beneath the bed. In the darkness, two eyes opened. And a voice, kind and familiar, whispered.

"Hello, my son."