

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” she said. “You blame yourself for Ingrid’s death. You have from the start, even if you won’t admit it. I can see it in your eyes every time someone says her name. Maybe now you can stop beating yourself up over it.”

“If I’d known about the homunculus . . .”

“You couldn’t have,” she said. “It’s not your fault Reve Azrael used the homunculus to find us. It’s not your fault you weren’t there when the shadowborn came. You need to start believing that, or the guilt will eat away at you. Believe me, I know. Guilt was a constant companion throughout my childhood. When I wasn’t busy hating my parents for abandoning me, I was busy blaming myself for driving them away. The guilt ate away at me a little more every day, until I couldn’t feel anything else. Don’t let it do the same to you. Find a way to move past it.”

“That’s easier said than done.”

“Maybe,” she said, “but it’s worth it.” She turned away from me again and took off her vest. Beneath it was a dark blue, formfitting turtleneck top. The material was snug, clinging to the planes and curves of her body like a second skin, and it turned sheer where it stretched across her shoulders. I could just make out the phoenix tattoo covering her back, bisected by the black band of her bra.

I caught myself staring and looked away. “The others are waiting downstairs. I should probably—”

“You okay? You sound weird.” She turned around to face me again. Her eyes were as bright and blue as the clearest water.

“I’m fine,” I managed to say.

She handed me a small cardboard box about the size of a wallet. “Here, this is for you.” I opened the box. Inside were seven nine-millimeter bullets. I grinned about a mile wide. “I found it in one of the drawers and thought of you. They probably won’t do you much good, but I figured you might like them anyway. If I didn’t know better, I’d say your gun was your talisman.”

I loaded them into the clip of my gun. “First the amulet, now this,” I said. “What would I do without you, Bethany?”

“Probably die a lot more,” she said.

I looked into her eyes again. She looked back at me. Something passed between us then, a moment where it felt like I could do or say anything

because anything was possible. I opened my mouth to speak, not even sure what was going to come out, but the oracles' words started banging around in my head again. *Danger. Threat. Abomination. A man that is not a man.* I closed my mouth again. Who was I kidding? Bethany wouldn't waste her time on someone like me. I felt like a fool, and the moment was gone.

"We should get downstairs," she said. She put on her vest, its pockets bulging with charms. We went downstairs in silence.

Downstairs, the main room was still a shambles from Reve Azrael's attack, the floor covered in shattered crystal obelisks, books knocked from their shelves, and broken statuettes, all covered in a coarse layer of ash. The others had already gathered amid the mess. Gabrielle was holding a morningstar she'd taken from Isaac's vault, weighing the balance of the spiky-headed mace in her good hand. Philip had a long-handled broadsword, its elaborate hilt carved in the shape of a roaring dragon's head. The vampire was covered head to toe in a flowing black hooded cloak to protect him from the sun. Even his hands were shielded inside black gloves. If I didn't already know him, I would have found him terrifying.

Isaac came up and tossed me a staff. "Catch!"

It was the Anubis Hand, new and improved. The blackened, mummified fist had been mounted to the tip of a metal staff this time. I tapped the staff against the floor. It was solid, strong. There was no way this one was getting chopped in half.

Isaac checked his watch and addressed the group. "Two hours until the equinox. Two hours to stop Stryge from waking up and destroying New York City. I'm not going to lie to you, this isn't going to be easy, and it isn't going to be safe. We're severely outnumbered by Reve Azrael's revenants and the Black Knight's gargoyles. I can't guarantee we're all going to come home from this, or that any of us will. I wanted to take a moment to tell you that you've all done your jobs remarkably well. I couldn't be prouder to work with each one of you. But what we're about to do is more dangerous than any job I've sent you on. This isn't like securing an artifact. This is Stryge we're talking about. He has all the powers of an Ancient, and he revels in death and destruction. If something goes wrong and Stryge is awakened, there's no amount of money I can pay you that'll be worth the danger you'd face."

"This isn't about money, not anymore," Gabrielle said.

Isaac nodded. “A very wise man once told me there comes a time when you have to rise up and make a stand, even if no one else will. I didn’t listen. I sent you all out into danger instead. You risked your lives for me, while I hung back. No more. But this is the most dangerous thing I have ever asked you to do, so if you have any reservations, if you’ve changed your mind about coming, leave now. The door’s right over there. No one would blame you.” He looked at each of us. No one spoke. No one left.

“Fun speech,” Philip said. “So, are you gonna drive, or am I?”

Philip drove us north on the West Side Highway toward Fort Tryon Park. Seated in the back of the Escalade, I watched the city roll by and gripped the staff tightly. I didn’t know what would be waiting for us on the other end of the ride, but I had some nasty ideas. Were we strong enough to handle it? Prepared enough? I wondered if this was the same trepidation Willem Van Lente had felt as he’d approached the battlefield to face Stryge four hundred years ago.

It was Willem Van Lente’s own fist that had become the Anubis Hand. He’d used magic—dangerous magic—to transform his own flesh into a weapon. The more I thought about that and everything it implied, the more the puzzle pieces slid into place.

The oracles were right when they said Willem Van Lente was still alive. And if I was right, he would be at Stryge’s tomb today, too.

Up front, in the passenger seat, Isaac shared his plan. “Reve Azrael will most likely have already gone underground to the tomb by the time we get there, but it’s a sure thing Melanthius will be lurking somewhere close, acting as lookout. We can use that to our advantage. Wherever Melanthius is, Reve Azrael won’t be far. He’s our signpost. Find him, and we’ll find Stryge’s tomb.”

Fort Tryon Park sat at the north end of Manhattan like a small island of green amid a vast sea of concrete, nature’s last gasp at the top of an overdeveloped urban landscape. The Cloisters loomed over the treeline in the distance as we approached, an enormous brick and stone Gothic fortress. When we reached the park, we pulled into the public parking lot.

The lot was surprisingly crowded. It took us a few minutes to find a parking spot, weaving through the cars and big white trailers before we

finally found a space to pull into. A family walked by, two parents and three kids, the father pushing the smallest one in a stroller. Isaac shook his head. "Damn it. I didn't think there would be this many people here today. We have to be careful."

We got out of the Escalade and started toward the park entrance. Philip pulled the hood of his cloak lower over his head to keep himself protected from the sun. The people standing by their cars watched us as we passed. Their eyes went to Gabrielle's morningstar, my staff, Philip's cloak and sword, but instead of doing something sane like backing away and calling the cops, they just nodded and gave us the thumbs-up. I scowled at them, confused, but kept walking.

"The Cloisters are on the other side of the park from where we are now," Isaac said. "That gives us a lot of ground to cover. Keep your eyes open and your weapons handy. Melanthius is out there somewhere, and I'm guessing the Black Knight is, too."

"Piece of cake," I said. "How hard can it be to spot a man in a wizard's cloak or a knight in armor? They'll stick out like a sore thumb."

Then I looked up and froze.

A dense throng of people waited at the park entrance. There were men in tights and doublets, cloaks, chainmail, and full suits of armor, and women in Renaissance gowns and cone-shaped princess hats. Above them, a banner stretched from one side of the park entrance to the other. It read, WELCOME TO THE MEDIEVAL FESTIVAL AT FORT TRYON PARK.

"Oh," I said.

## Thirty-six

We entered the park, trying not to draw attention to ourselves, but after a couple of minutes it was obvious no one was giving us a second look. There were others in the crowd drawing much more attention than we were, women in colorful, cleavage-baring satin corsets and men dressed as knights riding upon flag-draped horses. There were Renaissance noblemen chatting on cell phones, and armor-plated squires gnawing on oversized barbecued turkey legs. Children ran by with foam rubber swords, giggling with delight, followed by a handful of adults walking with poleaxes and sheathed sabers that looked a lot more real. I caught a glimpse of a man in a peaked, storybook-style wizard's hat, a curved wooden pipe in his mouth and a whittled walking stick in his hand. He reminded me of the twins in the photo of the Five-Pointed Star. It made me wonder if there were others at the festival who were like us, walking unnoticed amid the thousands who had no idea magic was real. What would the festivalgoers think if they knew? If they understood how dangerous magic was?

When I read *The Ragana's Revenge*, I'd scoffed at the idea that magic could be real. I wished now that I'd had the chance to finish the book before losing it in the fire. Seeing as how my life had started to mirror the novel in ways I never would have imagined, it suddenly felt very important to know whether or not it had a happy ending.

We followed the paved path deeper into the park, surrounded on either side by booths of jewelers, gamers, purveyors of period clothing, and one booth labeled, oddly, YE OLDE LONG DISTANCE SERVICE, where a woman wearing a velvet gown and a wreath of flowers in her hair took customers'

applications on a decidedly anachronistic laptop. So much for escapism, I thought. The path was so packed with festivalgoers that we could only move at a crawl. As I weaved my way through, I almost collided with a group of college-aged men and women in forest-green tunics and dresses. They laughed at some private joke and touched their comically big, prosthetic pointed elf ears to check that they were on straight.

Next to me, Bethany adjusted her hair self-consciously.

A flash of red caught my eye in a small field just past the booths, where the crowd was less thick. A figure in a hooded red cloak was moving swiftly across the grass, his face hidden from me. He wasn't browsing the booths or studiously checking the festival-grounds map like the others around him. He walked with speed and purpose, definitely heading somewhere specific.

Melanthius. I took off at a sprint after him.

"Trent, wait!" Isaac shouted after me, but I wasn't about to let Reve Azrael's manservant get away.

I zigzagged through the crowd and ducked past a blacksmith presentation at the edge of the path. I tried to keep my eyes on Melanthius as I ran, but every time I thought I was close, I lost him in the crowd, only to catch a glimpse of his red cloak again even farther away. I ran up the grassy hill toward him. Suddenly a unicorn appeared in my way, snorting and stamping one hoof. I paused, startled, then realized it wasn't a unicorn at all, just a white horse with a long fake horn attached to a part of the bridle that covered its forehead. The long-haired, long-gowned woman riding atop it smiled down at the children who had gathered around her, blocking my path. I went around them and kept running. Ahead, Melanthius had paused near the edge of the forest, his back to me. I ran up, grabbed him by the shoulders of his cloak, and spun him around to face me.

A startled man with fat, ruddy cheeks and a patchy beard gaped back at me from inside the hood.

I let him go. "Sorry, I thought you were someone else."

"The fuck is wrong with you, dude?" He walked off cursing as the others came running up behind me.

"It wasn't Melanthius," I said.

"I can see that," Isaac replied angrily. "Don't go running off like that again. We need to stick together."

I scanned the crowd, only halflistening. I saw red cloaks everywhere—on a teenage boy walking by, on a young woman buying something at a jewelry booth, on an older woman standing near the path and singing madrigals. “We’re never going to find him in this crowd,” I said.

A loud scream startled us. We took off running, following the commotion to the side of the park grounds, where a low stone wall overlooked the Hudson River. A crowd had gathered by the wall, pointing at the Palisades cliffs across the water. A thick, dark gray column billowed out of a cave in the cliffside and drifted across the river toward the park.

“Is that smoke?” Isaac asked.

“No,” I said. “It’s gargoyles.”

There were hundreds of them, all pouring out of the cave en masse and stretching like a ribbon across the sky. They followed the path of the river northward, flying inside a thick cloudlike cover of steam. It took me a moment to realize what the steam was. Their flesh was burning in the sunlight. They must have been in immense pain, but they had their orders direct from their king, and from what Jibril-khan had told me, if they didn’t obey they would end up dead. This was the Black Knight’s endgame, his final push to acquire Stryge’s power for himself, and he wasn’t the kind to let a tiny detail like his subjects’ painful aversion to sunlight stop him.

“We have to get everyone out of the park, right now,” Isaac said. “Philip, Gabrielle, you’re with me. Bethany and Trent, you follow the gargoyles, find out where they’re going. If I’m right, we won’t need Melanthius after all. The gargoyles will lead us right to Stryge’s tomb.”

The three of them took off, shouting at everyone they saw to evacuate the park. Bethany and I ran north with the gargoyles. In the distance, the single tower of the Cloisters peeked over the trees like the battlements of a mighty castle. The gargoyles were making a beeline right for it.

We ran past the tournament field, a long meadow of grass and dirt enclosed by a semicircle of portable bleachers on one end and a small picket fence on the other. I caught a glimpse of the jousting tournament inside, a man in an armored breastplate and plumed cap atop a chestnut stallion. He was holding a lance in front of him and galloping toward his opponent. The bleachers were filled with hundreds of cheering festivalgoers, oblivious to the gargoyle army flying past. I hoped like hell the gargoyles

stayed over the river and didn't come inland. The people here were sitting ducks, locked in by the bleachers and the fence with only a handful of narrow exits. If the gargoyles chose to attack, it would be a massacre.

But they ignored the tournament field and kept flying. Finally, they turned inland, sailing over the forest that surrounded the Cloisters. Bethany and I followed them, running into the woods and up a hill. At the top of the hill, Bethany stifled a cry of surprise, and we both skidded to a halt.

Below, the woods were filled with revenants, more than I'd ever seen in one place. There had to be a hundred of them, all shambling toward the Cloisters. They wore leather sheaths on their backs, and as one they stopped and turned their ragged forms toward us, until we were looking out upon a field of glowing red eyes. I reached for my gun, but as a great shadow fell over them, I realized it wasn't us that had caught their attention.

Overhead, a pack of gargoyles had broken away from the others. They swooped down through the treetops and attacked the revenants with their claws, teeth, and tusks. Undeterred, the revenants fought back, pulling machetes from the sheaths on their backs and hacking at the gargoyles.

Bethany grabbed my arm and started pulling me away. "Come on! Back this way!"

I looked up. The sky was filled with gargoyles flying toward the Cloisters. The ones at the head of group had already reached the tower and were circling it like a funnel cloud. "But the tomb, we must be close," I said.

"We'll never make it," she insisted. "You saw all those people back there in the bleachers. It's only a matter of time before the fight spills over to where they are. You think either side cares how many humans get caught in the crossfire? We have to get them out of there before it's too late."

I took one last look at the battlefield below, already running with gargoyle blood and littered with chunks of mangled revenants, then ran with Bethany back to the tournament field. We squeezed through the narrow gaps between bleachers to get inside. There were three hundred people in those seats, at the very least. There was no way the two of us could get them all out of there as fast as we needed to.

Bethany looked overwhelmed. "What are we going to do?"

On the other side of the field was a dais where a man dressed as a medieval king was announcing the tournament standings into a microphone.

"There," I said, pointing. "That mic is the only way we're going to reach everyone."

"But what are you going to—?" she started to ask, but I was already running out onto the field. I darted between the horses as they galloped toward each other, the chestnut stallion rearing in surprise and throwing its rider. The other horse, a black mare, whinnied and slid to a quick stop. I kept running. Security guards appeared from the sidelines, chasing after me. I broke for the dais, raced up the stairs beside it, and hip-checked the announcer away from the microphone.

I grabbed the mic with my free hand and raised the Anubis Hand with the other to make sure I had the crowd's attention. "Everyone! You need to get out of here! Clear the stands!"

A murmur rippled through the crowd, peppered with a few nervous chuckles and some drunken applause, but no one moved.

"Damn it, listen to me! You have to get out of here *now*! You're all in danger!"

Below, the security guards surrounded the dais but didn't climb the steps. They barked into walkie-talkies, and a moment later a cluster of police officers came out onto the tournament field, walking toward me. On instinct, my chest tightened at the sight of them, but I pushed the feeling away. This time, the cops were just what I needed. Provided they would listen to me.

"Officers, you have to evacuate the park, everyone is in danger!" I shouted into the microphone.

The cops kept coming toward me. One look at their stern, stony faces told me they didn't care what I had to say. Their hands hovered at their belts between their guns and their handcuffs, waiting until the last minute to decide which one they'd need to subdue the raving nut with the big metal stick.

I stepped back from the mic and looked around, trying to find a way out. The security guards were still at the bottom of the steps, blocking any exit that way. On my other side, the costumed announcer had found his courage and grabbed the mic again.

"No need to worry, folks. We'll get the show back up and running in a moment," he said. The crowd cheered. The announcer looked at me, then said into the mic, "Just another reason they shouldn't serve alcohol at these things anymore. Am I right?" The cheers turned to boos.

The cops looked up at me from the field below. One of them spoke around the wad of chewing gum he was working over, "Drop the metal pipe, sir, and come on down."

I backed away, clutching the staff tight. I had to make them listen, but I didn't know how. "Please, get them out of here!"

The cop sighed. "I don't like having to repeat myself, sir." The group of officers started toward the dais stairs.

A commotion arose at the far end of the field. A handful of gargoyles and revenants smashed suddenly through the low picket fence and onto the tournament field, locked in a desperate struggle. It was too late. The fight had spilled over already.

The officers, not understanding what they were seeing, ran toward the fight to break it up. "No, get back!" I yelled, but it was too late. As soon as the officers got close, the revenants attacked them with their machetes, hacking them to pieces.

Like a spark hitting a tinderbox, it set off a scream of terror through the crowd. People stampeded for the exits. The costumed announcer jumped off the dais and ran across the field, where the horses were panicking, kicking and running in circles. The jousters didn't stick around to try to calm their horses before scrambling away. But only one end of the field was safe from the battle, the side with the bleachers, and the exits between them were too narrow. People pushed and shoved, and before long shouts of pain and anger joined the screams of terror. It was pandemonium.

I jumped off the dais, gripping the Anubis Hand tight in case any gargoyles came at me. I scanned the surrounding chaos for Bethany, but I didn't see her anywhere.

A vast shadow fell over the tournament field, as if something immense had passed over the sun. I looked up. The whole sky swarmed with gargoyles, so many that the heavens themselves were blotted out, relegated to bright flashes of blue between the winged bodies overhead.

"Bethany!" I shouted, looking for her again. Then, finally, I spotted her near the other end of the field. She was helping an older woman with a cane out of the stands and away from the fight. I started running toward her. Bethany got the woman to the nearest exit, then saw me. She started toward me across the field, shouting something I couldn't hear over the din.

A flash of black caught my eye. A dozen crows descended from the sky and swooped down to the field. A moment later they were gone. In their place was the Black Knight, sitting astride his armored black horse.

Right behind Bethany.

I shouted, "Look out!"

She looked over her shoulder, saw the Black Knight, and started running. The Black Knight urged his horse into a gallop, chasing after her.

"No!" I shouted, running toward them. "It's me you want! Leave her alone!"

The Black Knight drew his sword.

Damn it, they were too far away. I heard the distressed whinny of another horse and saw the chestnut stallion standing nearby, digging a hoof in the dirt and flicking his tail nervously. I grabbed the saddle strap, hooked a foot into the stirrup, and swung myself up into the saddle. The jousting horse had left his shield behind, hooked to the saddle on the horse's back. Perfect. I picked it up in my free hand. It was made of a thin metal, possibly tin. Fine for a jousting exhibition, but not so great against the Black Knight's sword. Still, it was better than nothing, and I didn't have time to complain. The Black Knight was already bearing down on Bethany.

I leveled the Anubis Hand in front of me, a makeshift metal lance with a mummified human fist for a point, and squeezed my knees together to signal the horse to move. The stallion broke into a gallop, his panic subsided as his training took over.

"Over here!" I shouted. "I'm right here, you overgrown tin can!"

But I was still too far away. The Black Knight swung his sword, the barbed blade striking Bethany in the back. She cried out in pain, her legs giving out beneath her, and fell facedown to the ground.

My heart crammed into my throat. I couldn't breathe, couldn't release the anguished cry building like a head of steam inside me.

Bethany lay still in the dirt. Very, very still.

My lips pulled back in an angry snarl. I spurred the horse to run faster. The Black Knight turned the impassive, expressionless face of his helmet toward me just as I bashed the Anubis Hand into his chest. I'd hoped to knock him off his horse, but the Black Knight only rocked in his saddle a moment. Then I was past him, the chestnut stallion's momentum taking

me several yards away before I managed to slow the horse and turn him around.

The Black Knight charged at me, the pounding hooves of his night-black horse throwing up divots of dirt and grass. He held his sword high, ready to strike. I spurred my horse to a gallop, the stallion's taut muscles flexing beneath me as I closed the gap between us. The Black Knight swung his sword. I raised the metal staff to block it. The blade clanged against it, nearly knocking it out of my hand. Then we were past each other as our horses continued galloping.

I turned my horse around. The Black Knight did the same, and we rode at each other once more. This time the Black Knight knocked the staff out of my hand completely, and as we passed each other, he brought his sword around to strike again. It crashed against my shield with more force than I'd expected, throwing me off my horse. The shield went flying. I landed hard on my back in the grass. Apparently, I didn't have much of a future in jousting.

Or maybe not much of a future at all. The Black Knight slowed his horse and dismounted. The chestnut stallion deserted me, galloping off to the other end of the field. I couldn't blame him; just then I wanted to be on the other end of the field, too. The Black Knight held his sword in both gauntlets and walked toward me, his heavy boots flattening the grass beneath them.

I stood up, holding my head. It felt like the fall had knocked something loose in there. "Wait," I said.

The Black Knight swung the sword at me. I jumped back, narrowly avoiding getting cut in half at the stomach.

I put my hands up as if to ward him off. "Whoa! I thought you wanted me alive. What happened to stealing my power for yourself?"

He swung again, and I jumped back to avoid the blade. Clearly he wasn't interested anymore. Maybe he'd decided I wasn't as enticing a source of power as Stryge. It was hard to feel bad playing the bridesmaid in that particular contest, but unfortunately it meant the Black Knight had no use for me anymore, no reason not to hack me to pieces.

"Stop," I said. "I know who you are. I figured it out. It doesn't have to be like this."

The sword cut through the air at my midsection as I jumped back

again. The Black Knight came forward, his metal boots stomping the dirt.

“Please, listen to me,” I said. “No one put it together before because the clues weren’t all there. They didn’t know you were still alive, or that you’d forgotten your own name. Four hundred years ago, an alchemist vanished from Fort Verhulst. It was you, but you didn’t vanish, you snuck out to go fight Stryge, to stop him from killing your fellow Dutch settlers. You made the Anubis Hand so you could save your home and the people you cared about. You’re Willem Van Lente.” I pointed at the staff lying in the grass. “The fist on the end of that staff is *yours*.”

The Black Knight swung again, and I jumped back again. I wished I knew how much more room I had behind me, but I didn’t dare take my eyes off him to turn around. I hoped I wasn’t about to pin myself against the bleachers.

“In order to fight an Ancient like Stryge, you had to carry so much magic inside you. Every spell you could think of,” I said. “But after the Shift, that was a dangerous thing to do. All that magic changed you. It turned you into this.”

He swung again. I couldn’t tell if he was listening, but I refused to believe it didn’t matter to him. I refused to believe I couldn’t get through to him.

“In time, the infection twisted your mind. It made you forget who you are, forget everything about yourself. Except, maybe not *everything*. Somehow you remembered there were still people out there who could connect the Black Knight to Willem Van Lente, so you went back to Fort Verhulst, and you killed them. The infection made you kill the very same people you fought to protect.”

The sword cut through the air again, so close I could feel the breeze it made against my shirt.

“Willem, damn it, listen to me!” I yelled. “The infection made you forget the battle with Stryge. It made you forget so completely, buried the knowledge of how you did it so deeply, that even the oracles couldn’t see it. You forgot the man you used to be, the *good* man. You forgot your own name.”

The Black Knight drew back his sword to swing again, but hesitated. Was I finally getting through to him?

"I told you it doesn't have to be like this. We can help you, Willem. If there's a way back, we can help you find it, but first we need your help. Reve Azrael is about to wake Stryge up and undo everything you did. Please, you've got to help us. You're the only one who can."

The Black Knight tilted his helmet as though he were listening.

"I know how hard this is," I said. "Believe me, I know better than anyone, because we're in the same boat, you and me. Because if you want to put things right, if you want to save the city you love again . . . all you have to do is remember who you were."

The Black Knight regarded me in stoic silence.

"There's got to be something left inside you, Willem," I said. "Some part of you that still gives a damn."

By way of an answer, he drove his sword into my stomach.

I gasped and fell to my knees. The sword's hilt and half the blade stuck out of my body like a third appendage. Blood poured out of me. The Black Knight pulled the sword out again, the barbs on the back of the blade shredding my insides even more. If the sword hurt going in, it was a hundred times more painful coming out. The Black Knight backed up a step but didn't leave, preferring to watch me die. I looked up at him, desperately searching the cold, emotionless black helmet for some sign of the man he used to be, but there was nothing left of him in it. The infection had destroyed everything of the man he'd been, and replaced it with madness and cruelty.

The oracles were wrong. Willem Van Lente had died a long time ago.

I fell backward, landing right next to one of the bleachers. Bethany's charm rattled against my chest under my shirt. As blackness crawled from the corners of my vision to spread over everything, I caught a glimpse of four small faces staring in horror at me from under the bleachers. They were children, three boys and a girl, their faces streaked with dirt and tears. They must have been hiding there since the moment all hell broke loose. They were so close I could reach out and touch them—too close, and too frightened to run.

Oh God, no, not again. In my mind I saw the little boy in the crack house, dead in his mother's arms, and then the darkness came to swallow me whole.

## Thirty-seven

I gasped air into my lungs and opened my eyes. I didn't know where I was. I'd been dead again, that much I could tell, but what had happened? Above me, the sky was dark, rippling and swelling as though I were looking at an ocean wave from the bottom of the sea. A moment later, my vision cleared. What I'd thought was the sky was actually a mass of gargoyles circling overhead.

I looked down and saw a hole in the front of my shirt. The whole lower half of my shirt was soaked with blood, but as usual, I had come back whole and uninjured. I sat up quickly, the memories rushing back. The Black Knight was already gone, I saw, a dozen crows flying up into the gargoyle-filled sky.

I turned and looked under the bleachers, dreading the sight of a mummified husk of a child, but the four kids were still there, all of them still alive. Relieved, I let out a sigh. Amazingly, miraculously—impossibly—Bethany's charm had worked. The children shrieked at the sight of me, this big, blood-soaked man who'd come back from the dead before their eyes. It was enough to finally get them to leave their hiding place and run for safety.

I pulled myself up to my feet, still sore and disoriented. The tournament field was empty. The crowd had dispersed. The fighting gargoyles and revenants were gone, leaving their fallen behind. Bethany lay face-down in the grass farther down the field. I started toward her and heard what I thought was a cough. She moved, just slightly, and coughed again. I broke into a run, and knelt down beside her. I could see the wound on

her back, only it wasn't what I'd expected. The Black Knight's sword had cut through her cargo vest and shirt, but beneath it, her skin was unbroken. There was no injury, no blood, just the fiery feathers of her phoenix tattoo peeking out at me.

"You're alive! Oh my God, you're alive!" I couldn't stop myself from laughing with relief.

I turned her over gently and cradled her against my knees. She blinked at me, groggy. "Trent? What happened?" She glanced around the tournament field. "Where's the Black Knight?"

"He killed me and left," I said.

"How rude of him," she said fuzzily. Then she shook her head clear and said, "Wait, what?"

"The amulet worked, Bethany. No one died when I came back," I said. "By all counts, you should have been dead, too, but the blow only knocked you unconscious. I think your tattoo saved you."

"Don't be absurd," she said. "The sigil of the phoenix only protects me from magic, not from swords."

She had a point. So why hadn't the Black Knight's sword cut her in two? It had sliced through the chassis of my Explorer like it was cream cheese. A single swipe had knocked a police car right off the road. The sword could probably cut *anything*, so why had it spared her? I didn't know. And frankly, at the moment I didn't care why it hadn't killed her, I was just relieved that it hadn't.

I looked down into her eyes, marveling again at how bright and clear they were. "For a while there, I thought I'd lost you," I said. "I didn't like it."

"It wasn't a whole lot of fun for me, either," she said. If she meant to say anything after that, she didn't have the chance. I was already kissing her. It'd been building up in me, riding the crest of the immense relief I'd felt that she was still alive, and I simply couldn't contain it anymore. I kissed her, and she put one hand on my cheek and the other on my neck, smaller and warmer than any hands I'd ever known. She pulled me closer, kissing me with a ferocity I hadn't expected from her. Time seemed to slow, then stop altogether. But then she broke away, and pushed me gently back. "Wait. I—I can't do this."

I wasn't expecting that. I leaned back on my haunches, confused. "I'm sorry, I thought . . ."

“Don’t,” she said. “This is hard enough already, please just let me say this, okay? Remember what you told me when you left, how you weren’t any good to anyone until you knew for sure that Underwood was out of your life? Well, I’ve got something like that, too, something that makes me no good to anyone either until I can put it behind me.”

I nodded. I had a feeling I knew what it was. “Your parents,” I said.

She nodded back at me. “I have to know who they were, what happened to them. I can’t get involved with you, Trent. I can’t get involved with *anyone* until I can put it to rest. It’s too big, it takes up too much of me. There’s just no room for anyone else right now. I’m sorry. Does that make sense?”

I sighed. It did make sense. If anyone could understand what it was like having big questions hanging over you, it was me. “Just do me a favor and let me know when some space opens up in your life again. Because this thing we were doing just now? I kind of want to do that some more.”

She laughed, her cheeks reddening, and brushed her hair back from her face. “I’ll take it under consideration. Provided Stryge doesn’t kill us all first.”

She had a good point. We were running out of time, and we still hadn’t figured out how the hell we were supposed to stop an unkillable Ancient before he took us all out. Only one man had done it before, and he was so infected he couldn’t even remember—

And then, suddenly, the answer came to me. It was like a lightbulb switching on in my head. I snapped my fingers and said, “The Black Knight’s sword!”

She knit her brow. “What about it?”

“It’s no ordinary sword,” I said. “It’s magic. It’s as much a magical artifact as the Anubis Hand is. I figured out that the Black Knight is Willem Van Lente, or what’s left of him anyway, and that sword must be what he used to cut off Stryge’s head.”

“The Black Knight is Willem Van Lente?”

“Was,” I clarified. “I don’t think there’s anything left of him in there anymore.”

I heard someone call out to us and looked up. Isaac, Philip, and Gabrielle were walking toward us across the field. I stood up, held out my hands to Bethany, and helped her to her feet. Her hands burned warm in mine.

For a moment, our bodies were pressed together. Her breath hitched, and she pulled away quickly.

“Are you two okay?” Isaac asked.

“We’re fine,” she said tersely. We filled them in on everything that had happened.

“Everyone’s evacuating the park,” Isaac said. “We’ve only got half an hour before the equinox, and we still haven’t located the entrance to Stryge’s tomb. Show me the woods where you saw the revenants. They had to be heading *somewhere* before the gargoyles attacked them.”

I picked up the Anubis Hand and started to lead them out of the tournament field. A piercing shriek from far above stopped us in our tracks, followed by more, a cacophony of screeches and cries. In the sky above us, the gargoyles had broken into two warring factions, grappling in midair. The rebellion had begun.

“What the hell is happening up there?” Isaac asked.

“Civil war,” I said. “It’s been a long time coming. Come on, we’d be smart to stay out of the way.”

We returned to the woods and climbed the hill from which Bethany and I had seen the battle between gargoyles and revenants unfold. Below, the forest floor was carpeted with hacked-up gargoyles and shredded revenants. The air smelled foul and coppery from blood. Nothing moved. In the distance, the Cloisters rose like an ancient stronghold. The swarm of gargoyles above it roiled and undulated with clashing factions, their wings steaming in the sunlight. The gargoyle civil war was spreading across the sky.

We descended the hill, making our way carefully through the dead bodies and across the field toward the Cloisters. I stepped over bones and body parts, broken tusks and crushed skulls. Pools of blood sucked at the soles of my boots like mud. This was only the start, I knew. The whole city was on the verge of becoming a killing field. The end of everything was breathing down our necks, and we only had half an hour to stop it.

A flash of movement between the trees caught my eye. A figure in a hooded, bloodred cloak walked quickly in the direction of the Cloisters. He turned to look back at us over his shoulder. A golden skull mask peeked out from within his hood.

“Melanthius!” I took off running.

Melanthius ran, too, weaving confidently through the trees. Apparently he knew the terrain well. He moved fast, but it wasn't hard to keep my eye on him. His vibrant red cloak stuck out against the brown, yellow, and green of the autumn forest. I jumped over tree roots and skirted around boulders, pushing myself faster. Ahead, Melanthius ran toward a rock outcrop in the distance. I hurdled over a log, only taking my eyes off him for a second, but that was all he needed. When I looked up again, Melanthius was gone.

I drew to a halt, breathing hard as the others caught up to me.

"What did I tell you about running off like that?" Isaac said.

"Sorry," I said, scanning the woods for Melanthius's telltale red cloak, but there was no sign of it. Where could he have gone? That cloak was impossible to hide. My eyes went to the rock outcrop again, a formation of boulders poking out of the earth. It was the last place I'd seen Melanthius before I lost him. "Wait here."

I approached the outcrop cautiously, pulling my gun with my free hand. The carpet of dead leaves crinkled loudly under my boots. If Melanthius was waiting for me on the other side of the rocks, he knew I was coming. I circled around to the other side, holding the gun out, ready to fire, but he wasn't there. Instead, I saw an old, rusted iron gate standing framed within the rocks. It was unlocked and slightly ajar. Wide stone steps led down into the dark. I waved the others over.

"Do these stairs go where I think they go?" I asked.

Isaac looked over his shoulder at the Cloisters towering above us. "Stryge's tomb must be right below us," he said. He pulled the gate open wider, its hinges surprisingly quiet considering how old they looked, and we entered, descending the steps inside. The sunlight coming through the open doorway lit the way, but the deeper we went the murkier it got. By the time we reached the bottom, nearly a hundred feet down, there was more shadow than light.

We found ourselves in a wide tunnel of rough-hewn stone that extended off into the inky black distance. The walls were pitted with dark recesses, vaulted nooks that at one time must have held statuary or treasure, but now stood empty.

A shadowy figure stood in the dark before us. I lifted my gun. "Melanthius."

“Not this time,” came a familiar voice. The figure stepped closer, out of the shadows, and Gabrielle gasped.

It was Thornton, his eyes glowing red with Reve Azrael’s magic.

Gabrielle ran at him, hefting the morningstar with her good arm. “Get out of him, you bitch!”

A hulking revenant stepped out of the dark between them. It grabbed Gabrielle’s neck with one beefy hand and yanked the morningstar out of her grasp with the other. More revenants appeared, crawling out of the darkened nooks like roaches. They surrounded us, took our weapons, and tied our hands behind our backs with thick cords of rope. I felt two revenants behind me tightening the knot around my wrists. Others pulled back Philip’s hood and slipped a thin chain over his neck. He cried out and fell to his knees, clutching at the chain until they tied his hands behind his back as well.

“It is silver, vampire, to keep you in your place,” Reve Azrael said. “You will find I do not make the same mistakes twice.”

Isaac struggled to break away from the revenants that had tied his hands. His palms began to sizzle and glow.

“Stay your hand, mage, or my revenant will snap Gabrielle’s neck like a matchstick,” Reve Azrael said. Isaac stopped struggling. The glow faded from his palms. Reve Azrael turned to Gabrielle, who was gasping for air in the revenant’s strangling grip. “That *is* your name, isn’t it? Gabrielle? It’s the name your lover Thornton has for you in his mind, though there are others as well. Private names; names that exist only between you. He has so many memories of you, Gabrielle, each with such strong emotions attached that I feel almost as if they are my own.” With Thornton’s hand she stroked the side of Gabrielle’s face.

Gabrielle flinched away. “If you’re going to kill me, you better do it quick,” she said. “Because if I get free, this time I won’t hesitate. I won’t hold back.”

“No,” Reve Azrael said. “I imagine you wouldn’t.”

The revenant let go of Gabrielle’s neck. She doubled over, coughing, but before she could recover and make a move against Reve Azrael, the revenant pulled her injured arm out of its sling. She cried out in pain as the revenant yanked both her arms back and tied them together.

“You sent Melanthius to lead us right to you,” Isaac said. “Why? What do you want with us?”

“I have use for this one.” Reve Azrael stepped up to me, studying my face. She was so close all I could smell for a moment was the rot of Thornton’s dead body.

“What do you plan to do with the rest us?” Isaac demanded.

“Watch you die,” Reve Azrael answered. A revenant clubbed Isaac in the back of the head with the metal Anubis Hand. The mage fell to the floor, unconscious.

“Stop!” I shouted. “I’ll stay, I’ll do whatever you want, just let the others go.”

“But I already have you, my little fly. Why would I strike a bargain now? I’ve waited so long for this moment. I even prepared for your arrival. As you see, I wanted you to feel at home.”

The revenants behind me spun me around to face them. They were both severely burned, their faces reddened and charred. Yet even grossly disfigured by the fire that had killed them, I recognized them. How could I not?

“How you doin’, T-Bag?” Big Joe’s corpse said. The red glow of Reve Azrael’s magic danced in the burned wreckage of his eyes. Next to him, the corpse of Tomo started laughing.

## Thirty-eight

Watching Tomo and Big Joe's half-burnt corpses laughing at me, I thought I was going crazy. How could they be here? Why? Then, finally, I put it together. I turned back to Reve Azreal. "You're the one who blew up the gas station," I said. "Why? You were keeping tabs on me, you must have known I wasn't there, so why kill Underwood and his crew? Was it just for the thrill of it?"

She didn't answer. "Bring them," she said, and she turned and walked deeper into the tunnel. The revenants pushed us forward. One grabbed the collar of Isaac's duster and dragged the mage's unconscious body behind it like a duffel bag.

"Life, death, it's all just some sick game to you, isn't it?" I called after her. She continued to ignore me.

The tunnel ran for several hundred feet before it terminated in a huge archway. Reve Azrael passed through, and her revenants pushed the rest of us through after her. On the other side was an enormous chamber.

The first thing I saw was the massive throne carved out of rock that stood at the far wall. Seated upon the throne was the headless body of an enormous gargoye, as gray as stone, and chained to the throne by thick metal links that crossed over his chest and looped around his shoulders.

This, I realized, was Stryge. If he'd been standing upright instead of sitting, and if he'd had a head, he would have hit thirty feet tall, easy. But it wasn't just his size that was intimidating. Stryge was so powerful it had taken all the warriors of the Lenape Indian nation and every spell in Wil-

lem Van Lente's arsenal just to chain him to this throne and chop off his head. And even that hadn't killed him, only put him into some kind of supernatural hibernation.

Somehow, it was brighter in the chamber than it had been in the tunnel outside. Looking up, I saw why. Sunlight streamed through a hole far above us in the ceiling, coming in at an angle and hitting the wall to our left like a spotlight. Rings of concentric circles had been carved in the wall, each of them decorated with strange symbols. All but the circle in the center, which had been left blank. Lenape Indian glyphs, I guessed, left by the warriors who'd hidden Stryge's body here. As the sun moved across the sky, its light traveled along the wall, inching closer to the empty circle at the center of the rings.

A metal cage had been set up across from the throne. The revenants herded Philip, Gabrielle, and Bethany inside, then threw Isaac's unconscious body in after them. They closed the door. The *thunk* of the lock sliding into place echoed through the chamber.

For some reason, they left me on the outside. Reve Azrael had said she had special plans for me, but I wasn't exactly eager to find out what they were. I started working the ropes that bound my wrists. They'd been tied by the clumsy, numb hands of revenants and the knot felt sloppy. If I could just loosen it . . .

Inside the cage, Philip knelt down beside Isaac's unconscious form, keeping watch over him as he had sworn to do, but with his hands tied and the silver around his neck, the vampire wasn't capable of anything else. Gabrielle leaned against the bars, a sheen of sweat coating her face and a spot of blood dotting the shoulder of her shirt where the bullet wound had reopened. If she felt any pain from it, she didn't show it. Instead, she watched Reve Azrael in Thornton's body with a red-hot intensity. And then there was Bethany. She was working her wrists like I was, trying to squeeze them out of the knotted rope, but she wasn't getting very far. She was still wearing her cargo vest. The revenants had confiscated our weapons and tossed them in a pile off to one side of the cage, but they must not have known her vest was full of charms.

Not that she could reach any of them with her hands tied behind her back.

Melanthius entered from the tunnel outside, walking purposefully toward Reve Azrael, who stood at the foot of the throne. In his hands was the box.

I spat on the floor. That fucking box. I wished I'd destroyed the damn thing after all.

I worked the ropes again and felt a loop slip free.

Melanthius knelt before Reve Azrael and held the box out to her, his golden skull mask betraying no emotion. Reve Azrael opened the lid, reached into the box, and pulled out Stryge's severed head.

"At last," she said, holding the head aloft. "Now you will bear witness to my triumph. By day's end, this city will be unmade. Nothing will make a sound, nothing will *move* without my will commanding it."

Another loop of rope loosened and slipped, and then my hands were free. I tossed the rope on the ground and ran for Reve Azrael. I had to get Stryge's head from her before she could join it to his body. Big Joe got in my way. His cold, meaty, dead fist knocked me down. He sprang at me, but I rolled away and he landed in the dirt.

"Stop this," Reve Azrael ordered, but I was already on my feet and running again. The other revenants formed a protective circle around her. That would have been bad news if I'd wanted to get at Reve Azrael, but she wasn't where I was headed anymore. By gathering around her, the revenants had left the stash of weapons unguarded.

The chrome plating of my Bersa semiautomatic glittered at the top of the heap, its magazine full again thanks to Bethany. I made a mental note to buy her something nice, and reached for the gun.

Big Joe tackled me from behind before I could pick it up. I got a faceful of dirt as I went down. The heavy revenant pinned me to the floor. I managed to squirm onto my back, and face him. His glowing red eyes stared into mine. "This is foolish, my little fly," Reve Azrael said through him. "You cannot escape. Not from me."

"I'm not your little fly," I said. My fingers scabbled along the dirt floor until I found a good-sized stone. I brought it up and smashed it against the side of Big Joe's head. It tore a chunk of skin off his skull. He tumbled off me.

I moved quickly, scrambling on all fours for my gun. I grabbed it and spun around just as Big Joe came at me again. I pulled the trigger. The top

of Big Joe's head blew off in a spray of blood dust, bone, and brain matter, and he keeled over. This time, he stayed down.

"Trent, behind you!" Bethany shouted from inside the cage.

Before I could turn around, a dead, foul-smelling arm snaked around my neck in a sleeper hold. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Tomo's half-burnt face glaring back at me. "Enough," Reve Azrael said through Tomo's mouth. "Why do you keep trying to thwart me? Give up. You cannot win."

The sleeper hold tightened, cutting off my oxygen. I started to feel light-headed. I had to act fast. In another few seconds I would black out. I brought up the Bersa, positioned it under Tomo's chin, and blasted a nine-millimeter slug straight up through his skull. Tomo's hold relaxed, and he fell off me. I wiped his thick, sludgy blood off my face and looked down at the bodies.

God, I'd just killed Tomo and Big Joe. My hands were shaking.

"Do not lie to yourself," Reve Azrael said, back in Thornton's body. "It gave you pleasure to destroy those two. No doubt it is something you wanted to do for a very long time. There is so much anger in you. We have that in common, you and I. There is much anger in both of us. The only difference is that you keep yours bottled up, while this wretched city will soon feel the brunt of mine."

Just the sound of her talking infuriated me. I pointed the gun at her and cocked it. "We have *nothing* in common." She was using Thornton as her host body, and though I didn't want to, if I got past the revenants surrounding her I was going to have to put a bullet in Thornton's head.

But not before I got some answers out of her.

Her revenants came at me in a rush. I only managed to squeeze off a couple of shots, neither of which did any good, before they were upon me. Cold, bony fists struck my face, stomach, and sides. Overwhelmed, I doubled over to protect myself from the pummeling. The gun was pulled out of my hand, and finally the beating stopped. I was pulled upright again, my arms pinned behind my back. I was winded, weak, and in pain. There was nothing I could do to stop her.

"Now," Reve Azrael said, "let us proceed."

The beam of sunlight coming through the hole in the ceiling moved to the middle of the rings on the wall, where it illuminated the blank circle at

the center. As soon as the light touched it, the stone circle spun around on hidden gears. The blank side disappeared into the wall, and on the reverse side was the carving of a grotesque face, like something out of a nightmare, its tusked maw open in a roar, its eyes hollow black pits. A loud grinding noise came from above, echoing through the chamber. A huge stone slab began slowly lowering along the wall above the archway, held by thick ropes attached to an ancient pulley system. It was a system designed to seal Stryge inside at the moment of the equinox, I realized, a backup plan in case anyone was foolish enough to awaken him. The Lenape Indians had been clever. Maybe a little too clever. I didn't see us getting out before the stone slab blocked the exit.

"The time has come," Reve Azrael said. She climbed up onto one of the throne's armrests and lifted Stryge's head toward the stump of his neck.

"Don't!" I shouted. The revenants pulled my arms back harder to shut me up. It did the trick. I winced in pain.

Reve Azrael placed Stryge's head over his neck. A bright, sizzling light appeared between the two ends. The head and neck began to knit together, tendrils of flesh, muscle, and bone reaching toward each other, joining and pulling tight. Reve Azrael let go of the head and jumped down to the floor.

"Awaken, Stryge!" she said, looking up at her handiwork. "Awaken and become my weapon!"

The light that had filled the seam between Stryge's head and neck vanished, as did the seam itself, and the Ancient became whole again. His chest swelled suddenly, filling with air. Stryge's first breath in centuries, and the sound of it was like the howling of the wind.

"What have you done?" I said.

"Given birth," she replied, "to my glorious city of the dead."

Surprisingly, the revenants let go of me then. Reve Azrael turned away, and she, Melanthius, and the revenants walked to the archway. Above them, the stone slab continued to lower slowly.

"Wait, where are you going?" I demanded, hurrying after them. A fat revenant like a walking boulder pushed me back. The message was clear: This was as far as I went. I watched them file out into the tunnel.

"The rest is for you to do, my little fly, not me," Reve Azrael said.

"What am I supposed to do?"

“Why, kill Stryge, of course.”

I blinked at her, dumbfounded. “What? How? He already had his head cut off four hundred years ago and he’s not dead yet. There isn’t a weapon on Earth that can kill him!”

“Isn’t there?” she said. “You’d better figure it out quickly, unless you want to see your companions die. Stryge despises all humans with a bitter passion. What do you think he will do when he wakes up and the first thing he sees is a cage full of them?”

“Why did you bother waking him if you just . . . ?” I trailed off as I pieced it together. In that moment, her plan spread out like a roadmap in my mind, and it all became horribly clear. “Oh, God,” I said. “You woke Stryge in order to kill him. You’re going to turn him into a revenant.”

She smirked at me. “And then all Stryge’s power as an Ancient will be mine to command. My most powerful revenant yet. Undead. Unstoppable. A perfect storm of destruction.”

A chill ran down my spine. Gregor had warned us an immortal storm was coming, a force so powerful it threatened everything. Even if I didn’t believe in prophecies, I had to admit this one was starting to sound pretty damn accurate. Stryge as a revenant under Reve Azrael’s control would very much *be* an immortal storm.

“You’re insane,” I said. “I won’t help you.”

“Then your companions will die, and this city will be destroyed regardless.”

“He’ll kill you, too,” I pointed out. “You won’t be safe from him.”

“You think I fear death?” Reve Azrael said. “Death bends to *my* will, I do not bend to *its*.”

The stone slab dropped down over the archway then, striking the floor with a heavy thud. It cut me off from Reve Azrael and sealed me inside.

I looked back at Stryge. He sat on his throne, his eyes still closed, his chest swelling and falling with breath. How much time was left before he was fully awake? Not a lot, I guessed. And was I imagining it, or did the broken stubs of his tusks suddenly look longer than they had before, as if they were growing back?

I grabbed my gun off the floor and pocketed it. I pulled Gabrielle’s morningstar off the pile of weapons, then ran to the cage. “Stand back from the door!” I shouted. I swung the weapon’s spiked head into the lock.

The door didn't budge. Damn. If Isaac were awake he probably could have blown the door off its hinges with a wave of his hand, but the mage was still unconscious on the floor, bleeding from the back of his head. I hit it again, with no effect.

Bethany came up to the door. "You're just going to bend the lock out of shape like that, and then you'll never get it open. There's a charm in my vest, third pocket down, right over my stomach. It can get the door open, but you're going to have to reach in there and get it. I can't."

She pushed herself up against the bars. I dropped the morningstar and tried to put my hand in her pocket, but the angle was off. She pushed herself closer, as close as the bars would allow, and I did the same, until we were so close I could smell a faint floral scent coming off of her hair. I managed to slide my hand into the pocket over her stomach. I could feel the unusual warmth of her skin radiating through the material.

"We just keep finding ourselves like this, don't we?" I said.

Bethany looked past me at Stryge. "Trent, hurry!"

My fingers grazed something inside the pocket, a long, thin, metallic object. I pulled it out. It was the same charm I'd seen her take out of the drawer at Citadel, the small metal tube topped with a beveled glass bead.

"Touch the glass to the lock," she said, stepping back. "Gently," she added.

I did. There was a sudden shower of sparks, and the door swung open. I ran into the cage and untied Bethany's hands. Once she was free, she rushed to untie Gabrielle. I freed Philip and took the silver chain from around his neck, tossing it aside. He breathed a sigh of relief, rubbing the red marks it had left on his neck. Then he picked up Isaac, and ran like a blur for the stone slab blocking the exit. By the time the rest of us caught up to him, he had already laid Isaac gently on the ground and was trying to push the stone aside, but even his immense strength wasn't enough to move it.

"Help me," Philip said. "We've got to move this thing—"

A low rumble of a growl echoed through the chamber.

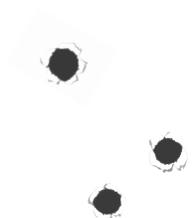
I froze, then turned around very slowly. We all did.

Stryge's eyes were open. They burned like fires in their sockets—cold, white fires, the same as Gregor's eyes. Maybe those were traits all Ancients shared, I thought, invincibility and freaky eyes. Then Stryge stood up out

of the throne, effortlessly snapping the chains that bound him. His tusks had regrown to their full length. His vast wings unfolded from his back.

The last of the broken chains slid off his shoulders and crashed loudly to the floor at his feet. Then Stryge noticed us, and let loose an angry, deafening roar that shook the chamber's walls.

"Guys," I said, "I think we should run."



## Thirty-nine

Stryge charged, his enormous, clawed feet pounding the floor so hard it felt like the whole chamber would collapse. Philip slung Isaac's unconscious body over his shoulder, and sped to the other side of the room. The rest of us scattered out of Stryge's way. The Ancient slammed into the stone slab that covered the archway. The stone cracked, a long fissure that ran lengthwise from top to bottom, but Stryge himself was unharmed. He turned toward us, bellowing his rage.

We ran for the weapons. Bethany snatched up the Anubis Hand, Gabrielle grabbed her morningstar, and I picked up Philip's broadsword. I shouted his name and tossed it across the chamber to him.

Philip moved quickly. He jumped for it, grabbing the sword in midair, flipped, and landed on Stryge's back. The Ancient batted him with his wings, trying to knock him off, but Philip held on. He stabbed the sword into Stryge's back, but the blade snapped, the tip shattering against the Ancient's invulnerable hide and leaving Philip holding a hilt with half a blade.

Stryge pulled him off his back with one claw and tossed him away like a toy. The vampire struck the wall where the circles had been carved, and then tumbled to the floor, landing in the column of sunlight that streamed through the hole in the ceiling. He screamed as the sunlight touched his bare face, reflecting like spotlights in his mirrored shades. His skin reddened into boils and began to steam.

"Philip!" I shouted, but I couldn't reach him. He was all the way on

the other side of the chamber, and a pissed off, thirty-foot-tall Ancient stood between us.

Philip thrashed in pain. He covered his face with his gloves and managed to drag himself out of the light. He pulled his hood up to protect himself, tried to stand, and fell back down. After that, he didn't move. I hoped he was still alive, but there was no way to tell how badly injured he was.

Bethany ran at Stryge, preparing to strike him with the Anubis Hand. He kicked her away. The staff flew from her hands as she tumbled through the air and landed hard, headfirst, against the wall near me. When she slumped over, I saw blood in her hair.

I picked up the Anubis Hand and gritted my teeth angrily. "All right, you ugly son of a bitch." I ran at him, clutching the Anubis Hand so tightly my knuckles went hot. But before I had a chance to swing it, he knocked me aside with a single sweep of his enormous hand. The sheer force of the blow sent me sliding across the floor until my back hit the wall next to Philip. I winced in pain. Next to me, the vampire was curled on the floor, unconscious but still breathing. That was the good news. The bad news was that Gabrielle and I were the only ones left conscious to fight an enormous, unkillable Ancient, but she only had one good arm and I wasn't feeling all that solid after Stryge's backhand. Frankly, the odds sucked.

Gabrielle pointed her morningstar at Stryge. In my dazed state, I thought it a strange way to hold what was essentially a club. But she'd taken it from Isaac's vault, and Isaac didn't keep ordinary weapons in there, only magical artifacts. The spiked ball at the end of the morningstar began to glow, and a bright sunburst of light exploded from it, like a flashbulb going off directly in Stryge's face. Stryge bellowed in rage, throwing one arm over his eyes and flailing angrily with the other. Apparently he didn't like bright light any more than other gargoyles did. Disoriented and in pain, he stumbled and fell, crashing into the enormous stone slab a second time.

This time, the slab broke apart, crumbling into rubble under his weight and revealing the tunnel outside. Unfortunately, I was still too stunned to get up and run. But that didn't mean Gabrielle couldn't.

“The door’s open! Go!” I shouted to her. She didn’t listen. She blasted Stryge with more light from the morningstar. The Ancient roared in pain. As her confidence built, she moved closer to him, intensifying the light. Stryge shrieked in agony. One wing unfurled and, before Gabrielle saw it coming, it swatted her away. She flew backward through the air and slammed into the metal bars of the cage. She yelped in pain and dropped the morningstar.

Stryge stood up again. He didn’t look seriously injured, just a whole lot angrier than before.

Damn. We’d gone up against an Ancient and had our asses handed to us. What more could we do? There was no way to stop him. I wished I had Van Lente’s sword so I could at least cut off Stryge’s head again. It wouldn’t kill him, but I’d settle for dormant at this point.

Stryge towered above us as we lay injured and pathetic on the floor of his tomb. I thought for sure he would stomp us into hamburger, but the Ancient hardly took notice of us. Instead, he looked up at the ceiling. He took a deep breath, the sound like the rush of a waterfall, and his whole body swelled. The shadows seemed to gather around him, pulled from the corners of the chamber, flowing into him. Then he exhaled with a mighty roar, and a beam of dark red light exploded out of him, shooting up to the ceiling.

And through it.

The light, or whatever it was, broke effortlessly through the rocks and earth, raining stones and clods of dirt down into the chamber. I covered my head. Boulders crashed to the center of the room, smashing the throne to rubble and sending up a cloud of dust. I couldn’t see Bethany on the other side of the chamber anymore. I had no idea if she was alive or dead after the rockfall.

The chamber kept shaking. It felt like an earthquake, like the whole world was tearing itself apart. The red beam coming out of Stryge’s form continued shooting past the enormous hole it had blasted in the ceiling, rising higher and higher into the sky itself. The warring factions of gargoyles, so far up from where I lay that they looked like tiny black bats, scattered out of its path. Finally, the beam seemed to explode in midair. The blue sky turned dark with clouds that billowed out of nowhere. Red and black clouds, like nothing I’d ever seen before, roiling like an angry sea.

The strange beam disappeared, but the quaking didn't stop. Stryge spread his wings and began to flap, lifting off the ground toward the hole he'd blasted in the ceiling.

No, I thought. I wasn't going to let it be that easy for him.

I forced myself to stand, and ran toward him, scooping the Anubis Hand off the floor. It was hard to keep upright with the whole chamber shaking. I jumped and clung to the lower half of Stryge's leg as he flew up toward the hole. Stryge roared at me, angry that my weight was throwing him off balance. He tried to kick me off. I held on for dear life with both arms wrapped around his enormous calf, trying not to fall, and trying not to let go of the Anubis Hand, either. Unfortunately, holding on this tight, I didn't have the leverage to use the staff against him.

We rose to the top of the chamber. I looked down but couldn't see the others through the dust in the air. I could see the open archway, though, and hoped they'd get the hell out of there as soon as they could. I thought I heard voices below, calling out to each other—was that Bethany?—and then Stryge flew through the hole and was loose in the city. I didn't know how I was going to stop him, but I knew it had to be done, and soon.

He landed on the park grounds at the foot of the Cloisters. I let go of his leg and ran for the treeline. The ground was shaking up here, too, not just in the chamber below. Stryge was causing it somehow, I was sure of it. The Ancient's enormous foot came crashing down behind me as I ran, trying to squash me like a bug, but I darted into the forest. I went in deep, dashing around trees, then stopped when I didn't hear Stryge follow. Only then did I notice all the leaves around me had turned red. The tree trunks and the ground, too. Everything was tinted the color of blood from the light filtering through the red and black clouds above. The air suddenly felt thick, soupy, difficult to move through, as though it were turning solid. It was as if the laws of physics were being altered. Somehow Stryge was doing that, too.

I looked up to see why he'd stopped chasing me. He'd become distracted, looking around with a strange, stunned expression on his face. I guessed a lot had changed since the last time he'd seen this plot of land. His surprise turned to anger when he saw the Cloisters. Stryge hated humans, and they'd built the Cloisters right over his tomb. It must have been like a slap in the face to him, a reminder of how much humankind had