

## Chapter 2

### LIVING IN THE SHADOW

The flickering lights of the trashed supermarket threw deep shadows from dark places, and Stephanie stepped through it all with one hand wrapped tightly round the golden Sceptre. Rows of shelves lay toppled against each other in a domino-sprawl of scattered food tins and ketchup bottles. She caught the scent of a small ocean of spilled vinegar and glanced to her right in time to catch a flash of pinstripe. The she was alone again in this half-collapsed maze, the only sound the gentle hum from the freezers.

She edged into the darkness and out again into the light. Slow steps and quiet ones and once more the darkness swallowed her in its cold hunger. The maze opened before her. A man hovered there, a metre of the ground, as if he were lying on an invisible bed. His hands were clasped on his belly, and his eyes were closed.

Stephanie raised the Sceptre. One thought would be all it'd take for a bolt of black lightning to turn him to dust. One simple command that, less than a year ago, she wouldn't have even hesitated to give. Ferrente Rhadaman was a threat. He was a danger to her and to others. He had stepped into the Accelerator and the boost to his powers had turned him violent. Unstable. Sooner or later, he was going to kill someone in full view of the public and, just like that, magic would be revealed to a world

that wasn't ready for it. He was now the enemy. The enemy deserved to die.

And yet ... she hesitated.

She was not one to second-guess herself. She was not prone to introspection. For the majority of her existence, Stephanie had been all surface. She was the reflection, the stand-in, the copy. While Valkyrie Cain had been out playing hero, Stephanie had gone to school. Sat at the dinner table, carried on with normal life. People viewed her as an unfeeling object. She had been an *it*.

But now that she was a *she*, things were murkier. Less defined. Now that she was a person, now that she was actually alive, she found that she didn't want to deprive any other living thing of that same opportunity — not if she could help it. Which was, she openly admitted, hugely inconvenient.

Wearing a scowl as dark as her hair, she stepped out from cover and advanced on Rhadaman slowly. She took a pair of shackles from the bag on her back, made sure the chain didn't jingle. She kept the Sceptre pointed at him — she didn't want to kill anyone if she couldn't help it, but she wasn't stupid — and chose her steps carefully. The floor was littered with supermarket debris. She was halfway there and still Rhadaman hadn't opened his eyes.

The closer she got, the louder her pulse sounded in her head. She felt sure he was going to hear her heartbeat. If not her heartbeat then at the very least her ridiculously loud breathing. When had she started

breathing so loud? Had she always breathed this loud? She would have thought someone might have mentioned it.

Three steps away Stephanie paused, looked around, watching for pinstripes. Nothing. Why hadn't she waited? Why did she have to do this on her own? Did she really have that much to prove? Probably, now that she thought about it. So would capturing Rhadaman single-handedly make her a worthy partner? Would that justify her continued existence? She wasn't used to all these conflicting thoughts ricocheting around in her head.

Three more steps and she reached out, shackles ready.

Rhadaman's eyes snapped open.

He stared at her. She stared at him.

"Um ... This is a dream?" she tried, and a wave of energy threw her back.

She went tumbling, realised in some dim part of her mind that her hands were empty, and when she came to a stop she looked up and Rhadaman was standing there holding the Sceptre.

"I've seen this in books," he said. He was American. "It's the real thing, isn't it? The Ancients actually used this to kill the Faceless Ones, to drive them out of this reality. The original God-Killer." He pointed it at her as she stood, then frowned. "It doesn't work."

"Must be broken," said Stephanie. "Could I have it back?"

She held out her hand. He looked at her a moment longer, and his eyes widened. “You’re her.”

“No,” she said.

He dropped the Sceptre and his hands started glowing. “You’re her!”

“I am not!” she said, before he could attack. “You think I’m Darquesse, but I’m not! I’m her reflection! I’m perfectly normal!”

“You killed my friends!”

“Stop!” she said, pointing at him. “Stop right there! If I were Darquesse, I could kill you right now, yes? I wouldn’t need shackles to restrain you. Listen to me. Valkyrie Cain had a reflection. That’s me. Valkyrie Cain went off and turned evil and became Darquesse, but I’m still here. So I am not Darquesse and I did not kill your friends.”

Rhadaman’s bottom lip trembled. “You’re not a reflection.”

“I am. Or I was. I evolved. My name is Stephanie. How do you do?”

“This is a trick.”

“No,” said Stephanie. “A trick would be much cleverer than this.”

“I should ... I should kill you.”

“Why would you want to do that? I’m working with the Sanctuary. The war’s over, right? You do remember that? We’re all back on the same side, although you guys kind of lost and we’re in charge. So, if I tell you to surrender, you have to surrender. Agreed?”

“No one gives me orders any more,” said Rhadaman.

“Ferrente, you don’t want to do something you’ll regret. The Accelerator boosted your magic, but it made you unstable. We need to take you back and monitor your condition until you return to normal. You’re not thinking clearly right now.”

“I’m thinking very clearly. Killing you may not bring my friends back, but it’ll sure as hell make me smile.”

“Now that,” Skulduggery Pleasant said, pressing the barrel of his gun to Rhadaman’s temple as he stepped up beside him, “is just disturbingly unhealthy.”

Rhadaman froze, his eyes wide. Skulduggery stood there in all his pinstriped glory, his hat at a rakish angle, his skull catching the light.

“I don’t want you getting any ideas,” Skulduggery said. “You’re powerful, but not powerful enough to walk away from a bullet to the head. You’re under arrest.”

“You’ll never take me alive.”

“I really think you should examine what you say before you say it. You’re not sounding altogether sane. Stephanie, you seem to have dropped your shackles. Would you mind picking them up and placing them on—“

Rhadaman moved faster than Stephanie was expecting. Faster even than Skulduggery was expecting. In the blink of an eye, Skulduggery’s gun was

sliding along the floor and Skulduggery himself was leaping away from Rhadaman's grasping hands.

"You can't stop me!" Rhadaman screeched.

Skulduggery's tie was crooked. He straightened it, his movements short and sharp. "We wanted to take you in without violence, Ferrente. Do not make this any harder than it has to be."

"You have no idea what it's like to have this kind of power," Rhadaman said, anger flashing in his eyes. "And you want me to give it up? To go back to being how I was before?"

"This power level isn't going to last," Skulduggery said. "You know that. It's already starting to dip, isn't it? In fifteen days, there'll be more dips than peaks, and by the end of the month you'll be back to normal. It's inevitable, Ferrente. So, do yourself a favour. Give up before you do any serious damage. We'll get you the help you need, and when it's all over, you'll return to your old life. The alternative is to keep going until you hurt someone. IF you do that, your future will be a prison cell."

"You're scared of my power."

"As you should be."

"Why should I be scared? This is the greatest thing that's ever happened to me."

“This?” Skulduggery said. “Really? Look around, Ferrente. We’re in the middle of the supermarket. The greatest thing that’s ever happened to you and you choose to trash a supermarket? Are you really that limited?”

Rhadaman smiled. “This? Oh, I didn’t do *this*.”

“No? Who did?”

“My friends.”

Stephanie couldn’t help herself — she had to look around.

“And where are your friends now?” Skulduggery asked.

Rhadaman shrugged. “Close by. They don’t wander off too far. There were loads of them around after the various battles, and I found a group and adopted them. They don’t say a whole lot.”

Stephanie picked up a faint whiff in the air. “Hollow Men?”

“I’ve given them names,” Rhadaman told her. “And I’ve dressed them in clothes. I’ve called them after my friends, the ones Darquesse killed. I think they like having names, not that they’d ever show it.”

“Hollow Men don’t like anything,” Stephanie responded. “They don’t think. They don’t feel.”

“Reflections aren’t supposed to feel, either,” Rhadaman said. “But you say you do. What makes you any different to them?”

“Because I’m a real person.”

“Or you just think you are.”

“If you surrender,” Skulduggery said, “I promise we’ll take your friends in and treat them well. Once the effects of the Accelerator wear off, they’ll be returned to you. Do we have a deal?”

“You know what they *do* enjoy?” Rhadaman asked, as if he hadn’t even heard Skulduggery. “They enjoy beating people to a pulp. They enjoy watching the blood splatter. They love the feel of bones breaking beneath their fists. That’s what my friends enjoy. That’s what will make them happy.”

“You don’t want to do this,” Skulduggery said.

Rhadaman smiled, curled his lips and gave a short shriek of a whistle.

Skulduggery flicked his wrist as he ran at Rhadaman, sending the Sceptre flying into Stephanie’s hands. Rhadaman caught him, threw him and leaped after him, and before she could run to help, the Hollow Men came at her, stumbling through a mountain of cereal boxes. Hollow Men dressed in clothes, ridiculous in badly-fitting suits, ludicrous in flowing floral dresses.

Black lightning flashed from the crystal set into the Sceptre, turning three of them to dust without even a sound. Lightning flashed again, and again, but they kept coming, and there were more Hollow Men behind her, and they were closing in. They had that knack. They were slow and clumsy and stupid, but it was when they were underestimated that they were at their most dangerous.

Stephanie darted right, clearing a path for herself, ducking under the heavy hands that reached for her. She led them down a narrow aisle, big heavy freezers on both sides, turned to them and backed away as they gave chase. Numbers mean nothing if the enemy can be corralled. Skulduggery had taught her that. It's all about choosing where to fight.

The black crystal spat crackling energy. If it could kill insane gods whose very appearance drove people mad, then artificial beings with skin of leathery paper and not one brain cell between them didn't stand much of a chance. They exploded into dust that drifted to the floor and was trodden on by their unthinking brethren. They didn't stop. Of course they didn't. They didn't know fear. They had no sense of self. They were poor imitations of life, much like Stephanie herself had been. Once upon a time.

But now Valkyrie Cain was gone, and Stephanie Edgley was all that was left.

From elsewhere in the supermarket, she heard a crash as Skulduggery fought Rhadaman. She wasn't worried. He could take care of himself.

The shadows moved beside her and a fist came down on her arm. Her fingers sprang open and the Sceptre went spinning beneath an overturned shelf. Stephanie ducked back, cursing. Her only weapon was the carved shock stick across her back, which had a limited charge and was useless against anything without a nervous system. She ran by a shelf of microwaves and blenders, past pots and pans. She grabbed a stainless-steel ladle that felt unsurprisingly unsatisfying in her hand, and

immediately dropped it when she saw the one remaining box of kitchen knives. She dragged it from the shelf, threw it straight into the face of the nearest Hollow Man. The box fell, knives scattering across the floor.

Stephanie snatched up the two biggest ones and swung, the blades slicing through the Hollow Man's neck. Green gas billowed like air from a punctured tyre. Even as she ran on, she could taste the sting of the gas in the back of her throat.

Two Hollow Men ahead of her, one in a shirt and tie and no trousers and the other in a silk dressing gown.

She dropped to her knees, sliding between them, cutting into their logs as she passed, and even as they were starting to deflate she was already on her feet again, stabbing the filleting knife into the chest of a Hollow Man wearing pyjamas. She spun away from the blast of gas, coughing, her eyes filling with tears. Something blurred in front of her and she hacked at it, shoved it away, her vision worsening, her lungs burning. Her stomach roiled. She tasted bile. She slipped on something. Fell. Lost one of the knives.

A hand grabbed her hair, pulled her back and she cried out. She tried slashing at it with the second knife, but the blade got tangled in her jacket and then it too was lost. She reached up, dug her nails into rough skin, tried to tear through. Her hair was released. Something crunched into her face. The world flashed and spun. She was hit again. She covered up, her arm doing its best to soak up the heavy punches, her head rattling with each impact. If she'd had magic, she'd have set the Hollow

Man on fire by now or sent her shadows in to tear it apart. But she didn't have magic. She didn't have such a luxury to fall back on, to get her out of trouble. She wasn't Valkyrie Cain. She didn't *need* magic.

Stephanie brought her knees in and spun on her back. The Hollow Man loomed over her, little more than a black shape. Its fist came down on to her belly like a wrecking ball, would have emptied her lungs were it not for her armoured clothes. She braced her feet against its legs and pushed herself back out of range, rolling backwards into a crouch, the Hollow Man stumbling slightly. She plunged her hand into the display stand next to her, scrabbling for a weapon, fingers curling round a mop. The Hollow Man came at her and Stephanie rose, swinging the mop like a baseball bat.

She missed wooden mops. Wooden mops had a little weight to them — whereas the plastic one in her hands merely bounced lightly off the Hollow Man's head.

She flipped it, drove the other end into its mouth, pushed until she'd sent it staggering and then she let go, turned and ran back the way she'd come. Her eyes were clearing. She no longer wanted to puke. A Hollow Man turned to her and she dodged round it, tripped and fell and saw the Sceptre. She threw herself forward, plunged her hand under the fallen shelf, her fingers closing round its reassuring weight. The Hollow Man reached for her. She turned it to dust.

She got up, disintegrated the next one, and the one after that. Three more trundled into view and she dispatched them with equal ease. Then the only sounds in the place were coming from Skulduggery.

She hurried back to the open area, in time to see Rhadaman pull Skulduggery's arm from its socket.

Skulduggery screamed as his bones clattered to the floor. A blast of energy took him off his feet, and Rhadaman closed in, ready to deliver the killing blow.

“Freeze!” Stephanie yelled, the Sceptre aimed right at his chest.

He looked at her and laughed. “That doesn't work, remember?”

She shifted her arm, turned the door behind him to dust. “It only works for its owner, moron. Now, unless you want your remains to be swept into a dustpan, you'll shackle yourself.” She kicked the shackles across the floor at him. They hit his feet, but he didn't move.

“I know what you're thinking,” she said. “You're thinking, ‘Can I kill this girl before she fires?’ Well, seeing as how this is the Sceptre of the Ancients, the most powerful God-Killer in the world, and it can turn you to dust with a single thought, you've got to ask yourself—“

Skulduggery swung the butt of his gun into Rhadaman's jaw and Rhadaman spun in a semicircle and collapsed.

Stephanie stared. “Seriously?”

Skulduggery nudged Rhadaman with his foot, making sure he was unconscious.

“I was in the middle of something,” Stephanie said. “I had him, and I was in the middle of something. I was doing a bit. You don’t interrupt someone when they’re doing a bit.”

“Cuff him,” Skulduggery said. He holstered the gun and picked up his arm, started to thread it through his sleeve.

“I’d almost got to the best line and you ... fine.” Stephanie shoved the Sceptre into the bag on her back, walked over and cuffed Rhadaman’s hands tight. She stood as Skulduggery’s arm clicked back into its socket.

“Ouch,” he muttered, then looked at her. “Sorry? You were saying something?”

“I was being cool,” she said.

“I doubt that.”

“I was being really cool and I was quoting from a really cool movie and you totally ruined it for me.”

“Oh,” he said. “Sorry.”

“No you’re not. You just can’t stand it when other people get to say cool stuff while you’re too busy screaming, can you?”

“He did pull my arm off.”

“Your arms get pulled off all the time. I rarely get to say anything cool, and usually there’s no one else around to hear it anyway.”

“I apologise,” Skulduggery said. “Please continue.”

“Well, I’m not going to say it *now*.”

“Why not? It obviously means a lot to you.”

“No. There’s no point. He’s already in shackles. Also, he’s unconscious.”

“It might make you feel better.”

“I’d feel stupid,” said Stephanie. “I can’t say cool things to an unconscious person.”

“This isn’t about him. It’s about you.”

“No. Forget it. You’d just laugh at me.”

“I promise I won’t.”

“Forget it, I said.”

He shrugged. “OK. If you don’t want to finish it, you don’t have to. But it might make you feel better.”

“No.”

“OK then.”

He stood there, looking at her. She glared back, opened her mouth to continue the conversation, but he suddenly turned, walked away, like

he'd just remembered that she may look and sound and talk like Valkyrie Cain, but she *wasn't* Valkyrie Cain.

And she never would be.