

# Chapter 11

**September 2005**

## **Revenant Days: Next Stop – Hollywood**

By now, Rainah's ass was numb. She adjusted her weight against the merciless wooden planks on the old park bench and settled in for another five or so minutes until she felt she was able to continue. She had been on the run since the '80s hair-band tour bus flipped onto its side and skidded 50 feet on the Ben Franklin Parkway and stopped about a quarter of a mile from the old Philadelphia Art Museum.

The crash took out a few more Revenant Clan soldiers. On Griff's orders, 18 of the surviving grunts positioned themselves around the wreckage and prepared to engage the approaching vampires. Griff was struggling to coax the bus upright when he ordered a small group of them (Derek, Rainah, Menz, and a few grunts) to "Go! Now! We'll hold these mothafuckas off."

Rainah and Derek had tried unsuccessfully to pull Kagen (who was unconscious) from the wreckage before Griff climbed out and took over.

The vampires were running and leaping toward the wall of grunts as Griff worked to get the bus on its feet.

"Split up and find someplace to lay low. I'll coax to you when I can," he yelled to them as they ran.

They had split up at some point. Rainah was running so fast that she didn't even realize it until Derek didn't answer her when she (thinking that he was right behind her) called out to him. She stopped in front of the museum stairs and wasted a moment or two trying to decide whether to look for the rest of the group. Standing in front of the iconic staircase, she couldn't help thinking of Rocky's running up the steps in his trademark grey sweatsuit.

When she looked behind her, Rainah saw a humanoid shape leave the ground and disappear into the dead trees that lined the parkway. The trees begin to sway as if accommodating extra weight. The swaying drew closer. A shape slinked from tree to tree. Or maybe not.

Rainah took off running. She ducked into the woods behind the museum and hid beneath a mound of loose dirt, trash, and dead tree limbs. She lay there listening for the telltale signs of approach—twigs crunching under foot, trees swaying, voices, heavy breathing. After an hour or so (it seemed), Rainah rose, living-dead style, from beneath the detritus and started to make her way back to the bus. The wooden park bench beckoned to her fatigued body to take a load off when she passed it, so she did.

Though tired and wary, her adrenaline still simmered. It kept her blood warm. Her pores flexed open and vomited beads of sweat. Her bugsuit was an excellent insulator of heat. Mixed with the suffocating backdraft of her own hot breath, it left her feeling anxious and slightly claustrophobic, like she was sitting in a sauna custom-built to fit her body. She wanted to rip the damn thing off and let her skin breathe. It was a dilemma that was shared by many in this day and age. It drove some people to stop wearing biochem attire all together. Some people... but not Rainah.

*Fuck that.*

The dirt was a son-of-a-bitch to get out of the crevices of her gas mask. She used the sleeve of her uniform to wipe the smears from the lens.

She assumed, as she had the entire time she hid, that Griff's voice would suddenly pop into her head, telling her that everything was all right. As time went on, she began to fear the worst.

Rainah sat on the bench with her face (mask) buried in her hands. She was wondering how it all came to this when she heard a voice.

"Hey, blondie..."

From its timbre, she surmised that the voice belonged to a young man. It came from somewhere behind her where the short, bulky shrubs were tightly packed. Although there were no leaves, the twigs and branches intertwined in a way that made it equally hard to see through them.

Rainah thrust to her feet and spun toward the voice. Her fingertips caressed the knife-handle that peeked out from its sheath that was strapped to her thigh. It was her only remaining weapon.

Nothing.

Something told her to turn around. She spun again and completed the invisible circle.

There was a young man standing about 10 feet from her.

The first thing Rainah noticed was that he wasn't wearing a bugsuit.

The young man looked somewhere between 18 and 20 years old, probably around 5'10" or 5'11", with an athletic build and dirty-blond hair styled in a short buzz with tapered sides. He was that all-American type, so much so that it almost bordered on Casper Van Dien-ish parody. He looked like he hadn't slept in days, and the last time he *did* sleep, it was in the faded, '80s-style denim-jacket-and-jeans ensemble that he was wearing.

"Want some company?" the young man said with a grin that he probably used to charm the panties off all the ladies.

The guy didn't strike Rainah as a vampire, but he had to be if he was walking around in the Zone without protective gear. That's what logic told her.

Her intuition told her that vampire or not, he was up to no good. As much as her tired muscles would allow, she prepared herself to do battle. She had taken down bigger, more capable men in the past. At the time, she had the inner confidence to act without fear. But things were different now, so different that she found herself feeling insecure about her chances against this... this... kid.

*Just go away. Shut up!* Rainah thought in reference to the voice of self-doubt that whispered in her brain.

"Who are you?" Rainah inquired. "Are you... one of *them*?"

"One of... *them*?" the young man replied.

"Don't play with me, kid. If you're from around here, then you definitely know what I'm talking about."

"I am. And I don't. Honestly? I was just out lookin' for a good time. And here you are, all alone. Don't *badasses* need love, too?"

Rainah glanced down at the stencil over her left breast. *Cute*. She tried to read the young man's responses. He was being coy, which meant to her that he knew something more than he was letting on. She didn't want to have to actually say "vampire," but it was looking like she had no other choice. As she prepared to respond, she suddenly remembered... *He called me blondie... How did he know what color my hair is beneath the mask?*

Rainah tensed up.

*Time to strike, girl*, her inner voice suggested. Running was another option, and based on what she'd seen of the vampires' fighting prowess, it was the one she preferred. She probably wouldn't get far, though. Not unless she somehow wounded him first. That wouldn't be easy, even if she weren't tired.

Opting for the diplomatic approach, Rainah tried one last time to reason with the kid. Sure, the "blondie" comment was a dead giveaway, but she was pessimistic about the outcome should they come to blows. Maybe if she had a little more time to think, she could come up with a feasible plan of attack.

"Do me a favor kid, and..."

"Call me Hollywood."

There was a scratching sound, like someone dragging a needle across a record.

Everything (the trees, the background noise, the night itself) paused as if to react to the ridiculous name.

"Hollywood !?!" Rainah scoffed. She would've laughed in his face if she were in a better mood.

Hollywood struck a pose, presenting himself with open arms.

"Don't I look like a star?" He flashed the straightest, whitest smile that Rainah had ever seen. A sparkle of light gleamed across his teeth. It was accompanied by a twinkling sound.

"Do me a favor, *Hollywood*, and go home to your family."

"Don't have a family," he responded before she finished her sentence. "And even if I did, I have a feeling that I'd still rather be out here with you."

"Look, Goddammit. I'm going to tell you one more time..."

"And I'm tellin' *you* that I'm staying right here. Am I really that bad that you'd rather sit here all by yourself? I mean... look at me."

He turned his profile to her and posed.

Rainah didn't say another word. Her scattershot mind had birthed a strategy. She would have to get uncomfortably close to him to pull it off, though.

She channeled a "naughty-girl" affect and approached him.

"You see something you like and you just have to have it, huh?" she said.

Hollywood didn't know what to make of Rainah's sudden change of heart. His little head told him to go with the flow, but his big head said that she was up to something. He knew now that she knew what he was. Was she simply giving in to an unwinnable situation or playing him like a fool?

Only about a half an hour ago, Hollywood was sitting in a hotel room listening to the radio broadcast of the Market Street showdown as he decompressed from a double shift of construction work. They mentioned a hefty reward for the capture of any Revenant Clan soldiers. He didn't go out looking, though. His intention was to hang upside down from the trees and think, which he liked to do from time to time.

Hollywood laid back in his stance and watched Rainah approach. Her curves screamed through her uniform. He salivated at the possibilities.

He lifted his arms to accept her, cautiously at first.

Rainah reached out, cupped Hollywood's groin in her hand and began to fondle the area. They were close, closer than Rainah had been to a man in this context in some time. He was staring down at her with intense brown eyes. His breathing was beginning to flutter. She had him.

Eventually, Hollywood relinquished his caution to the moment. He cocked his head back and closed his eyes. It was just the opportunity that Rainah was waiting for.

Rainah snatched the knife from her thigh and swung it horizontally at eye level. Using all of her remaining strength, she applied pressure as the serrated blade struck its target and slid through. Friction caused it to stutter on its way across his eyes and the bridge of his nose. One of his eyeballs (the left) bobbed and bounced on the blade, then popped out its socket and dangled against his cheek. The other one split open like a hard-boiled egg.

Hollywood groaned. His features shot vampiric. He spun away from Rainah and threw his hands up over his face. The dangling eyeball spun with him.

"You fucking bitch! Fucking... human... *CUNT!*"

Rainah followed Hollywood as he stumbled, directionless. She began stabbing at his body wherever she saw an opening. She stabbed and stabbed and stabbed (it seemed like a hundred times, at least) until he swung his arm blindly, knocking her on her ass.

Rainah was back on her feet in an instant. She was standing further away from Hollywood than before; maybe 25 feet separated them. It was then that she realized how bad the blow that knocked her back hurt. His arm caught her right across the chest. Had she not been so energized, she would've realized that it winded her.

Rainah felt nothing when Hollywood collapsed: no euphoria, no speedball of adrenaline, no erogenous sting, not a damn thing. It made taking a life seem rather ugly. The black blood that poured from his wounds and stained his clothing reminded her that he wasn't human—and that he most likely wasn't dead.

She took off running deeper into the woods.

Clutching her knife in a firm grip, Rainah moved through the woods like a pro. She took long steps and pushed off of trees for extra thrust or to enable her to continue forward at an impossible angle when needed.

She was traveling along a hilltop one layer deep in the brush. She had a good view of the neighborhoods below. They looked pretty much the same as anywhere else, with rows and rows of devastation sprinkled with pockets of buildings left undamaged. And construction. Pinpoints of blowtorch light flickered on distant façades like connect-the-dots. Interior light gleamed from windows here and there. Down in the street that separated the hillside from the neighborhoods, traffic buzzed.

There was something different, a zest for life that was missing from any of the other communities, except maybe for the Ergeister Capital in LA. It was as if these people weren't aware that the planet had become a toxic cesspool. Either that or they just didn't give a fuck.

Rainah maintained her focus in split-screen. On the left, she navigated a course through the obstacles that impeded her—cock-eyed trees with their wooden tentacles

reaching everywhere, chubby roots that poked and knuckled up from the dirt, vines that tried to choke or trip her, and the sudden changes in the ground's texture, from soft to smooth to lumpy. On the right, she scoped out the neighborhoods.

She ran until her beleaguered lungs forced her to stop and replenish her breath. She picked a secluded spot behind two trees that merged at the waist.

"Blonndiiiiieeee, where arrreee yooouuuu?" A spectral voice called out in surround-sound, coming from near and far.

*Hollywood!!!*

Rainah spun herself off balance trying to identify its source. Suddenly the trees seemed to crowd her with their stalwart presence, the lower shrubs closing in with their bare, pointed fingers.

"I know you're out there, blondie.... I can *smell* your blood."

This time, the voice came from right over her shoulder.

Rainah slashed at the darkness behind her. It was a blind strike delivered with an upward arc starting at where she assumed Hollywood's stomach might be. But there were only the merging trees, and shrubs and darkness.

Rainah ran away from the talking air.

"Where ya goin', blondie?" Hollywood's voice bounced along the trees echoing after Rainah as she huffed and willed her legs to move.

It came from the right...

"You think because I can't see that I won't find you?"

From the left...

"Don't you know anything?"

From the front...

"You can't get away from me, girl."

...and from the rear...

"Not with that sweet, sweet blood of yours."

Rainah was eyeing a clearing in the tangle of dead bushes that bordered the hilltop. It was coming up on her right, about 30 feet away. As she came closer, she could see that someone... *something* was hiding in those bushes. Whatever it was had caused them to rustle.

Rainah flipped her knife blade-side down and held it ready. She was going through that clearing one way or another.

The bushes growled the next time they shook. It was deep and angry, like the howl of a ghettoized pit bull.

The growling grew more ferocious as Rainah closed the distance. The bushes shook faster, harder. By the time she was 10 feet from the clearing, it sounded as if the dog were going to jump out and attack.

But it didn't.

"I wouldn't go that way if I were you, blondie...."

The voice swooped down on her, coming from everywhere, from everything at the same time—trees, rocks, empty space. The many different manifestations overlapped and drowned each other out. The growling crept underneath it all, ferocious as can be. Now *it* was directionless, too.

The voice... the growling... and now laughter... goofy laughter...

Rainah stopped, put her hands up to the sides of her mask (where her ears would be), and did a twisting, lunatic dance. Covering the sides of her mask did nothing to mute the noise. It was merely an instinctive move, enacted without thought.

Rainah stepped erratically. It appeared that she had lost it, or that she was stepping in awkward circles away from and toward the noise.

Without warning, Rainah planted her feet and tightened her stance. She yanked her arms down from the sides of her mask. Hot breath inflated her trunk. It was intense.

“UrrrhcccCome out here and show yourself, Goddammit! RIGHT-FUCKING-NOW!” she roared, her frustration spilling over.

Dead silence.

“YOU WANT ME SO BAD? WELL, HERE I AM!” She wasn’t even sure whom she was talking to at this point, but she kept it coming. “WHAT? YOU AFRAID OF A GIRL?”

Nothing.

Rainah stood there cycling deep breaths and waited for a response. She waited long enough for her fiery enthusiasm to wither. She was about to yell again when the stocky bushes to her right chuckled and shook.

Hollywood stood from behind the bushes and smiled. He made a “Ta-da!” motion with his arms. An asterisk of light gleamed from a point on his perfect smile. It was accompanied by a twinkling sound. Black blood streamed from his eye sockets like mascara moistened by tears. His left eyeball dangled from squishy black strands.

“Awww, man,” he laughed as he parted the bushes with his hand and stepped over them. “I wish I could see the look on your face.”

Rainah was too worked up to respond with words. Instead, she flipped the knife in her hand and charged. She feigned left, then came at him from the right, swinging her weapon in practiced patterns.

Hollywood didn’t even try to lean away, or duck, or to grab for the metallic blur like most people instinctively attempted. Rainah was sure she had him until he vanished into thin air and reappeared a few feet away, standing casually with his arms folded across his chest. He was humming and acting as if he had been waiting on her for long time.

Rainah adjusted to the real-time edit and closed the distance in seconds.

Hollywood let her get dangerously close before vanishing again. This time, he reappeared sitting down with his legs crossed, whistling.

Rainah stutter-stepped, changed directions, and attacked.

Hollywood vanished and reappeared. He was standing right next to her, sticking out his tongue like a precocious child. His thumbs were in his ears, fingers spread and wiggling.

The next time he was lying on his side, chilling.

After that, he appeared in a wobbly, single-legged crane stance (like in “The Karate Kid”) and made faces at her.

The next time, he was standing again, his right arm raised over his head and dropping in exaggerated stabbing motions accompanied by his very own vocal rendition of the shower scene music from “Psycho.” “Drink! Drink! Drink! Drink! Drink!” he joked in a high-pitch.

Hollywood was always just out of Rainah's reach as she tried to adapt to his unorthodox strategy. Until...

He appeared behind her and went in for a bite. His mouth stretched open wide enough to swallow her entire head.

Rainah spun around and plunged her knife deep into his chest. She looked pleasantly surprised that the blade found its mark.

She grabbed the handle with both hands and forced the blade in deeper. Sliding closer as the blade sunk, their bodies touched. Rainah could smell Hollywood's breath as he wheezed at the mercy of his pierced lung. There were no words to describe the stench.

Rainah hadn't felt a body as hard as Hollywood's was since... since forever, it seemed. He was streamlined and cut like a male gymnast.

Hollywood grabbed the top of Rainah's head and dug his claws into the fabric of her hooded mask. His fist closed around a jumble of torn fabric and matted, dirty-blond hair. He twisted to secure a hold, his bony knuckles digging in "super-noogies," and lifted her off her feet.

Rainah shrieked. By the time she reacted (grabbing Hollywood's wrist and pulling up to take the slack off her hair), she was already dangling. Her scalp was on fire. She could feel every last strand fighting to stay planted in her flesh. Some of them let go.

Hollywood held Rainah at arm's length out in front of him. She watched his teeth grow longer before her eyes. He curled his lips back to give her a good view.