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**THE LOST ART
OF
WORLD DOMINATION**

SHORT STORY

The Lost Art of World Domination



With the shadows wrapped around him and the sliver of light falling dramatically over his eyes, the evil sorcerer Scaramouch Van Dreg stood in the dungeon and watched his captive with predatory amusement.

The dungeon was dark and damp and dank, and the chains that bound the skeleton detective were big and thick and heavy. They shackled the bones of his wrists to the stone floor, forcing him to kneel.

Scaramouch liked that. The great detective, the living skeleton who had foiled plan after

plan, scheme after scheme, was now forced to look *up* at Scaramouch. Like he had always been meant to. Like *everyone* had always been meant to.

The detective, his dark blue suit burnt and torn and muddy, hadn't said anything for almost an hour. In fact, he hadn't *moved* for almost an hour. Scaramouch had been standing in the shadows, gloating, for a little over fifteen minutes, but he wasn't entirely sure that his captive had noticed.

He shifted his weight noisily, but the detective still did not acknowledge his presence.

Scaramouch frowned. There was very little point in going through all this if his efforts weren't rewarded with due and proper attention.

He brought himself up to his full height, which wasn't very high, and sucked in his belly, which was substantial. He gathered his cloak and

stepped forward, gazing down at the top of the detective's skull with the pitiless gaze he had practiced for hours.

“Skulduggery Pleasant,” he sneered. “Finally, you are within my grasp.”

The detective shifted slightly, and muttered something.

Good God. Was he *asleep*?

Scaramouch cleared his throat and gave the detective a little kick. The detective jerked awake and looked around for a moment, then looked up with those empty eye sockets.

“Oh,” he said, like he had just met a casual acquaintance on the street, “hello.”

Unsure how to counter this unexpected approach to being a captive, Scaramouch decided to replay the sneer.

“Skulduggery Pleasant,” he repeated. “Finally, you are within my grasp.”

“It does appear so,” Pleasant agreed, nodding. “And in a dungeon, no less. How brilliantly postmodern of you.”

“You have interfered in my plans for the last time,” Scaramouch continued. “Unfortunately for you, you will not live to regret your mistake.”

Pleasant tilted his head curiously. “Scaramouch? Scaramouch Van Dreg? Is that you?”

Scaramouch smiled nastily. “Oh yes. You have fallen into the clutches of your deadliest enemy.”

“What are *you* doing here?”

Scaramouch’s smile faltered. “What?”

“How are you mixed up in all this?”

“How am I...? What do you mean? This is *my* plot.”

“*You’re* plotting to use the Crystal of the Saints to bring the Faceless Ones back into our reality?”

Scaramouch frowned. “What? No. What do the Faceless Ones have to do with this? I don’t want the Faceless Ones back, I don’t even worship them. No, this plot is for *me*, to gain absolute power.”

“Then... you’re not in league with Rancid Fines or Christophe Nocturnal?”

“I’ve never even *met* Rancid Fines,” Scaramouch said, “and I *hate* Christophe Nocturnal.”

Pleasant absorbed this information with a nod. “In that case, I’m afraid there’s been a bit of a misunderstanding.”

Scaramouch felt like he’d been punched in the gut. All the breath left him, and his shoulders slumped. “You mean, you’re not here for me?”

“Dreadfully sorry,” Pleasant said.

“But... but you arrived at the hotel. You and your partner, the girl. You were asking all those questions.”

“We were looking for Fines and Nocturnal. We didn’t even know you were in the country. To be honest with you, and I don’t mean to offend you or anything, but I thought you had passed away some time ago.”

Scaramouch gaped. “I just took a little break...”

Pleasant shrugged. “Well, at least now I know. So what are you up to these days?”

“I’m... I have plans,” Scaramouch said, dejected.

“The absolute power thing you mentioned?”

Scaramouch nodded.

“And how’s that going?”

“It’s going OK, I suppose. I mean, you know, everything’s on schedule and proceeding apace...”

“Well that’s good. We all need something to get us up in the mornings, am I right? We all need goals.”

“Yeah.” An unwelcome thought seeped into Scaramouch’s mind and lingered there. He tried ignoring it but it flickered and swam, and finally he had to ask; “You don’t view me as your deadliest enemy, do you?”

Pleasant hesitated. His skull remained as impassive as ever, but this hesitation spoke volumes. “I view you as *a* deadly enemy,” he said helpfully.

“How deadly?”

“I don’t know... relatively?”

“Relatively deadly? That’s all? I thought we were arch-enemies.”

“Oh,” Pleasant said. “No, I wouldn’t call us *arch*-enemies. Nefarian Serpine was an arch-enemy. Mevolent, obviously. A few others.”

“But not us?”

“Not really..”

“Why? Is it because I’m not powerful enough?”

“No, not exactly.”

“Then why? What’s so different between me and, say, Serpine?”

“Well,” said Pleasant, “Serpine had options. He was adaptable. Remember, the deadliest enemies are not necessarily the strongest, they’re the smartest.”

“So it’s because I’m not *smart* enough? But I *am* smart! I am highly intelligent!”

“OK,” Pleasant said in an understanding voice.

“Don’t patronise me!” Scaramouch snapped. “I have *you* as a prisoner, don’t I? You fell into my trap without even a hint of a suspicion!”

“It *was* a clever trap.”

“And those chains that bind your powers- you think that’s easy to do? You think *that* doesn’t require intelligence?”

“No no,” Pleasant said, “I have to admit, you

got me fair and square.”

“You’re damn right I did,” Scaramouch sneered. “And you don’t even know about my plot yet, do you? You don’t even know how intelligent *that* is.”

“Well, like I said, I’ve been busy—”

“Busy with Fines, and with Nocturnal, busy with the threat of the Faceless Ones – but you haven’t been busy with the *real* threat, have you?”

“I suppose not,” Pleasant said, and then added, “You mean you, don’t you?”

“Of course I mean me! I’ve been smart enough to fool you all into thinking I was dead. I’ve been smart enough to work under your radar, to set in motion events that will grant me absolute power, which will lead to my total dominion over this world! Now *that*, detective, *that* is smart!”

“Total dominion?”

“Oh yes, skeleton. How does it feel to know that an opponent such as I, an adversary you would have classified as merely ‘relatively deadly’, will soon rule this planet with a will of iron, and a fist of...” He faltered. “... iron.”

“Um...”

“What?”

“I was just going to say, have you really thought this through?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re talking about ruling the world, right?”

“Yes.”

“Not bringing back old gods, not turning the world into some new version of hell, not remaking it as you see fit...”

“Well, no.”

“You’re just talking about ruling it, then?”

“Yes. With a will of iron and a fist of iron.”

“Yes. And again, I’m compelled to ask – have you really thought this through?”

Scaramouch pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. He was getting a headache. He could feel it coming on. “What do you mean? What is so wrong with planning to rule the world?”

“Well, for a start, think of all the work.”

“I’ll have minions,” Scaramouch said dismissively.

“But they’ll still need orders. They’ll need you to tell them what to do. You’ll be inundated with reports, with documents, with briefings. There won’t be enough hours in the day to go over them all, let alone make any decisions.”

“Then I’ll just order that the days be longer,” Scaramouch said. “I will decree that a day stops and starts when *I* decide, not the sun or the moon.”

“And how will you cope with warring nations?”

Scaramouch laughed. “When I am ruler, there will be no wars. Everyone will do what I tell them.”

“There are billions of people in the world, all with their own viewpoints, all with their own rights. It won’t be as simple as telling them to just *stop*. What about famine?”

“What about it?”

“What will you do about it?”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“If famine strikes a country, what will you do?”

Scaramouch smiled evilly. “Maybe I will do nothing. Maybe I will let the country die.”

“In which case, you will have an entire country rise against you, because they have nothing left to lose.”

“Then I will destroy them.”

“And you’ll have to deal with the neighbouring countries squabbling over the remains.”

“Then I’ll destroy them – no, I’ll order them to... they’ll do what I tell them, alright?”

“And the media?”

Scaramouch sighed. “What about them?”

“How will you cope with the media questioning your policies?”

“There will be no questions. This won’t be a democracy, it will be a dictatorship.”

“There will be always be dissent.”

“What did I say? I’ll have minions, I told you. *They’ll* take care of any rebels.”

“You’ll have a secret police?”

“Of course!”

“You’ll assign minions to levels of power?”

“Naturally!”

“And when these minions get ambitions of their own, and they go to overthrow you?”

“Then I’ll kill them!” Scaramouch said, exasperated. “I’ll have absolute power, remember?”

“And how do you plan to attain this absolute power?”

“It’s all in my plan!” Scaramouch yelled, pacing to the wall of the dungeon.

“What about sorcerers?”

Scaramouch tore the cloak from around his neck. It was heavy, and too warm, and when he paced it was annoying. “What about the bloody sorcerers?”

Pleasant’s chains jangled slightly as he shrugged. “You don’t really think they’ll just stand back and let this happen, do you? I realise I’ll be dead, so that’s one less you’ll have to worry about, but there are plenty more.”

“There won’t be,” Scaramouch said, stepping back into the shadows for dramatic affect. “When my plan is complete, I will be the only one capable of wielding magic.”

“So you’re going to kill them all?”

“I won’t have to. They will be left as ordinary mortals, while I will be filled with their powers.”

“Ah,” Pleasant said. “OK.”

“Now do you appreciate my vast and superior intelligence?”

Pleasant thought for a moment. “Yes,” he decided.

“Excellent. I’m sorry we can’t talk further, detective, but my Hour of Glory is at hand, and your death will be—”

“One more question.”

Scaramouch’s chin dropped to his chest. “What?” he asked bleakly.

“On the surface, this plot is fine. Drain the

magic from others, and then use this magic to become all-powerful and unstoppable and take over the world. I can't see anything wrong with that plot – in theory. But my question, Scaramouch, is how exactly are you going to achieve all this?"

Scaramouch picked his cloak off the ground, felt through it until he came to the cleverly concealed pocket. From this pocket he withdrew a small wooden box with a metal clasp.

He held the box for Pleasant to see. "Recognise this?"

Pleasant peered closer, examining the etchings in the wood. "Ohhh," he said, impressed.

"Exactly. This container, enchanted with twenty-three spells from twenty-three mages, is one of the fabled Lost Artifacts. I have spent the last fifteen months tracking it down – and

tonight, it is finally mine.”

“So it’s true, then?”

“Of course it’s true. Why wouldn’t it be?”

Pleasant’s head jerked up sharply. “You mean you haven’t checked it?”

Scaramouch suddenly felt a little foolish. “I—I don’t have to,” he said. “Everyone knows—”

“Oh Scaramouch,” Pleasant said, disappointment in his voice.

“I just got it!” Scaramouch said defensively. “Literally, I just got it three hours ago!”

“And you haven’t checked it?”

“I didn’t have *time*. I had to capture *you*.”

Pleasant looked back at the box, and his head tilted thoughtfully. “If that *is* the box from the Lost Artifacts, and it certainly does *look* like it might be authentic, then it contains an insect with the power to drain magic at a bite.”

“Exactly.”

“Providing that insect is still inside.”

Scaramouch looked at the box. “There are no holes in it.”

“It’s been lost for three hundred years.”

“But the insect’s meant to live forever, right? It doesn’t need food or anything?”

“Well, that’s the legend. Can you hear it? You should be able to hear it buzzing around in there.”

Scaramouch shook the box, and held it up to his ear. “Nothing,” he said.

“Well, it’s a thick box,” Pleasant said. “You probably wouldn’t be able to hear it anyway.”

Scaramouch shook it again, then listened for any buzzing. Even a single buzz. Anything.

“Did you pay much for it?” Pleasant asked.

“The guy who found it, he needed to mount expeditions and things. It wasn’t cheap.”

“How much did he charge?”

“I, uh, I gave him everything I had.”

The detective went quiet.

“But I’m going to be ruler of the world!” Scaramouch explained. “What difference does it make to me?”

“He made an awful lot of money by just handing over a box, without even verifying that it contained what you hope it contains.”

“How will I know?”

“There’s only one way. You have to open it.”

“But the insect will fly away!”

“Let it out near me,” the skeleton suggested. “You’re going to kill me anyway, right? So what do I care if it drains my powers before I die?”

Scaramouch narrowed his eyes. “Why would you make this offer?”

“Because I’m *curious*. Scaramouch, I’m a detective. I solve mysteries. If my final act in this world is to establish whether or not a

mythological insect could still be contained in one of the Lost Artifacts, then that, to me, would be a good death.”

Scaramouch looked at him, and nodded. “OK.”

“Put it on the ground, open it, and stand back. When it’s finished draining me, it’ll be sluggish. That’s when you recapture it.”

Scaramouch nodded. He licked his lips nervously, and placed the box on the floor. He undid the metal clasp, felt his heart pound in his chest, and he opened the lid.

He scampered back into the shadows.

The detective gazed down into the box.

“Well?” Scaramouch asked from the corner.

“Can’t see anything,” Pleasant said. “It’s a little dark... wait.”

“Yes? What?”

And then, the most beautiful sound Scaramouch had ever heard – a buzzing.

“Amazing,” Pleasant said in a whisper.

Something rose from the box, rising into the air after centuries of being trapped. It was unsteady, and weak, but it flew. It *lived*.

“One little insect,” Pleasant was saying. “The legends say it rose from the carcass of a slain demon. An insect borne of evil, and wickedness, the demon’s last attempt to destroy its enemies.” The insect flew up, dancing in a shaft of light. “One little insect, and it could be responsible for bringing this world to its knees.”

“Wonderful,” Scaramouch breathed.

The insect landed on the ground in front of its box, its prison for all those years. Pleasant looked down at it, then moved slightly and knelt on the insect and squished it.

Scaramouch screamed and the door burst open and Valkyrie Cain stepped into the dungeon.

“What the hell is going on here?” she asked.

Scaramouch charged at her and the girl closed her eyes and flexed her fingers. Her eyes and hand snapped open and the air around her rippled. Scaramouch was hurled back off his feet. He crashed into the far wall, hitting his head and collapsing with a groan. He heard the girl and the detective talking, and he heard the chains being unlocked. Moaning, he turned over and looked up at them.

“It was a trick,” he said. “You really *were* here to stop me, weren’t you? You really *were* here to foil my plan. This is the last time, you hear me? I will escape whatever prison you send me to, and the next time we meet you will pay for—”

“Who’s this?” Valkyrie Cain asked.

Scaramouch paled. “What? What do you mean who am I?”

“His name’s Scaramouch Van Dreg,” Pleasant told her.

“She knows who I am!” Scaramouch shrieked. “I am your deadliest enemy!”

Cain raised an eyebrow but ignored him. “Has he got anything to do with Fines and Nocturnal?”

“Nope.”

“Then why are we wasting our time? Come on, we’ve got real bad guys to stop.”

Cain walked out. Skulduggery Pleasant looked down at Scaramouch and shrugged.

“I’ll just chain you up for the moment, but the Cleavers will be around soon to take you into custody. Is that alright with you?”

Scaramouch started crying.

“Good man. Don’t let this get you down though. We all need goals, and I fully expect to do battle with you again, OK?”

Scaramouch wailed.

“We need more villains like you, you know

that? We need more bad guys who want to take over the world. There aren't enough of them. The others think it's just, you know... *silly*.”

Scaramouch felt the shackles on his wrists. He had to look up to watch Skulduggery Pleasant leave the dungeon.