



LAST STAND OF DEAD MEN

The Skulduggery Pleasant series

SKULDUGGERY PLEASANT

PLAYING WITH FIRE

THE FACELESS ONES

DARK DAYS

MORTAL COIL

DEATH BRINGER

KINGDOM OF THE WICKED

LAST STAND OF DEAD MEN

THE DYING OF THE LIGHT

RESURRECTION

THE MALEFICENT SEVEN

ARMAGEDDON OUTTA HERE

(a Skulduggery Pleasant short-story collection)

The Demon Road trilogy

DEMON ROAD

DESOLATION

AMERICAN MONSTERS



**Skulduggery
Pleasant**

LAST STAND OF DEAD MEN

DEREK LANDY



HarperCollins *Children's Books*



First published in Great Britain by
HarperCollins *Children's Books* in 2013
Reissued in this edition in 2017
HarperCollins *Children's Books* is a division of HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd,
HarperCollins Publishers
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

The HarperCollins website address is:
www.harpercollins.co.uk

Skulduggery Pleasant rests his weary bones on the web at:
www.skulduggerypleasant.com

Derek Landy blogs under duress at
www.dereklandy.blogspot.com

1

Text copyright © Derek Landy 2013
Illuminated letters copyright © Tom Percival 2013
Skulduggery Pleasant™ Derek Landy
Skulduggery Pleasant logo™ HarperCollinsPublishers
All rights reserved.

ISBN 978-0-00-748923-7

Derek Landy asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of the work.

Typeset in Baskerville MT by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Conditions of Sale

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form, binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.



MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC® C007454

FSC™ is a non-profit international organisation established to promote the responsible management of the world's forests. Products carrying the FSC label are independently certified to assure consumers that they come from forests that are managed to meet the social, economic and ecological needs of present and future generations, and other controlled sources.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

This book is dedicated to you.

*Whether you are a Minion or a Skuttlebug or just, you know,
a normal person, it's because of you that I get to do what I love and
laughingly call it work.*

*I know some of you by name and some of you by sight (and some of
you by smell, but let's not get into that) but there are still countless others
I have never met, and to all of you I say thank you for your support, your
passion, and your lunacy.*

Now please, for the love of whatever god you pray to, leave me alone.

FIVE YEARS AGO



The camp was dark and quiet, and the Warlocks slept. Up on the hill, watching them, a man with golden eyes pulled the collar of his coat tighter in a vain attempt to stave off the cold. His fingers and toes were already numb. His teeth were starting to chatter. How many times had he been in similar circumstances, enduring discomfort while he waited for the perfect time to strike? More than he could remember, that was for sure. It was worth it, of course. It was always worth it.

There was movement behind him, but he didn't turn. He recognised the footsteps. "I didn't think you were coming."

The old man stopped beside him, cupped his hands and blew into them to warm them. "I had visitors," he said. His voice was rough. Words scraped from his throat. "The Skeleton Detective and a girl. She has old blood in her. Ancient blood, I reckon. She's dangerous."

"She's thirteen years old. She's a child."

"She won't stay a child. A few more years and she'll be a threat, you mark my words."

"Consider them marked," said the man with the golden eyes. What had Madame Mist said about the Torment? Once upon a

time, he'd been formidable, he'd been dangerous, but he was an old man now, a good blade that had lost its edge. Maybe she was right.

"These plans of yours," the Torment said, "the plans you've made with my fellow Children of the Spider. These are good plans. They will suffice."

"You're onboard, then? What changed your mind?"

The Torment's lined face was half hidden by the long grey hair and all that beard, but he didn't look like a dulled blade any more. He looked suddenly sharp. "My visitors. Their arrogance has stirred me from my apathy. The mortals they protect have run this world long enough. It's past time we took over."

"I'm so glad to hear it," said the man with the golden eyes. "In that case, there are some Warlocks down there in need of killing, if you're in the mood...?"

The man with the golden eyes approached the camp from the south, the Torment beside him, while the mercenaries closed in from all around. Mortals, in dark military clothing. Heavily armed. Not a sound was made, and yet one of the Warlocks stirred, woke, sat up, looked out into the night, a night that was suddenly lit up by the bright flashes of gunfire.

The three Warlocks leaped up, caught in the crossfire. Notoriously hard to kill, even they couldn't survive the relentless barrage of bullets. Light spilled from every wound as they jerked and fell and stumbled, and then the light faded and they toppled.

Silence followed, broken only by empty magazines being replaced.

The Torment put his gun away. He didn't like using mortal weapons. He didn't like having to work by their side. But he was going to like what came next.

The mercenaries walked into camp, made sure that the Warlocks were really dead.

"You three," said the man with the golden eyes, "take the jeep and go. I'll be in touch to arrange payment."

Three mercenaries faded into the darkness. The other two stayed close, waiting for orders.

The Torment grabbed the taller one's head, twisted till the neck broke. The smaller one stumbled back, going for his weapon, but the Torment took it from him and used it to beat him to death.

While the mercenary was being killed, the man with the golden eyes surveyed the scene. The other Warlocks would return to find their brothers slaughtered, and they would find the bodies of two of the soldiers who did it. Mortal soldiers, wearing no uniform, with no insignias or identification.


"Why did you let the others live?" the Torment asked when he was done. "They can identify us."

That was half right. The other mercenaries could identify the Torment, but the man with the golden eyes was already fading from their memories. "For this to work, they need to be able to boast about their missions. The three I let go have the biggest mouths. Their boasts will eventually reach the right ears."

The Torment scowled. "There is a faster way to do this."

"No," said the man with the golden eyes. "We're not ready yet. But we will be. Soon."

THREE MONTHS AGO

 If its estimations were correct – and of course they were correct, they were never wrong – then the Engineer was going to make it. From the instant that warning *ping* had sounded in its head, it had had exactly four weeks to implement the shutdown procedure before catastrophe became somewhat inevitable. It used the caveat ‘somewhat’ because of course nothing was inevitable, not really. There were always hidden clauses to every eventuality. This the Engineer had learned in its travels, in what it called ‘life experience’. That the Engineer was not, technically, alive, mattered not. It existed, and it had sentience, and as such it had life experience. Moving on...

If it had been where it was supposed to be when the *ping* had sounded, the four-week countdown would have mattered not one jot. Unfortunately, the Engineer was not where it was supposed to be. A regrettable unfolding of events, to be sure. The Engineer felt most bad about that. Not that it was the Engineer’s fault. No one could possibly lay the blame at the Engineer’s mechanical feet. Had it not stood guard for almost three decades? Had it not fulfilled its duty for the most part? Was it really the fault of the Engineer that its advanced programming, a wonderful mixture of technology and magic, enabled it to experience the human

phenomenon of ‘boredom’? Was it really the fault of the Engineer that it had decided to go for a walk, or that when the *ping* sounded, when the Engineer was finally needed to leap into action, instead of being right there, ready to help, it was on a beach in Italy looking for unusual shells?

No, the Engineer thought not.


It was making good time now, though. The magical symbols carved into its metal body erased it from the memories of mortals the instant they saw it, allowing the Engineer to travel in broad daylight, through busy city streets. The Engineer smiled (internally, for of course it had no mouth). It was feeling good. It was feeling optimistic. Moving at its current speed, it would arrive back in Ireland in plenty of time to shut everything down before a series of overloads and power loops inevitably led to a sequence of events which would, in turn, eventually lead to the probable destruction of the world. The Engineer wasn’t worried.

And then the truck hit it.

War is the business of barbarians.
—Napoleon Bonaparte

1

THE WITCHES

The sky was clear and the stars were bright and Gracious had fallen asleep on the grass. Donegan nudged him and he murmured and came round.

“You were supposed to be keeping an eye on the place,” Donegan said.

“I was,” Gracious yawned.

“You were asleep.”

“I was resting my eyes.”

“You were snoring.”

“I was exercising my lungs.”

“Get up.”

Grumbling, he got to his feet and stretched. He didn’t have to stretch very far. He wasn’t that tall. Still, what Gracious O’Callahan lacked in height he made up for in muscle and cool hair. “Hi, Valkyrie,” he said.

“Hi, Gracious.”

“So is this your first time meeting a witch?”

She nodded.

“You’ll do fine, don’t worry. Witches are more afraid of you than you are of them.”

“I thought that was bees.”

He blinked. “You might be right. Yes, you *are* right. Bees are fine, witches are horrible. Always get those two mixed up.” He was wearing baggy jeans and a faded *Star Wars* T-shirt. Valkyrie imagined that he had a special nerd room at home where he kept all of his weird clothes that referenced old movies, and she imagined him standing in the middle of that room for hours, slowly rotating on the spot, an unsettling smile on his face. By contrast, Donegan Bane, a tall and slender Englishman, favoured sports coats and narrow ties with his skinny jeans.

He glared at Gracious. “I can’t believe you fell asleep.”
“I *didn’t* fall asleep.”

“Then do you know if she’s home or not?”

“I haven’t a clue,” Gracious admitted. “I fell asleep.”

Valkyrie had first met them only a few months earlier, but she felt she knew them well enough by now to know that, if given the opportunity, they would stand on this hill and bicker for hours. So she turned and walked down to the cottage, and after a moment they followed her.

They arrived at the door and Donegan knocked three times. They waited and the door was opened by a frowning girl.

“Hello,” Donegan said with a smile she didn’t return.

“Do you know what time it is?” the girl asked. Valkyrie judged her to be around her age, maybe seventeen or eighteen. She had pale skin and full lips and luxuriant red hair that framed her face.

“Why no,” Donegan replied as if it were a game. “What time is it?”

She scowled. “What do you want?”

“My name is Donegan Bane and this is my colleague Gracious O’Callahan – we’re Monster Hunters. We’re here with our associate Valkyrie Cain, and we were wondering if your grandmother was home.”

“You’re Monster Hunters?”

“Indeed we are. You’ve probably heard of us. Writers of *Monster*

Hunting for Beginners, The Definitive Study of Were-Creatures, and The Passions of Greta Grey, our first work of romantic fiction.”

“And you want my grandmother?”

“If your grandmother is Dubhóg Ni Broin, yes.”

“Are you going to kill her?”

“I’m sorry? Oh, no! No, nothing like that. We just want to talk to her.”

“So you’re not going to kill her?”

“No,” Donegan said with a laugh. “I assure you, she’s quite safe.”

The girl’s eyes narrowed. “How do I know I can trust you?”

“We came here unarmed,” Donegan said cheerfully, and Gracious looked at him.

“You’re unarmed?” he asked, surprised.

“Yes,” Donegan said. “Aren’t you?”

“Well, I suppose so. Apart from my gun.”

Donegan glared at him. “What? Why did you bring a gun? I told you to come unarmed.”

“I thought you were joking.”

“Why would I be joking?”

“I don’t know, I thought that’s what made it funny.”

Donegan looked like he might strangle his partner, but then forced the smile back on his face and turned once again to the girl.

“I’m sorry, miss, I didn’t catch your name...?”

“Misery,” the girl answered, suspicious.

“Misery, it’s a pleasure to meet you. My friend here has many problems; he’s quite bright in his own way, but likes taking guns to inappropriate places. Let me assure you that we mean your grandmother no harm. We just want to talk to her.”

“Why?”

Valkyrie stepped forward before either of the Monster Hunters could make the situation worse. “We’re looking for a friend of ours. Maybe you’ve seen him? Tall? Skinny? Wears nice suits?”

Also he's a skeleton? His name's Skulduggery Pleasant and he's wandered off on his own and we think your gran might know where he is."

"Why would my grandmother know that?"

"Because he came to see her, and that's the last we heard of him."

"We don't have much to do with sorcerers," Misery said. "They don't like us and we don't like them. I don't recall seeing your friend, either. What did you say he was? A zombie? A mummy?"

"A skeleton."

"A skeleton, yeah. No, haven't seen one of those in ages."

"I think you're lying," Valkyrie said.

Misery smiled coldly. "What if I am? What are you going to do about it?"

"Whatever I have to."

"Ah, there it is, the arrogance that my grandmother is always talking about. And what kind of sorcerer are you, then? Let me guess. Standing here, dressed all in black... Are they armoured clothes you're wearing? They are, aren't they? And that big ugly ring on your finger – that's from that death magic thing, isn't it? Necromancy? But you... you're my age. You're too young to have had the Surge. You're probably still experimenting with your little sorcerer disciplines, like a good little girl. So I'd say you're an Elemental. I'm right, amn't I? See, witches don't have disciplines. Real magic isn't about choosing one thing over the other. Real magic is about opening yourself up to everything."

"Yeah," said Valkyrie. "That's really interesting. Is your granny home? Could we talk to her?"

"She's home," said Misery. "She's busy, though."

"Doing what?"

"Witchy things."

"Could we come in?"

"Nope."

"We're coming in, with or without your permission."

“I’d like to see you try.”

“No, you really wouldn’t.”

“I think,” Gracious said quickly, “that the wrong foot has been gotten off of. Misery, you seem to me to be a lovely girl, and I sense a sort of kindness in your eyes which reminds me of a newborn fawn, or the noble hedgehog. We’ve been looking for your grandmother for days now, and yesterday our dear friend Skulduggery went missing. We’re very worried, as you can imagine, and some of us, without naming any names, might be a little more short-tempered than usual.”

“I’m not short-tempered,” said Valkyrie.

“Then how did you know I was referring to you?”

“Because you pointed.”

“Getting back to the subject at hand, Misery, we would really appreciate it if you’d let us in. Please?”

Misery looked at him, but didn’t respond.

“Um,” said Gracious, “hello?”

“Quiet,” she said, “I’m thinking.” She chewed a plump lip, then sighed. “I don’t really get along with my grandmother. She’s stuck in her ways and... I look at her and she’s all withered and stuff and I don’t want to end up like that, you know? I don’t want to live in a cottage in the middle of nowhere for the rest of my life. I want to live in the city. I want to wear high-heeled shoes every once in a while and do things that don’t all revolve around being a witch.”

Gracious nodded. “I understand and sympathise with everything you’ve just said, apart from the bit about the high-heeled shoes, which I wouldn’t know about.”

“Can you promise me you’re not going to hurt her?” Misery asked.

Valkyrie frowned. “Why would we hurt her?”

“Because she has your friend trapped in the cellar.”

Valkyrie stepped through the doorway. “He’d better be OK.”

Misery held up her hands. “He’s fine, he’s fine. From what I

can hear they're just talking. If you can promise me you won't hurt her, I'll show you how to get down there. Deal?"

"I'll defend myself," Valkyrie said. "If she attacks me, I'll defend myself. But... we promise to go easy on her if it's at all possible."

"That's really the best deal you're going to get," Gracious added, a little apologetically.

"Fine," said Misery, after a moment's consideration. "Come on in. Wipe your feet."

The cottage was dark and weird and smelled funny, like boiled cabbage and wet dog. Valkyrie could see why Misery didn't like living here. She couldn't see a TV or even a radio. It was lit by oil lamps, and there was a brazier in the corner. In the winter, she imagined this place would get very cold.

Misery pulled back a rug and lifted a heavy trapdoor. She put her finger to her lips, and Valkyrie nodded.

The cellar was bigger than she'd expected, but about as gloomy. Valkyrie and the Monster Hunters walked down the stone steps, then crept through the tunnel towards a flickering light, following the sound of Skulduggery's voice and another, a woman's. The nearer they got, the more distinct the words became.

"—see what this has got to do with me," said the woman. "I'm just an old witch living out her life with an ungrateful granddaughter. What would I know about the affairs of Warlocks?"

Valkyrie peered round the corner. Dubhóg Ni Broin looked remarkably like the witches in fairy tales. She was old and small and stooped, with tangled grey hair and a long chin with a wart on it — an actual *wart*. She was wearing a black shawl over a shapeless black dress but, disappointingly, no pointy hat. Still, Valkyrie wouldn't have wanted her to slip *fully* into caricature. That would have been silly.

Facing Dubhóg, his back to Valkyrie, Skulduggery Pleasant stood in a chalk circle. She knew enough about symbols and sigil magic by now to know that the circle was binding his powers, but there were other symbols there she didn't recognise. Seeing

as how he didn't just step out of the circle, though, she guessed they were there to keep him in place.

"Witches and Warlocks get along like a house on fire," he said. He was wearing the grey suit he'd been in the last time she'd seen him. His hat was on the table in the corner, and the lamplight flickered off his skull. "You shop at the same stores, use the same recipes... If anyone would have heard what the Warlocks are up to, it'd be a witch."

"Maybe those *other* witches," Dubhóg said, somewhat resentfully. "Maybe the Maidens or those Brides of Blood Tears with their exposed bellies and their veils and their long legs... Is my belly exposed, Mr Skeleton? Am I wearing a veil? Are my legs long and shapely?"

"Uh," said Skulduggery.

"There are different sorts of witches and Warlocks," Dubhóg continued, "just like there are different sorts of sorcerers. There are male witches and female witches, just as there are male Warlocks and female Warlocks. There are all kinds. But we keep to ourselves. The business of others does not interest us."

"But the business of others *does* interest *me*," Skulduggery said. "I've been hearing rumours, Dubhóg. Disquieting rumours. I just thought you might be able to allay my fears."

"And that is why you attacked me?"

"I merely knocked on your front door."

"Then you attacked my *door*." Dubhóg squinted at him. "You think you're so clever, don't you? With your Sanctuaries and your rules. You think everyone should be like you. Well, I'm not like you. Witches aren't like you. Warlocks aren't like you. Why would we want to be? You live your lives restricted by rules. Even your magic is restricted. Sorcerers treat magic like science. It's disgusting and unnatural. It twists what true magic is all about."

"Control is important."

"Why? Why is it important? Magic should be allowed to flourish in whichever form it takes."

“That way madness lies.”

“For the weak-minded, perhaps.”

“Tell me what Charivari is up to.”

“I wouldn’t know,” said Dubhóg. “I’ve never met the man. Why would you think I know anything about any of this?”

“A little over a year ago, you were seen talking to a Warlock who went on to try to kill me and my associate.”

“A year? How can I be expected to remember that far back? I’m eight hundred years old. I get confused about the little things – who said what, who did what, who tried to kill who... My days are devoted to my granddaughter and my nights are spent making multiple trips to the toilet. I don’t have time for anyone’s grand schemes.”

“So Charivari has a grand scheme?”

Dubhóg frowned. “I didn’t say that.”

“Actually, you sort of did.”

“Oh, I see,” said Dubhóg. “You’re one of those, are you? You like to play around with words to try and get the better of me. Well, it’s not going to work. With age comes wisdom, you ever hear that?”

“I did, but I’ve found that wisdom has a cut-off point of around one hundred and twenty years. Once you reach that, you’re really as wise as you’re going to get.”

“Well, I’m wise enough to say nothing more on the subject.”

“So you *know* more on the subject.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Again, you implied that you did. The Warlock you spoke to had been hired by the Necromancers to kill us – he said he owed them a special favour. Why?”

Dubhóg shrugged. “Why does anyone do anything?”

“What did the Necromancers do for the Warlocks? Did they give them something? They did? What was it – an item, an object, a person? Was it a thing, was it information, was it—? It was information? OK.”

Dubhóg stepped back, horrified. “What are you doing? Are you reading my mind? No one can read my mind. Witches’ minds cannot be read.”

“I’m not reading your mind,” Skulduggery said. “I’m reading your face. What information did the Necromancers give them? A strategy? A place? A name?”

Dubhóg screamed and covered her face with her hands.

“A name, then,” Skulduggery said.

“You don’t know that!” Dubhóg cried. “I have my face covered!”

“So that’s what the Warlock wanted from the Necromancers, but what did he want from you? This will go easier for you if you just tell me what I want to know.”

“Never!”

While Dubhóg reeled dramatically with her face covered, Valkyrie stepped out from hiding and approached the circle. Skulduggery gave her a little wave. She could have wet her finger and smudged the chalk, but instead she decided to put all those hours of practice to good use. Crouching by the edge of the circle, she put her hand flat on the ground and pushed her magic into the concrete until she was almost part of it, until she was cold and hard just like it was. And then she wrenched her hand to the side and the ground cracked, splitting one of the lines of chalk.

Dubhóg whirled at the noise, and stared at Valkyrie as Skulduggery stepped out of the circle. “How did you get in? Did you harm my granddaughter?”

“She’s fine,” Valkyrie said, straightening up.

“If you hurt her..”

“We didn’t.”

Dubhóg’s face contorted in fury. “*You will pay!*”

“I told you,” Valkyrie said, frowning, “we didn’t hurt—”

But it was too late.

Dubhóg flew into the air, the space around her crackling with

an energy that made her long hair stand on end. She hovered there, looking like an electrocuted cartoon character, her face twisted in anger. Gracious leaped at her, and a stream of sizzling light caught him in the chest and sent him hurtling backwards. Donegan rushed in, his hands lighting up, but Dubhóg caught the energy stream he sent her way and responded with another one of her own. The air rushed in around Valkyrie and she shot towards Dubhóg, the shadows bunching round her fist. Dubhóg grabbed her by the throat, her grip strong, and Valkyrie clicked her fingers, summoning a ball of flame into her hand, and prepared to ram it into the witch's face.

“Granny,” Misery called. “Granny, stop that. Gran. *NANA!*”

The battle froze, and Dubhóg looked round. “Misery? You're OK?”

“They didn't hurt me, Nana,” Misery said, somewhat crossly. “Now put her down before you embarrass me even more.”

Dubhóg drifted to the ground and let go of Valkyrie, who stepped back, rubbing her throat.

“Terribly sorry,” Dubhóg said, her hair returning to normal, that ferocious power leaving her as quickly as it had arrived.

“That's quite all right,” Skulduggery said, walking forward. “We all make mistakes, isn't that right? No harm done.”

In the corner, Gracious moaned.

“Tell them what they want to know,” Misery said, “then come upstairs. I'll put the kettle on.”

Misery turned, walked away, and Dubhóg cleared her throat and smiled at Skulduggery.

“I'm a constant source of embarrassment to her,” she explained. “I can't do anything right, really. All I want to do is protect her from the everyday cruelties of life, but I always do something wrong. I say the wrong thing, or I attack the wrong people...”

“Kids,” Skulduggery said, sympathising.

“She'll miss me when I'm gone,” Dubhóg said.

“So, the Warlock...”

“Oh, yes, him. I don’t know what information the Necromancers gave him. He mentioned he’d been talking to one of them, a man with a ridiculous name.”

“Bison Dragonclaw,” said Valkyrie.

“Dragonclaw, yes,” said Dubhóg. “That was it.”

“And why did he come to see you in the first place?” Skulduggery asked.

“He thought I’d be able to convince my sisters to join with Charivari. But we Crones use magic differently from even other witches – it doesn’t keep us so young. We are old women, and so I told him no.”

“Join Charivari to do what? What are the Warlocks planning?”

“War,” said Dubhóg. “They’re planning on going to war.”

2

BACK IN ROARHAVEN



hastly Bespoke returned to Roarhaven with a sense of overwhelming dread. It wasn't danger he dreaded, or battle, or confrontation or arguments. It was meetings. It was endless, monotonous meetings.

The last few days he'd spent at his old shop in Dublin, working on various items of clothing. Repairing, modifying, making from scratch. He had been content there. Happy. Alone with this thoughts, alone with the needle and thread, with the fabrics, his mind had been allowed to settle, and it had been wonderful.

But his vacation was over, and here he was, being driven back into the squalid, bleak little town of Roarhaven and all that anxiety he'd left behind was quickly building up again inside his chest. They drove through Main Street, drawing a few cold glances from the townspeople. There was a single, sad little tree planted in a square of earth on the pavement. For as long as he'd been here, he had never seen it with leaves. Here they were in August and it was just as thin and skeletal as it had been in winter. It wasn't dead, though. It was as if the town were keeping it alive purely to prolong its torture.

They approached the dark, stagnant lake and the squat building that rested beside it, all grey and concrete and uninspiring. The

Administrator, Tipstaff, was waiting for him as he thanked the driver and got out of the car.

“Elder Bespoke, welcome back. The meeting is about to start.”

Ghastly frowned at him. “It’s not scheduled till two. They arrived early?”

“In their words, they are ‘eager to negotiate’.”

Ghastly walked out of the warm sun into the chill Sanctuary, Tipstaff beside him. “Who’s here?”

“Elder Illori Reticent of the English Sanctuary plus two associates, an Elemental and an Energy-Thrower.”

“That’s all?”

“We’ve been tracking them since they flew in this morning, and we’ve been keeping an eye on all known foreign sorcerers in the country. It would appear that these three are the only ones in the vicinity. Elder Bespoke?”

Tipstaff held a door open and Ghastly grumbled, but went inside. In here, his robe was waiting. He pulled it on, checked himself in the mirror. His shirt, his waistcoat, his tie, his trousers, all those clothes he’d made himself, all of them were covered up by this robe. His physique, honed by countless hours of punching bags and punching people, was rendered irrelevant by this shapeless curtain he now wore. The only thing that wasn’t covered up was the one thing he’d spent his life trying to draw attention away from – the perfectly symmetrical scars that covered his entire head.

Tipstaff brushed a speck of lint from Ghastly’s shoulder, and nodded approvingly. “This way, sir.”

Ghastly could have walked to the conference room blindfolded, but he let Tipstaff take the lead. There was Ghastly’s way of doing things and there was the proper way of doing things, and if there was one thing Tipstaff liked, it was procedure.

They reached a set of double doors guarded by two Cleavers. At Tipstaff’s nod, the warriors in grey banged their scythes on the floor in perfect unison and the doors opened. Tipstaff stood to one side as Ghastly walked in.

Grand Mage Erskine Ravel sat at the round table and scratched at his neck. The robes could be particularly itchy against bare skin, which was why Ghastly had lined his with silk. He hadn't offered to line Ravel's, though. He found it quietly amusing to watch his friend suffer.

Beside Ravel sat Madame Mist, her face covered by that black veil she always wore. He'd often wondered if her features were as unsightly as his own, but decided that no, the veil was probably some piece of tradition that the Children of the Spider had chosen to keep alive.

Across from Ravel and Mist, Illori Reticent sat patiently. A pretty woman with a beautiful mind, Illori's smile grew warm when she saw him.

"Elder Bespoke," she said, rising to meet him, "so good to see you again."

"Elder Reticent," said Ghastly, shaking her hand. "Sorry I'm late."

"You're not late, we're early, which in some circumstances can be twice as rude as being late."

Ghastly glanced at the man and woman standing behind her, their backs to the wall and their expressions vacant. "You only came with two bodyguards, I see."

"Of course," Illori said, smiling innocently. "I'm not in any danger, am I? I am among friends, yes?"

"Indeed you are," said Ghastly, smiling back at her. "It's nice that you remember. So many of your fellow mages seem to have forgotten that fact."

"Well, they're not here, and I am, so I have been granted the honour of speaking for the whole of the Supreme Council. And I have some things I'd like to discuss with you."

"Then let's get started," Ghastly said, and took up his place at Ravel's side.

Illori looked at them all before speaking again. "The Irish Sanctuary has been at the forefront of the battle against oppression

and tyranny for the last six hundred years, ever since Mevolent's rise to power. We recognise that, and we appreciate that. Until recently, your Council of Elders was the most respected Council of any territory in living memory."

Ravel nodded. "Until recently."

"That's no secret, surely. The death of Eachan Meritorious was a great loss to us all, but for Ireland it signalled the beginning of a rapid slide into uncertainty, aided no doubt when Thurid Guild's brief time as Grand Mage ended with his imprisonment. Again and again, the Irish Sanctuary has been battered by enemies from without and within."

"And again and again we have triumphed," said Ghastly.

"Indeed you have," said Illori, "thanks to some exemplary work by your operatives. But your Sanctuary has been weakened. When the next attack comes, you may not be strong enough to prevail. So I have come to you with a solution, should you be agreeable."

"This'll be interesting," Ravel muttered.

"Before the Sanctuaries, there were communities. Each of these communities was ruled by twelve village Elders. Each of these twelve would oversee a different aspect of village life, but, when the time came to make important decisions, all twelve votes were counted equally."

"We know our own history," said Ravel. "We also know that when the Sanctuaries were established, the unwieldy twelve was cut down to a more practical three. Even the communities that are around today haven't kept up with the old ways."

"Even so," Illori said, "lessons can be learned. We propose the establishment of a supporting Council of nine – five mages of our choosing, four of yours – to help you in the running of your affairs. This would leave you with a majority of seven to five, and it would mean you had more sorcerers, more Cleavers, and more resources. Your Sanctuary would remain under your full control and it would be returned to its former strength."

Ravel looked at her. "I'm curious as to why you think we would possibly say yes to this."

"Because it's a fair proposal. You retain full control—"

"We retain full control now," said Mist. "Why would we change?"

"Because the current situation is not acceptable."

"To you," said Ravel.

"To us, yes," said Illori. "There are members of the Supreme Council who view you as dangerous and reckless and they continually call for action against you. Every mage paying attention is expecting war to break out at any moment. Why would you risk hostilities if the situation can be resolved amicably?"

"There's not going to be a supporting Council, Elder Reticent."

"Why not?"

"Because the Supreme Council does not tell us what to do."

Illori shook her head. "Is that what this is? A matter of pride? You won't accept our terms because you don't like being told what to do? Pride is wasted breath, Grand Mage Ravel. Pride is you putting your own petty concerns over the well-being of every sorcerer in your Sanctuary. More than that, it's putting your petty concerns over the well-being of every mortal around the world. If war breaks out, it's going to be so much harder to keep our activities off the news channels. If that happens, it's on your heads. But we can avoid it all if you'd just listen to reason."

"The Supreme Council has no right to dictate to other Sanctuaries how to conduct their business," said Mist. "In fact, the Supreme Council itself may even be an illegal organisation."

"Ridiculous."

"We have our people looking into it," Mist said.

"Don't bother," said Illori. "We've already had our own experts combing through the literature. There is no ancient rule or obscure law that says Sanctuaries cannot join forces to combat a significant threat. It's what we did against Mevolent, after all."

"We are a significant threat, are we?" asked Ravel.

“You might be,” Illori answered, then shook her head. “Listen, I didn’t come here to threaten you. We are standing on the precipice and the Supreme Council isn’t going to back away. They’re angry and they’re frightened, and the more they think about this, the more angry and frightened they become. They’re hurtling towards war and you’re the only ones who can stop them.”

“By agreeing to their demands.”

“Yes.”

“We’re not going to do that, Illori.”

“Do you *want* war, Erskine? Do you actually *want* to fight? How many of us do you want to kill?”

“If you’re looking to calm things down, calm down those making all the noise. We will not be intimidated and we will not be bullied.”

Illori laughed without humour. “You keep painting yourselves as the aggrieved, like you were just minding your own business and then the Supreme Council came along and tried to steal your lunch money. You are at fault, Erskine. Your Sanctuary is weak. You’ve made mistakes. We are not the bad guys here. We have gone out of our way to treat you with respect. We released Dexter Vex and his little group of thieves, didn’t we?”

“What does that have to do with us?” asked Ghastly. “Vex’s little group of thieves, as you call it, consisted of three Irishmen, an Englishman, an American and an African. It was an international group affiliated with no particular Sanctuary, who sought approval from no one before embarking on their mission.”

“An international group that was led by Dexter Vex and Saracen Rue,” Illori said, “two of your fellow Dead Men. They may not have told you what they were planning, but where would they have brought the God-Killer weapons had they succeeded in stealing them, except back to you?”

“Vex wanted them stockpiled in order to fight Darquesse.”

“A more suspicious mind than mine might wonder if Darquesse was merely the excuse he needed.”

“All of this is a moot point,” Ravel said. “Tanith Low and her band of criminals got to the God-Killers before Vex and she had them destroyed.”

“And you had her,” said Mist. “Briefly.”

“What was that?” Illori asked.

“You arrested her,” said Mist. “The woman who assassinated Grand Mage Strom. You arrested her, chained her up, and she escaped.”

“What’s your point?”

“There are those who say Strom’s assassination was the breaking point,” said Mist. “It was his death that has propelled us to the verge of war. He was assassinated here, of course, in this very building. For this, you blame us, even though Tanith Low is a Londoner. But when you finally arrest Miss Low, when you have the chance to punish the killer herself for the crime she committed... she mysteriously escapes.”

“Are you saying we let that happen?”

“It has allowed you to refocus your blame on us, has it not?”

“I haven’t heard anything so stupid in a long time,” said Illori, “and I’ve heard a lot of stupid things lately. We don’t know how she escaped or who helped her. The investigation is ongoing. There are those in the Supreme Council, by the way, who think this Sanctuary had something to do with it.”

“Of course they do,” Ravel said, sounding tired.

“They believe both Vex’s group and Tanith Low’s gang were taking orders from you,” Illori said. “Two teams going after the same prizes, independent of each other – doubling the chances of success.”

“Well,” said Ghastly, “it’s nice to see the Supreme Council thinks we’re so badly co-ordinated as to organise something as incredibly inept as that.”

“Illori, go home,” Ravel said gently. “Tell them you approached us with this proposal and we politely declined. Tell the Supreme Council that, before he died, Grand Mage Strom agreed that

their interference was not necessary. He would have recommended no further action if Tanith Low hadn't killed him. You and your colleagues have nothing to fear from us."

"But that's not strictly true, is it?" Illori asked. "You have the Accelerator. We've heard what it can do. Bernard Sult witnessed its potential. He saw the levels to which it can boost a sorcerer's power. If you so wanted, you could boost the magic of every one of your mages and you could send them against us. Our superior numbers would mean nothing against power like that."

"That's not something we're planning on doing."

"Then dismantle it. I'm sure that would go a long way to placating the Supreme Council."

Ravel shook his head. "The Accelerator is powering a specially-built prison cell – the only cell in existence capable of holding someone of Darquesse's strength. We need it active."

"Then give it to us as a gesture of good faith."

"As a gesture of naivety, you mean. We're not giving you the Accelerator. We're not dismantling it. We're not turning it off. We're not even sure if it *can* be turned off. If that makes the Supreme Council nervous, then that is unfortunate. Please make it clear to your colleagues that we do not intend to use the Accelerator against them as part of any pre-emptive strike." Ravel sat forward. "If, however, the Supreme Council launches any kind of attack against us or our operatives, and if we feel significantly threatened, then using the Accelerator to even the odds is always an option."

"They're not going to be pleased to hear that."

"Illori, at this point? I really don't give a damn."

3

THE BIG DAY

Desmond Edgley threw back his head and sang, “Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, you look like a monkey, and you smell like one, too!” and laughed like a drain as Valkyrie blew out her candles. It had been the same lyrics every year since she was old enough to know what a monkey was. She had grown up and matured. Her father had not.

Her mum and baby sister clapped and Valkyrie sat back down, grinning. Faint trails of smoke rose, twisting, from eighteen candles, and were quickly dispersed by her mother’s waving hand.

“Did you make a wish?” her dad asked.

She nodded. “World peace.”

He made a face. “Really? World peace? Not a jetpack? I would have wished for a jetpack.”

“You always wish for a jetpack,” her mum said, cutting the cake. “Have you got one yet?”

“No,” he said, “but you need to use up a lot of wishes to get something like a jetpack. On my next birthday, I’ll have wished for it forty times. Forty. I’ll *have* to get one then. Imagine it, Steph – I’ll be the only dad in town with his own jetpack...”

“Yeah,” she said slowly, “I’ll be ever so proud...”

Her mum passed out the plates, then stood and tapped her fork against a glass. “I’d like to make a toast, before we begin.”

“Toast,” said Alice.

“Thank you, Alice. Today is a big day for our little Stephanie. It’s been a big week, actually, with the exam results and the college offers. We’ve always been proud of you, and now we’re delighted beyond belief that the rest of the world will be able to see you the way we see you – as a strong, intelligent, beautiful young woman who can do whatever she puts her mind to.”

“Toast,” Alice said wisely.

“You’ve been in our lives for eighteen years,” her mum continued, “and you have brightened every single day. You’ve brought joy and laughter to this house, even when times were tough.”

Her dad leaned in. “It is *not* easy being married to me.”

“And today is also the day that Gordon’s estate passes into your name. You are now the sole custodian of his books, the owner of his house, and the spender of his money. And even though you’ve known that this was coming since you were twelve years old, you never slackened off. You never took anything for granted. You finished school, you got excellent results, and you made sure you faced the future on your own terms. We couldn’t be prouder of you, honey.”

Before her mum could start crying, Valkyrie’s dad stood up. He cleared his throat, pondered a bit, and then began. “It is no secret that I always wanted a son.”

Valkyrie howled with laughter and her mum threw a napkin at her husband, who waited until things had calmed down before continuing. “I thought that having a daughter would mean there’d be pink everywhere and I’d have to take her to ballet lessons and when she was old enough to have a boyfriend I’d be really weird around him. Thankfully, none of this turned out to be the case.”

Valkyrie blinked. “You were extraordinarily weird around Fletcher.”

“No, you’re misremembering. I was cool.”

“You kept touching his hair.”

“I have no recollection of that ever happening.”

“Des,” her mum said, “you were really, really weird to that boy.”

“Can I be allowed to finish my speech? Can I? Thank you. So, to recap, I never wanted daughters. But when Stephanie was born I looked into her big eyes and I was so overcome by both her cuteness and the baby fumes that I decided to let bygones be bygones, and start over. It was a noble and selfless act by me, but you were only two days old so you’re probably too young to remember it.”

“Probably,” said Valkyrie.

“And now look at me!” her dad said. “Eighteen years on and I have two daughters, and the smaller one can barely walk in a straight line, let alone do ballet. What age are you, Alice? Four? Five?”

“Eighteen months,” said Valkyrie’s mum.

“Eighteen months and what have you to show for it? Do you even have a job? Do you? You’re a burden on this family. A burden, I say.”

“Toast,” Alice responded, and squealed as her dad scooped her up and did his face-hugger walk round the kitchen.

“I’m pretty sure that when that speech started it was about you,” Valkyrie’s mum said, “but then he kind of got distracted. Des. Des, don’t you think it’s time to give Steph her birthday present?”

“Present!” Alice yelled, as her dad held her over his shoulder by one ankle.

“Fair enough, wifey. I suppose it can’t be put off any longer. Steph, now that you have large sums of money, you can of course buy one of these brand-new if you so wanted. But I like to think that a second-hand one, bought by your parents, would have a sentimental value that you just wouldn’t be able to get in a—”

Valkyrie sat up straight. “You got me a car?”

“I didn’t say that.”

She stood. “Oh my God, you got me a car?”

“Again, I didn’t say that. It might not be a car. It might be a drum kit.”

“Is it a drum kit?”

“No. It’s a car.”

“Toast!” Alice yelled.

“Ah, yes, sorry,” Valkyrie’s dad said, setting his youngest daughter back on the ground. She wobbled and fell over and started laughing.

“You are so dumb,” her dad murmured.

Valkyrie ran to the front door, yanked it open, and froze. There, in the driveway, was a gleaming Ford Fiesta. And it was orange.

She’d been in an orange car before. One of Skulduggery’s spare cars had been orange. But this... this...

She couldn’t help herself. “It looks like an Oompa-Loompa,” she blurted.

“Do you not like it?” her mum asked at her shoulder.

“I asked for the colour specially,” her dad said. “The salesman said it wasn’t a good idea, but I thought it might be extra safe and there was a possibility it could glow in the dark. It doesn’t, though.” He sounded dejected. “If you want a different colour, we can take it back. I mean, the salesman will probably laugh at me, but that’s OK. He was laughing enough when I drove off in it.”

Valkyrie walked up to the car, traced her fingertips along the side. The interior was dark green. Just like an Oompa-Loompa’s hair. She looked back at her parents.

“You got me a car. You got me a *car*.”

Her mum dangled the keys. “Do you like it?”

“I love it!”

Valkyrie caught the keys and slipped in behind the wheel. Her car had a very nice dashboard, and a very nice smell, and her car was very clean. She adjusted her rear-view mirror in her car

and slid her seat back in her car and it was her car. It wasn't the Bentley and apart from the colour it wasn't very flashy, but it was *her* car. "You are the Oompa-Loompa," she said, patting the dash, "and I love you."

She put on Pixie Lott as she got ready, sang along as she danced round her bedroom, doing the hip-grinding thing in the mirror whenever the chorus popped up. The white dress tonight, she reckoned, laying it out on the bed. Tight, white and strapless – her dad was going to have a fit when he saw it. But this was her night, and she was going out with her friends, and she was going to wear whatever the hell she wanted. She was eighteen, after all.

As she sang into the hairbrush, she realised that she was actually looking forward to spending time with Hannah and the others. A girls' night out – the first girls' night out since school had ended. It was going to be fun. The fact that she had butterflies struck her as weird, though, until she tried to remember whether or not she'd actually met all of her friends, or if some were friends the reflection had made and then simply transferred the memory to Valkyrie's mind. She laughed at the oddness of her life, and then her phone rang and she paused the music.

"Happy birthday," Skulduggery said.

"Thank you," she grinned. "Guess what my parents got me."

"An orange car."

Her grin faded. "How did you know?"

"I'm looking at it."

"You're outside?"

"We got a call. You're not doing anything, are you?"

She looked at her dress, at her shoes, and felt the butterflies slowly stop fluttering. "No," she said, "not doing anything. I'll be out in a minute."

She hung up, and sighed. Then she tapped the mirror in her wardrobe and her reflection stepped out.

"I know," Valkyrie said. "You don't have to say it. I know."

“You deserve a different kind of fun,” the reflection said.

Valkyrie pulled on her black trousers, hunted around for some socks, and grabbed her boots. “It’s fine. Most of them are your friends anyway. I’ve never talked to them. What would I even say?”

“You’re really going to use that excuse?”

“I’m going to use whatever excuse I have to. Where’s my black top?”

“I put it in the wash.”

“It was clean.”

“It had blood on it.”

“Yeah, but not mine.”

The reflection held up a spaghetti-strap T-shirt.

“That’s pink,” said Valkyrie.

The reflection pulled it on. “It looks cute on you.”

Valkyrie raised an eyebrow. “It *does* look cute on me. Wow. I look hot in that. Where did I get it?”

“I bought it last week,” the reflection said, giving a twirl.

“OK, you’ve convinced me.”

The reflection threw it to her and Valkyrie put it on, then zipped up her jacket.

“Do me a favour, OK?” said Valkyrie. “Have a good time tonight.”

“I’ll do my very best,” said the reflection, and smiled. “You try to do the same.”

Valkyrie opened the window. “I’ll be with Skulduggery,” she said. “No trying involved.”

She slipped out as Pixie Lott started playing again, and she jumped.

Right before they reached the hotel, Skulduggery’s gloved fingers pressed the symbols on his collarbones, and a face flowed up over his skull.

Valkyrie raised an eyebrow. “Not bad.”

“You like this one?”

“It suits you. Can you keep it on file, or something?”

He smiled. “Every time I activate the façade, the result is random, you know that.”

“Yeah, but you’ve had it for a few years now. It might be time to start thinking about settling down with something a little more permanent.”

“Are you trying to make me normal?”

“Heaven forbid,” she said, widening her eyes in mock horror. He opened the door for her, followed her through. They walked into the lobby, passed the reception desk and went straight to the elevators. Skulduggery slipped a black card into the slot, and pressed the button for the penthouse. The doors slid closed.

“So...” said Valkyrie.

“So.”

“It’s my eighteenth.”

“Yes it is.”

“The big one eight. I’m an adult now. Technically.”

“Technically.”

“It’s an important birthday.”

“Well, you’re doing fine so far.”

She laughed. “Did you... y’know... Did you get me a present?” Skulduggery looked at her. “Did you want me to get you a present?”

Her smile dropped. “Of course.”

The elevator stopped with a *ping*, and the doors opened. She was the first out, walking quickly.

“I see,” he said, following her. “Do you have any suggestions?”

“I think you know me well enough by now to figure it out for yourself.”

“You’re mad at me.”

“No I’m not.”

“Despite my handsome face, you are.”

She stopped before they reached the penthouse and turned.

“Yes, I’m mad at you. People buy presents for people who are important to them. After all this time, I didn’t think I had to *tell* you to buy me a present.”

“And I didn’t think I had to buy you a present to prove that you’re important to me.”

“Well... I mean... you don’t, but... but that’s not the point. It’s not about proving it, it’s about showing it.”

“And a gift is an accurate measurement? Your parents got you a car. Does this mean you are as important to them as a car is? Do they love you a car’s worth?”

“Of course not. A birthday present is a token gift.”

“A token gift is like an empty gesture – devoid of any kind of value.”

“It’s a nice thing to do!”

“Oh,” Skulduggery said. “OK. I understand. I’ll get you a present, then.”

“Thank you.” She turned back, and knocked on the door. “Who are we here to see?”

“An old friend of yours,” Skulduggery said, and for the first time she noticed the edge to his voice.

She didn’t have time to question him further. The doors opened as one and Solomon Wreath smiled at her.

“Hello, Valkyrie,” he said.

Before she knew what she was doing, she was giving him a hug. “Solomon! What are you doing here? I thought you were off having adventures.”

“I can’t have adventures in my home country every once in a while? This is where the real action is, after all. Come in, come in. Skulduggery, I suppose you can join us.”

“You’re too kind,” Skulduggery muttered, following them inside and closing the doors behind him.

The penthouse was huge and extravagant, though Valkyrie had been in bigger and more extravagant when she dated Fletcher. Back then, he’d spend his nights in whatever penthouse suite was

available around the world, and all for free. Such were the advantages of being a Teleporter, she supposed, though these days all that had changed. Now he had a nice, normal girlfriend and he was living in his own apartment in Australia. He was almost settled. It was kind of scary.

She glanced back at Skulduggery, who had already let his false face melt away. He took off his hat and didn't say anything as Wreath came back with a small box, wrapped up in a bow.

"Happy birthday," Wreath said.

Valkyrie's eyes widened. "You got me a present?"

"Of course," Wreath said, almost laughing at her surprise. "You were my best student in all my years in the Necromancer Temple. No one took to it quite like you did, and although we may have hit a few bumps along the way—"

"Like you trying to kill billions of people," Skulduggery said.

"—you have always been my favourite," Wreath finished, ignoring him. "Open it. I think you'll like it."

Valkyrie pulled the bow apart and the wrapping opened like a gently blooming flower. There was a wooden box within, and she opened the lid and raised an eyebrow. "It's, uh, it's an exact copy of my ring."

"Not exact," said Wreath. "Inside, it is different indeed. When students begin their training, they are given objects like the ring you have now – good, strong, sturdy, capable of wielding an impressive amount of power. But after their Surge, they need something stronger, something to handle a lot more power."

"But I haven't had my Surge yet."

Wreath smiled. "I know, and yet you need an upgrade already. In this, as in so many other ways, you are exceptional, Valkyrie. Your ring, please?"

He held out his hand. She glanced at Skulduggery, then slid it from her finger and passed it over. As Wreath walked out of the room for a moment, she took the new one from the box, put it on.

Wreath returned, carrying a hammer. “Now for the fun part,” he said, and put Valkyrie’s ring on the table and smashed it. A wave of shadows exploded from the flying shards, twisted in the air and went straight for the ring on her finger. The ring sucked them in eagerly, turning cold, and Valkyrie gasped.

“Do you feel it?” Wreath asked. “Do you feel that power?”

“Wow,” she said, regaining control of herself. “I do. Wow. That’s... that’s...”

“That’s Necromancy.”

It was startling. It was distracting. It was amazing. “Thank you,” she said.

Wreath shrugged. “Turning eighteen is a big day for anyone. But I am well aware that you did not come to see me for gifts and hugs.”

“Oh, yeah,” she said, getting her mind back on track. “Why *are* we here to see you?”

“Your unusually silent partner here has been in touch. It seems you’ve been investigating the events surrounding that Warlock trying to kill you last year.”

“He told us he was doing you Necromancers a favour,” Skulduggery said. “It was in exchange for information. A name.”

“First of all,” said Wreath, “I was kept out of that particular loop. It was not my idea to include the Warlocks in any of our sordid schemes, because I am neither stupid nor deranged. That was all Craven, by way of that idiot Dragonclaw.”

“So what did Dragonclaw tell the Warlock?” Valkyrie asked.

“Please,” Wreath said, “take a seat. What do you know about the Warlocks?”

Valkyrie settled herself on the couch, the ring sending slivers of sensation dancing up and down her arm. “Just the, uh, you know, the usual stuff. They’re not... wow, this ring is cool... they’re not like the rest of us. They have their own culture, their own traditions, their own type of magic...”

Wreath nodded. “A type of magic that, quite frankly, we don’t

understand. And all of that is fine because there aren't very many of them and they keep to themselves. Or at least they did."

"What's happened?"

"Someone's been attacking them," Wreath said. "Provoking the Warlocks is not a wise move at the best of times, but there seems to be a group of people who are determined to do just that. In the past five years, dozens of Warlocks have been killed. They've been isolated from the others, hunted down, and executed. Now there is only a handful left."

Valkyrie frowned. "The one who attacked us, he said they're growing stronger every day."

Wreath smiled. "Warlocks are known for never showing weakness. It's what I like about them."

"So what name did he want from Dragonclaw?"

"An associate of mine, Baritone, actually one of the Necromancers who were killed during the battle at Aranmore, was travelling through France a year or so before he died and happened to come across a group of mortals in a bar who were boasting of a job well done. Naturally, he pretended to be a mere mortal just like they were and, from what he gathered, they were ex-Special Forces, funded by secret government money and directed to—"

"Wait," Skulduggery said. "You're talking about Department X."

"Who are they?" Valkyrie asked.

"They don't exist," Skulduggery said. "There have always been rumours of mortal governments forming death squads to go out and exterminate sorcerers. Department X was supposedly a British and Irish joint task force, shrouded in mystery and conspiracy. Except, as I said, they don't exist. Any time someone in power starts to ask questions, we send people like Geoffrey Scrutinous in to convince them they're being silly."

"That may be so," said Wreath, "but these mortals admitted to Baritone that they had just taken out, in their words, the most dangerous targets they'd ever hunted. They told Baritone he

wouldn't believe the whole story if he heard it – they said the targets they killed bled *light*. Sound familiar?"

"Sounds like Warlocks," said Valkyrie.

"And that's all Dragonclaw gave the Warlock in question?" Skulduggery pressed. "A sorcerer's urban legend?"

Wreath shrugged. "It's the only juicy little titbit concerning the Warlocks that we possess. I can't imagine what else it could have been. Obviously, word got out that we knew something and Charivari sent his little friend to investigate."

"And there's nothing else we should know?"

"Nothing else of value. The only other item of interest was that one of the soldiers mentioned their orders had been given by an old man with a long grey beard and another man he couldn't identify."

Valkyrie ignored the ring, and frowned. "What, he didn't know him?"

"No," said Wreath. "Baritone was under the impression that the soldier couldn't even *remember* him."

"All of this," Skulduggery said, "strikes me as something you could have told me over the phone."

Wreath laughed. "Now that is very true, Skulduggery. However, we don't like each other very much, so I wasn't about to tell you anything. And how else was I going to see my favourite student on her special day without popping up uninvited outside her window? Such behaviour strikes me as being vaguely unhealthy, wouldn't you agree?"

"A visit from you strikes me as *very* unhealthy," Skulduggery said.

Valkyrie got to her feet. "I'm going to cut this short before you start hitting each other. Solomon, thank you for your help and thank you so much for the present – it was really nice of you."

"My pleasure," he said, coming forward and kissing her cheek. "Happy birthday again."

Skulduggery put on his hat and walked out. Valkyrie caught

up with him at the elevator, right before the doors slid closed. They started their descent.

“What do you think it all means?” she asked.

Skulduggery didn't respond.

She sighed. “Are you sulking?”

“Me? No. I don't sulk.”

“You sound like you're sulking.”

“I'm just waiting for the violent urges to subside.”

“Why don't you like Solomon? He's really not that bad.”

“I've known him a lot longer than you have.”

“Fine. Be like that. So this mystery man giving orders, the one who couldn't be remembered... We've been hearing that a lot lately.”

Skulduggery activated his façade as they reached the ground floor. The face was plain, the expression grim. They walked to the exit. “Three years ago, Davina Marr was enlisted to destroy the Sanctuary in Dublin by a man she couldn't remember clearly. A similar man turns up *five* years ago and is revealed to be behind some Warlock killings. Sean Mackin, that lovable teenage psychopath, was released from his Sanctuary cell three *months* ago by a man he can't quite remember. It would appear that this is the same man, and he has a significant connection to Roarhaven.” They left the hotel, walked to the Bentley.

“So...” said Valkyrie. “Department X is killing Warlocks, except Department X doesn't exist. But if the Warlocks think it *does* exist, then... what does that mean? Are they going to go after mortals in revenge? How does framing ordinary people help our mystery man achieve whatever it is he wants to achieve?”

“I don't know. But practically every mage in Roarhaven believes that sorcerers should be running the world.”

“So that's his plan? To get the Warlocks to kill some mortals? That's kind of a stupid plan. I mean, as soon as we find the Warlocks, we're going to stop them, right?”

“Unless there's a war on to distract us.”

“You think the mystery man has something to do with what’s happening with the Supreme Council?”

“I don’t like coincidences, Valkyrie. They’re ugly and annoying.” He glanced at her. “How do you like your ring?”

She couldn’t help it. She beamed. “It is *awesome*.”