



THE DYING OF THE LIGHT

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



THE DYING OF THE LIGHT

DEREK LANDY



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This book is dedicated to me.

Derek, without you, I would not be where I am today.

Words cannot convey how much I owe you for the guidance you've shown me — for your wisdom, your wit, your keen insight and your keener intelligence, your taste, your strength, your integrity and your humility. I won't mention the charity work you do, or the political activism you're involved in, or the ecological work you've spearheaded. And it's not just because you won't talk about it — it's because no one else does, either.

You have taught me how to be a better person.


Nay — you have taught us all.

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Dylan Thomas

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MEEK RIDGE



Five in the morning and Danny is up, rolling slowly out of bed, eyes half open as his bare feet touch the floorboards. Getting up this early is worse in the winter, when the cold threatens to push him back under the covers. Colorado winters are something to behold, as his dear departed dad would say, and Danny isn't one to argue with his dear departed dad. But the summers are warm, and so he sits on the edge of his bed without shivering, and after a dull minute he forces his eyes open wide, stands up and dresses.

He goes downstairs, puts the coffee on while he opens the store. Five thirty every morning except Sundays, the General Store is open and ready for business. It was that way when Danny was a boy and his folks ran the place, and it's that way now that Danny is twenty-seven and his folks are cold and quiet and lying side by side in the ground. On his more maudlin days, Danny also likes to think his dreams are buried down there with them too, but he knows this is unfair. He tried to be a musician; he moved to LA and formed a band and when it didn't all happen the way he wanted he scampered back home to take over the family business.

He quit, and there's no one to blame but himself.

By six, the town of Meek Ridge is awake. People stop by on the way to work, and he speaks to them with none of that easy patter his mom had been famous for. Back when she was alive, she'd talk the hind legs off a donkey, and she'd always be quick to crinkle up her eyes and laugh. His dad was more measured, more reserved, but people around here still liked him well enough. Danny doesn't know what they think of him, the wannabe rock star who lit out as soon as he finished school and skulked back with his tail between his legs years later. Probably just as well.

Early morning grows into mid-morning, and mid-morning sprouts wings and becomes a hot, sun-blasted afternoon. Unless there's a customer perusing the shelves, Danny stands at the door, cold bottle of Coke in his hand, watching the cars pass on Main Street and the people walk by, everyone seeming like they have things to do and places to go. By around three, business has picked up, same as it always does, and that keeps him busy and away from the sunshine, until finally he raises his head and it's coming up to seven in the evening and his favourite time of the week.

He takes out the list even though he doesn't need it, just to make sure he hasn't missed anything. When he's done, he's filled two large grocery bags – the reusable canvas kind, not paper or plastic. He locks up, puts the bags on to the passenger seat of his dented old Ford and drives out of Meek Ridge with the window down, his busted AC not doing a whole lot to dispel the trapped heat. By the time the road gets narrower, he's already sweating a little, and as he follows the twisting dust trail, he can feel the first trickle of perspiration running between his shoulder blades.

Finally, he comes to the locked gate and waits there, the engine idling. He doesn't get out and hit the intercom button. Same time every week, he's here and she knows it. Hidden somewhere in the trees or the bushes, a camera is focused on his face. He's stopped trying to spot it. He just knows it's there. The gate clicks, opens slowly, and he drives through.

The previous owner of this farm died when Danny was a teenager, and the buildings fell into disrepair and the fields, hundreds of acres of them, got overgrown with weeds and such. Now the fields are meadows, lush and vast and green, and the buildings have either been salvaged or rebuilt from scratch. A fence encircles the property, too tall to climb over, too sturdy to break. There are hidden cameras everywhere, and every last thing is rigged with alarms. Stories of the farm's new owner swept through Meek Ridge like a tidal wave when she first moved in, and ever since the waters have been unsettled.

There are those say she's an actress who's had a breakdown, or an heiress who rejected her family's lavish lifestyle. Others reckon she's in Witness Protection, or the widowed wife of a European gangster. The tidal wave has left behind it pools and streams of gossip in which rumours and stories and outright lies ebb and flow, and Danny doubts any of them even remotely touch upon the truth. Not that he knows what the truth is. The farm's new owner is almost as much a mystery to him as to anyone else in town. Only difference between them is that he gets to meet her once a week.

He pulls up to the farmhouse. She's sitting in a rocking chair, an actual rocking chair, in the shade on the porch, something she likes to do most warm evenings with her dog curled up beside her. He takes the grocery bags, one in each arm, and walks up the steps as she puts down the book she's reading and stands. She looks to be nineteen or thereabouts, with dark hair and dark eyes, but she's been living here for over five years and she hasn't changed a bit, so he reckons she's somewhere around twenty-four or so.

Pretty. Real pretty. She has a single dimple when she smiles, which isn't quite so much a rare sight any more. Her legs are long and strong, tanned in cut-off jeans, scuffed hiking boots on her feet. This evening she wears a sleeveless T-shirt, the name of some band he's never heard of emblazoned across it. She has a

tattoo on her left arm, from the shoulder to the elbow. Some kind of tribal thing, maybe. Weird symbols that almost look like hieroglyphics.

“Hi there,” he says.

Xena, the German shepherd who never leaves her side, growls at him, showing teeth.

“Xena, hold,” she says, talking quietly but with an edge to her voice. Xena stops growling, but those eyes never leave Danny’s throat. “You’re early,” she says, focusing on him at last.

Danny shrugs. “Slow day. Decided to give myself some time off. That’s one of the advantages of being your own boss, you know?”

She doesn’t respond. For a girl who lives up here with only a dog for company, she isn’t someone who embraces the gentle art of conversation.

She pulls open the screen door, then the door beyond, beckons him through. He brings the groceries inside, Xena padding behind him like an armed escort. The farmhouse is big and old and bright and clean. Lots of wood. Everything is heavy and solid, the kind of solid you’d grab on to to stop yourself from floating away. Danny feels like that sometimes, as if one of these days, he’d just float away and no one would notice.

He puts the groceries on the kitchen table, looks up to say something, realises he’s alone in here with the dog. Xena sits on her haunches, ears pricked, tail flat and still, staring at him.

“Hi there,” he says softly.

Xena growls.

“Here,” she says from right beside him and Danny jumps, spins quickly to the dog in case she mistakes his sudden movement for aggressiveness. But Xena just sits there, no longer growling, looking entirely innocent and not unamused.

Danny smiles self-consciously, takes the money he’s offered. “Sorry,” he says. “I always forget how quietly you walk. You’re like a ghost.”

Something in the way she looks at him makes him regret his choice of words, but before he can try to make things better she's already unpacking the bags.

He stands awkwardly and tells himself to keep quiet. He knows the routine by now. As she busies herself with packing away the groceries, she will ask, in the most casual of tones—

“How are things in town?”

“Good,” Danny says, because that's what he always says. “Things are quiet, but good. There's gonna be a Starbucks opening on Main Street. Etta, she owns the coffee shop on the corner, she's not too happy, and she tried to have a town meeting to stop it from happening. But no one went. People want Starbucks, I think. And they don't really like Etta.”

She nods like she cares, and then she asks, just as he knew she would, “Any new faces?”

“Just the usual number of people passing through.”

“No one asking about me?”

Danny shakes his head. “No one.”

She doesn't respond. Doesn't smile or sigh or look disappointed. It's just a question she needs answered, a fact she needs confirmed. He's never asked who she's waiting for, or who she's expecting, or if someone asking about her would be a good thing or a bad thing. He doesn't ask because he knows she wouldn't tell him.

She closes the kitchen cabinet, folds one of the canvas bags into the other, hands them both back to Danny.

“Could you bring some eggs next time?” Stephanie asks. “I think I'll be in the mood for an omelette.”

He smiles. “Sure,” he says. He's always been a sucker for the Irish accent.

LIVING IN THE SHADOW



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

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

Stephanie raised the Sceptre.

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

kill someone in full view of the public and, just like that, magic would be revealed to a world that wasn't ready for it. He was now the enemy. The enemy deserved to die.

And yet... she hesitated.

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

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

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

The closer she got, the louder her pulse sounded in her head. She felt sure he was going to hear her heartbeat. If not her heartbeat then at the very least her ridiculously loud breathing. When had she started breathing so loud? Had she always breathed this loud? She would have thought someone might have mentioned it.

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

She wasn't used to all these conflicting thoughts ricocheting around in her head.

Three more steps and she reached out, shackles ready.

Rhadaman's eyes snapped open.

He stared at her. She stared at him.

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

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

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

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

She held out her hand. He looked at her a moment longer, and his eyes widened. "You're her."

"No," she said.

He dropped the Sceptre and his hands started glowing. "You're her!"

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

"You killed my friends!"

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

Rhadaman's bottom lip trembled. "You're not a reflection."

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

"This is a trick."

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

“I should... I should kill you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You’ll never take me alive.”

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

Rhadaman moved faster than Stephanie was expecting. Faster even than Skulduggery was expecting. In the blink of an eye, Skulduggery’s gun was sliding along the floor and Skulduggery himself was leaping away from Rhadaman’s grasping hands.

“You can’t stop me!” Rhadaman screeched.

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

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

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

"You're scared of my power."

"As you should be."

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

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

Rhadaman smiled. "This? Oh, I didn't do *this*."

"No? Who did?"

"My friends."

Stephanie couldn't help herself – she had to look around.

"And where are your friends now?" Skulduggery asked.

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

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

"I've given them names," Rhadaman told her. "And I've

dressed them in clothes. I've called them after my friends, the ones Darquesse killed. I think they like having names, not that they'd ever show it."

"Hollow Men don't like anything," Stephanie responded. "They don't think. They don't feel."

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

"Because I'm a real person."

"Or you just think you are."

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

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

"You don't want to do this," Skulduggery said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The shadows moved beside her and a fist came down on her arm. Her fingers sprang open and the Sceptre went spinning beneath an overturned shelf. Stephanie ducked back, cursing. Her only other weapon was the carved shock stick across her back, which had a limited charge and was useless against anything without a nervous system. She ran by a shelf of microwaves and blenders, past pots and pans. She grabbed a stainless-steel ladle that felt unsurprisingly unsatisfying in her hand, and immediately dropped it when she saw the one remaining box of kitchen knives. She dragged it from the shelf, threw it straight into the face of the nearest Hollow Man. The box fell, knives scattering across the floor.

Stephanie snatched up the two biggest ones and swung, the blades slicing through the Hollow Man's neck. Green gas billowed

like air from a punctured tyre. Even as she ran on, she could taste the sting of the gas in the back of her throat.

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

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

A hand grabbed her hair, pulled her back and she cried out. She tried slashing at it with the second knife, but the blade got tangled in her jacket and then it too was lost. She reached up, dug her nails into rough skin, tried to tear through. Her hair was released. Something crunched into her face. The world flashed and spun. She was hit again. She covered up, her arm doing its best to soak up the heavy punches, her head rattling with each impact. If she'd had magic, she'd have set the Hollow Man on fire by now or sent her shadows in to tear it apart. But she didn't have magic. She didn't have such a luxury to fall back on, to get her out of trouble. She wasn't Valkyrie Cain. She didn't *need* magic.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stephanie stared. “Seriously?”

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

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

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

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

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

“I was being cool,” she said.

“I doubt that.”

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

“Oh,” he said. “Sorry.”

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

“He did pull my arm off.”

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

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

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

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

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

“It might make you feel better.”

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

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

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

“I promise I won’t.”

“Forget it, I said.”

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

“No.”

“OK then.”

He stood there, looking at her. She glared back, opened her mouth to continue the conversation, but he suddenly turned, walked away, like he’d just remembered that she may look and sound and talk like Valkyrie Cain, but she *wasn’t* Valkyrie Cain.

And she never would be.

3

THROWING DOWN THE GAUNTLET



Roarhaven was a young city – barely more than three weeks old. It had grown from its humble beginnings as a small town beside a dead lake to a wonder of architectural brilliance in the blink of an eye. Constructed in a parallel reality and then shunted into this one, it overlaid the old town seamlessly. Roarhaven's narrow streets were now wide, its meagre dwellings now lavish. Its border was immense, proclaimed with authority by the protective wall that encircled it, a wall that used tricks and science and magic to shield it from prying, mortal eyes. At the city's centre was the Sanctuary, a palace by any other name, resplendent with steeples and towers and quite the envy of the magical communities around the world.

This was to have been the first magical city of the New World Order. Others would follow, as per Ravel's plan. When the Warlocks started killing mortals and the mortals needed saviours, the sorcerers would swoop in, beat back the horde and be hailed as heroes. They would prove themselves invaluable allies against the newly-discovered forces of darkness. Sorcerer and mortal would stand united. And then, slowly and subtly, the sorcerers would nudge the mortals to one side, and the world

would be theirs. But what was that quote Valkyrie Cain had heard once, that Stephanie now remembered?

No plan survives first contact with the enemy.

The Warlocks had come in numbers far greater than expected. They took down the shield, smashed the wall and breached the gate. To even the odds, Erskine Ravel sent Accelerator-boosted sorcerers to fight them – but these supercharged operatives proved to be as much a threat to their own side as to the enemy. And then Darquesse appeared.

In the chaos that followed, many more people died. The Warlocks, having seen their leader killed, scattered and withdrew, nineteen supercharged sorcerers fled, and Darquesse inflicted the punishment of all punishments upon Erskine Ravel.

Roarhaven survived, but the dream had been broken.

Now, sixteen days after the battle had ended, only a fraction of its lavish buildings were occupied. Its streets were quiet and its people humbled and scared and ashamed. They had been promised glory and dominion; they were told they were going to claim their birthright as conquering heroes of the world. What a shock it must have been to discover that they were the villains of this little story.

Stephanie had no sympathy for them, however. They may have seen themselves as lions, but they flocked like lambs.

She hadn't made up her mind about the city, though. Yes, it was impressive and in places beautiful, and the emptiness of it all added a certain eerie quality she found she liked, but it took the Bentley eight minutes to get from the city gates to the Sanctuary. And that wasn't because of traffic – there was barely any to speak of – but because of the ridiculous grid system they'd used to arrange the streets. It would have been fine if those eight minutes were filled with conversation, but this morning Skulduggery was in one of his quiet moods, so Stephanie sat in silence.

They got to the Sanctuary – or to the palace that the Sanctuary had become – and took the ramp down below street level, where

they parked and rode the elevator up to the lobby. No expense had been spared to remind visitors that this was where the power lay. The lobby was a vision of statues and paintings, white marble and deepest obsidian. Grey-suited Cleavers stood guard, their scythes gleaming wickedly.

The Administrator walked to meet them. “Detective Pleasant,” Tipstaff said, “Miss Edgley, Grand Mage Sorrows will be ready to receive you shortly.”

Skulduggery nodded as Tipstaff walked away, already checking his clipboard for the next item on his to-do list. Skulduggery waited with his hands in his pockets, standing as still as any of the statues around him. Stephanie wasn’t nearly so patient, so off she went, glad for the chance to get away from him. He had his moments of levity, moments when the old Skulduggery would emerge, but they were few and short-lived. His mind was on other things. His mind was on Valkyrie Cain.

She didn’t need to be around him when he was thinking about her.

She left the marble and the brightly-lit corridors and entered the area that had become known as the Old Sanctuary, what remained of the original building with its concrete walls and flickering lights and dancing shadows. Not many sorcerers bothered coming down here, and that’s why Stephanie liked it. Those other sorcerers looked at her uneasily. To them, she was the reflection of the world-breaker, the cheap copy of the girl who was going to kill them all. They didn’t trust her. They didn’t like her. They certainly didn’t value her.

She stepped into the Accelerator Room.

“Hi,” she said.

The Engineer turned. The smiley face that Clarabelle had drawn on to its smooth metal head was still there, and gave the robot an endearingly cheerful expression. Parts were missing from its sigil-covered body, and in those gaps a blue-white light pulsed gently, almost hypnotically.

“Hello, Stephanie,” the Engineer said. “How are you today?”

She shrugged. The Accelerator stood in the middle of the room like an open vase, the uppermost tips of its wall almost scraping the ceiling. Circuitry ran beneath the surface of its skin, crackling brightly. It drew its power from a rift between this world and the source of all magic, a rift the size of a pinprick that the machinery had been built around.

“It’s getting brighter,” she said.

“Yes it is,” said the Engineer. “Every time the power loops, it grows.”

It had originally given them twenty-three days, eight hours, three minutes and twelve seconds until the Accelerator overloaded. Tasked with extending that deadline if at all possible, it had tinkered with the machine, re-routing its power flow and usage, until seven more days had been added to the countdown. But that brief moment of breathing space had been swallowed up as time marched onwards.

“How long left before it all goes *kaboom*?” Stephanie asked.

“Fourteen days, seven hours and two minutes,” the Engineer said. “Although the sound it makes will not be *kaboom*. If and when the Accelerator overloads, the sound will more than likely be a very loud *fizz*. Possibly a *whump*.”

“Right. So not very impressive, then.”

“Indeed. The effects, however, will be most impressive.”

“Yeah,” Stephanie said. “Every sorcerer in the world boosted to twenty times their normal level of power and driven insane in the process, effectively dooming the entire planet. That’s damned impressive, all right.”

“Sarcasm is your forte, Miss Edgley.”

She smiled. “So nice of you to say, Engineer. So, has anyone come forward yet to offer their soul in exchange for shutting it down?”

“Not yet.”

“They’re probably busy.”

“That is what I have surmised.”

“We have two weeks left. I’m sure there’ll be a queue of volunteers once word gets out.”

“Undoubtedly.”

She laughed. “You’re a cool robot, you know that?”

“Possibly the coolest. You are damaged?”

“Sorry?”

“Your face. It is bruised.”

“Oh,” she said, “it’s nothing. Just another perk of the job.”

“Does it hurt?”

“No. Not really. Only when I poke it.”

“Seeing as how pain is not generally sought after, why would you poke it?”

“Exactly what I was thinking.” Stephanie grinned, then the grin faded. “Can I ask you a question? It’s about the symbols you have on you. One of the things they do is make sure you can’t be seen by mortals, right?”

“Essentially.”

“But I’m mortal, and I can see you.”

“But you are different.”

“How? I mean, I’m not magic.”

“But you come from magic,” the Engineer said. “You are a thing born from magic, as am I. But, unlike me, you have surpassed your original purpose. You have become a person – much like Pinocchio in the old fable.”

“Pinocchio,” Stephanie said. “Huh. I hadn’t looked at it like that.”

“My creator, Doctor Rote, would read to me at night. That was his favourite story. It is now my favourite also.”

“Aw, that’s actually sweet. You want to be human?”

“Oh, no, not at all,” said the Engineer. “I want to be a puppet.”

She found Skulduggery in the Medical Wing, talking with Reverie Synecdoche. She didn’t get too close. Synecdoche was a nice

enough doctor, but she was way too fascinated by Stephanie's independent existence for it to be anything other than unnerving. Stephanie let Skulduggery talk and hung back, out of the way.

The Medical Wing was adjacent to the Science Wing, and everyone in this part of the Sanctuary was serious and industrious and at all times busy. Apart from Clarabelle. Stephanie watched her work – or at least do something that could be misconstrued as work. She moved with none of the energy of the people around her and carried an empty clipboard, but the look of concentration on her face was fierce, and double that of anyone else. She had bright green hair today.

“Hi, Clarabelle,” said Stephanie.

Clarabelle stopped walking, but didn't lose that look. “Hi, Valkyrie.”

Stephanie shook her head. “It's still Stephanie, I'm afraid.”

“Why are you afraid? Did you do something wrong?”

“That's very likely,” said Stephanie. “You look busy.”

“I know. I'm practising. None of the doctors will let me do anything until I've proven myself, so I'm pretending to be busy so that they'll see I'm really good at it.”

“Do you think that'll work?”

“I'm fairly confident,” said Clarabelle. “It's how I got Professor Grouse to hire me. He told me afterwards that he immediately regretted his decision, but by then I'd already moved my stuff in. The doctors here aren't as much fun. There's one who looks like a toadstool. You'd imagine someone who looks like a toadstool would be fun to hang around with, but he isn't. He also doesn't appreciate being called a toadstool. Even Doctor Nye was more fun than Toadstool-head. Where is Doctor Nye?”

“Prison.”

“When is it getting out?”

“Not for a long time.”

Clarabelle pursed her lips for a moment, then nodded. “That's probably a good idea. Doctor Nye isn't very nice. It likes

experimenting on things. I heard it once combined the top half of a centaur with the bottom half of a minotaur and the creature escaped, and you can hear it sometimes, roaming the woods at night, howling at the full moon..."

"I'm not sure any of that is true."

"Still, though," Clarabelle said, walking away, "it makes you think, doesn't it?"

"Stephanie," Doctor Synecdoche called, and waved her over.

Stephanie stifled a groan, and joined them without much enthusiasm.

"I have something for you," said Synecdoche, rooting around in a desk. "I don't approve of it, personally, as I'm in the habit of saving lives rather than taking them. But an item was recently discovered buried in the backrooms of the Old Sanctuary, and I was considering your situation and I thought that... let me just find it..."

"My situation?" Stephanie asked.

"Not having magic," said Skulduggery. "The shock stick is useful, but limited if you can't recharge it yourself. The Sceptre is unstoppable but, in its own way, also limited. You may not have the space to aim and fire."

"So I saw something," Synecdoche said, "and thought of you. Ah, here we are. What do you think?"

She held out a gauntlet made of black metal.

Stephanie's eyes widened, and even Skulduggery stiffened.

Synecdoche couldn't help but notice the reaction. "Is something wrong?"

"This is the gauntlet I wear in the vision," Stephanie said.

"So it would seem," murmured Skulduggery.

"You've seen this in a vision?" Synecdoche asked. "But I just came across it yesterday. I thought you might want it as a last-resort weapon."

Stephanie frowned. "What does it do?"

Synecdoche hesitated. "The Old Sanctuary was built by a more

ruthless breed of sorcerer. This belonged to one of them. It's called a Deathtouch Gauntlet. When it's activated, one touch will take someone's life. Ordinarily I'd have had it destroyed immediately, but considering what you're going up against, I thought you could use all the help you can get. You said Mevolent pulled Darquesse's head off and she reattached it, yes? She managed to use her last few seconds of thought to heal herself. With the Deathtouch Gauntlet, there are no last thoughts. Physical death and brain death are instantaneous, so, provided Darquesse doesn't know what's coming, she won't even have the *chance* to survive."

Stephanie looked at Skulduggery. "If I don't wear it, will the future we've seen be averted?"

"Not wearing the gauntlet will more than likely have no impact whatsoever on the vision coming true," Skulduggery said. "We've seen details of the vision change, but the result is always the same."

"Well, I'm not wearing it," said Stephanie. "There. I've decided. Can we go see Cassandra? Check if the vision still ends the same way?"

Skulduggery nodded, his voice suddenly brighter. "I'll tell Cassandra to expect us. Doctor, thank you for your efforts, but it appears we won't be taking the gauntlet."

"OK," said Synecdoche. "But I'll put it aside for you, Stephanie, just in case."

"Don't bother," Stephanie said, already moving away. "I'll never wear it."