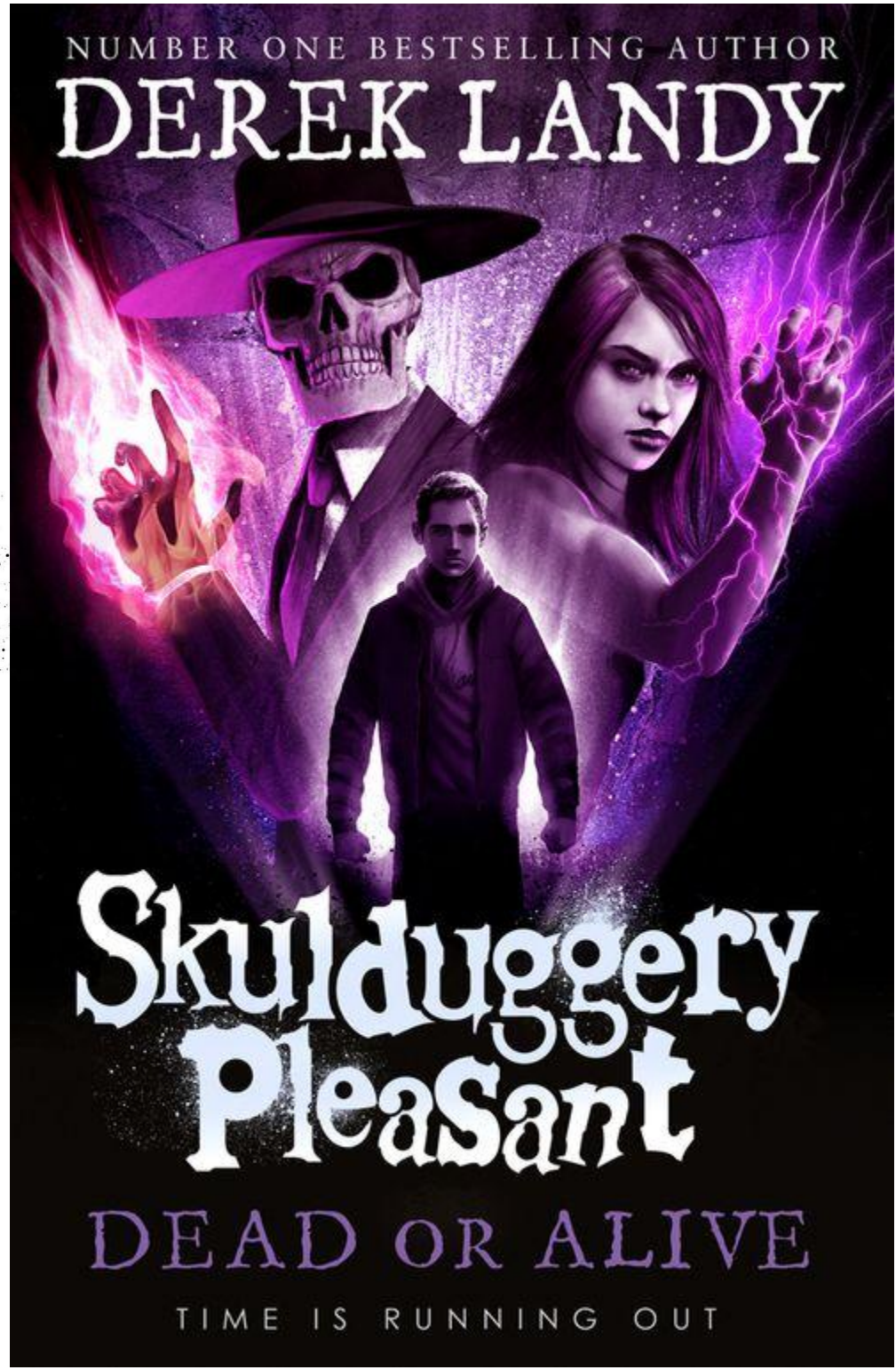
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DEREK LANDY



Skulduggery Pleasant

DEAD OR ALIVE

TIME IS RUNNING OUT

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In years to come, it'd be nice if Covid-19 was an easily managed affliction, or even a distant memory.

But right now, as we're living through it, it's robbing us of time and loved ones.

So this is to all the good times we've spent with the people we love, and all the great times still to come, and the loved ones we've yet to meet. If this book has a message, it's that time heals, and love is forever, and laughter is—

Hold on. No.

The message, I think, is that bad times pass, and good times are always... no. That's not it, either.

Maybe something about punching? There's a lot of punching in this book. Some kicking, too. And jokes. Many jokes. Man, I'm funny. I find myself hilarious, I don't mind telling you. Absolutely...

Wait, what was I talking about?

1

This was surely going to be the greatest day in the life of Rancid Fines, and it was a Tuesday. Not the most auspicious day of the week, he supposed, but he was aware of at least a few momentous things that had occurred on Tuesdays before now.

The stock market crash, back in 1929. That had been on a Tuesday.

The *Challenger*. That had exploded on a Tuesday in 1986. He'd been sad about that. He'd never particularly liked mortals, but had always admired astronauts. He liked the way they bounced on the moon.

Elvis had died on a Tuesday, as had Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and the Big Bopper.

D-Day. That had happened on a Tuesday and it had ruined everything, back when he'd been working with the Nazis. It had almost soured Tuesdays for him forever.

But he was about to take Tuesdays back. He was about to restore the most depressing day of the week to its former glory, if it had ever had any.

He checked his watch, and smiled: 4.48 in the morning would forever be known as the time the Faceless Ones returned to their rightful place as masters of the Earth.

He threw the switch. Very little happened.

"What's wrong?" asked Kiln.

"Nothing," Rancid said, hurrying over to the array and checking the connections. There were over a dozen power cables leading to and from the metal dish – any one of them could have come loose. It was an easy fix. It would be an easy fix. It had to be an easy fix.

"What are you doing?" Kiln asked.

Rancid resisted the urge to shout at him, to tell him to shut up and let him work. Now was not the time to lose his temper. This was a joyous occasion – or it would be, once it got going. Besides, Kiln was a good deal taller than him and a good deal stronger and a good deal scarier.

Rancid Fine was tall in the mind. He was strong in the heart. He was scary in the soul.

"It's a loose cable," he muttered. "It's an easy fix."

It was a nice night. Summer was a month away and the sky twinkled with stars. He was glad the Faceless Ones were going to return to good weather. He imagined that the dimension they'd been exiled to was cold and barren. He was looking forward to welcoming them back to the warmth.

"What's wrong with it?" Kiln asked, coming over.

Rancid got to his feet, staring at the array. The Crystal of the Saints – yellow, as big as both of Rancid's fists side by side, sat in its place in the centre of the dish. With the power cables connected – which they were – the crystal should have been glowing. All those sigils he'd painstakingly carved into the metal, they were supposed to be glowing, too. The whole thing should have been lighting up the entire mountainside.

"Nothing's wrong," Rancid said.

"Then why isn't it working?"

"Give it time."

Kiln frowned. "How much time?"

"As much as it needs."

"Rancid, you said it would work immediately. You said all the adjustments you'd made to the array would mean an instant

connection. You said it would light up – you said there'd be fireworks."

"It just needs more—"

Kiln grabbed him by the collar of his coat and pulled him in. "I've spent every last cent I have on this project! Everything I own went into the equipment that you specified! That you designed!"

"It will work!" Rancid squealed.

"It will not work! It was never going to work! The array can't pull power out of the Crystal of the Saints because there is no power! It's a dud!"

"No!" Rancid screamed.

Kiln threw him down. "My whole life," he said, horrified. "I bet my whole life on this."

"It will bring the Faceless Ones back," Rancid whimpered.

"I don't care about them," Kiln sneered. "I don't give a damn about your gods! I was after the power you assured me was resting in that thing! With it, I could have had everything! I'd have been able to rebuild my fortune a hundred times over!"

Rancid blinked up at him. "But we... we were going to bring back the Faceless Ones."

"That was your dream, you insufferable toad."

"You were going to betray me?"

Kiln laughed. "Yes, Rancid, I was going to betray you. Once you'd proven the Crystal still had some juice in it, I was going to take it and start my life over. Your ridiculous notions of what the world would be like with the Faceless Ones in charge? Why the hell would I ever want a world like that? I happen to like this one. I happen to like mortals. They're not bad. Sure, I've killed a whole bunch of them over the years, but who hasn't?" He sighed. "But the Crystal doesn't have any power in it. You've ruined me."

Rancid got to his feet. He was short, so it didn't take long. "Blasphemer," he said.

Kiln didn't respond to that. His eyes were on the Crystal. "It'll be a challenge finding someone to buy it, but, so long as I sell before the news spreads that it's just one big lump of costume jewellery, I should recoup some of my losses, at least."

Rancid snatched up the Crystal, held it to his chest. "You stay back!"

"Rancid, come on. Don't be stupid."

Rancid turned and ran, tripped over a cable and stumbled, fell to his knees and the Crystal jolted out of his grip, went bouncing into the shadows.

A moment later, a figure stepped out of those shadows. Tall, slender, wearing a dark blue three-piece suit, complete with hat. The moonlight fell across the white of his skull as he looked at the Crystal in his gloved hands.

"I've been chasing you and this damn thing for far too long," Skulduggery Pleasant said.

Rancid shook his head. "No. Not you. Please, not you."

"Every time I've come close, you've managed to stay just out of reach," Pleasant continued, "whether it be by cunning or pure dumb luck. Without meaning to be rude, it was invariably the latter. Every time I've made a concentrated effort to catch you, something has pulled me away: killers, hellworlds, Remnants, alternate dimensions, ex-girlfriends... but today it is my pleasure – my absolute, unconditional pleasure – to finally say the words 'Rancid Fines, you're under arrest.'"

"No!" screamed Rancid, scrambling up again. "No! Not when I'm so close!"

He dived for the Crystal, but Pleasant tossed it over Rancid's head and it dropped into the hands of a woman in black, her dark hair falling across her face.

"So this is what we've been looking for, on and off, since I was thirteen years old," said Valkyrie Cain.

"I was looking for it a lot longer than that," Pleasant responded. "First time I even caught a glimpse of it, it was 1943 and I was

crouching in the dark, surrounded by Nazis. They were talking about the massive amounts of power it could generate – but I've yet to see any evidence of that."

"Its power is limitless!" Rancid wailed.

"Nazis," Cain said, ignoring him completely, "I'd have loved to have fought Nazis. I bet you could keep on punching them and you wouldn't feel even the slightest bit bad about it."

"Nazis *were* pretty punchable," Skulduggery agreed. "Still are."

Kiln cleared his throat and held up his hands. "Thank God you're here," he said. "Rancid Fines was going to kill me."

"I was not!" shrieked Rancid.

"This guy?" said Cain. "This guy was going to kill you?"

Kiln nodded. "Yes."

"This guy right here, who needs to either stop crying or wipe his nose? This guy was going to kill you?"

"Don't let the tears or the nose fool you," said Kiln. "He's merciless."

"He certainly looks it. But I'm afraid you're under arrest, too. The Crystal of the Saints has been on the Forbidden Items list for a long time."

"It has?"

"Right there in the *Catastrophic Consequences* column."

"That does sound serious," Kiln said. "And you're not going to let me go, are you? I didn't think so. See, that presents me with something of a dilemma. You want to arrest me, and I don't want to be arrested."

"I can see how a dilemma would arise."

"So I only have one recourse. I have to resort to violence."

"Ah," said Pleasant. "Not a good idea."

Cain shrugged. "We excel at violence."

"We exceed at violence."

"You don't want to resort to violence with us," said Cain. "It won't go well for you."

Kiln nodded. "I understand what you're saying, and I appreciate

you saying it. And while people a lot more powerful than I have tried to kill you before now, and I've heard about how badly that has gone for them, I can't help but think that maybe they failed because they just weren't me, you know?"

Three masked figures in black, with just their eyes visible, stepped out beside Kiln.

"Ninjas?" Cain whispered. Then, louder, "We're gonna fight ninjas?"

The first ninja took out a sword. The second took out a three-sectioned staff. The third filled his hands with throwing stars.

"Sweet blessed baby Jesus," said Cain. "We're gonna fight ninjas."

The third ninja flung the stars and Cain turned, the stars bouncing off her shoulder. He joined the ninja with the three-sectioned staff and they went after Pleasant, who started hurling fireballs, while the one with the sword lunged at Cain. The sword slashed at her, knocking the Crystal from her hands, but the blade, like the throwing stars, failed to get through her suit. Cain dodged another slash and charged, crashing into him.

Kiln crept forward, scooped up the Crystal.

"No!" Rancid yelled, diving and wrapping his arms round Kiln's leg.

"Stop that," said Kiln, trying to kick him off.

But there wasn't a power on this Earth that could dislodge Rancid Fines. "That stays with me! I'm so close to unlocking its secrets!"

"If you were ever going to unlock anything," Kiln said, doing his best to walk away, "you'd have done so by now."

The air rippled and one of the ninjas – the one currently on fire – went flying through the air like a screaming meteor.

"I will not let you take away my life's work," Rancid muttered through gritted teeth as he was dragged through the dirt and long grass.

The ninja with the sword had lost his weapon, but he was still

kicking Valkyrie Cain around the place. Finally, she just blasted him with what looked like white lightning, and he slammed into Kiln.

The Crystal fell and Rancid grabbed it, kissed it, and scrambled away, leaving the fight to continue behind him.