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Skulduggery Pleasant: Mortal Coil

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1

WREATH'S TASK



The doors swung open and High Priest Auron Tenebrae strode into the room, his robe swirling around his tall, narrow frame. To his right was Quiver, a miser with words, but overly generous with withering glares. To Tenebrae's left, Craven, a bland sycophant, possessed of an uncanny skill to worm his way into his superior's good graces. Solomon Wreath had been seeing far too much of all three lately.

"Cleric Wreath," Tenebrae said, nodding imperiously at him.

"Your Eminence," Wreath responded, bowing deeply. "To what do I owe the honour?"

"Why do you *think* we're here?" Craven said, almost sneered. "You're late with your report. Did you think the High Priest would forget? Do you think him a fool?"

"I do not think him a fool, no," Wreath answered calmly. "But as to the intelligence of the people who accompany him, I'm afraid I cannot say."

"An insult!" Craven screeched. "How dare you! How dare you use a derogatory tone in the presence of the High Priest!"

"Enough," Tenebrae sighed, "both of you. Your constant bickering tries my patience."

"My humblest apologies," Craven said immediately, bowing and closing his eyes, his lower lip trembling on the verge of tears. A magnificent performance, as usual.

"Yes," Wreath said. "Sorry about that."

"Despite Cleric Craven's overt dramatics," Tenebrae said, "he is quite correct to point out that you are late with your report. How is Valkyrie Cain progressing through her studies?"

"She's a fast learner," said Wreath. "As far as the practical side goes anyway. She's a natural at shadow casting, and every time I see her she's improved."

"And the philosophical aspect?" Quiver asked.

"Is not progressing nearly as smoothly," Wreath admitted. "She doesn't seem to be at all interested in the history or the teachings of the Order. It's going to take a lot to open her mind to it."

"The skeleton has already poisoned her against us," Tenebrae said bitterly.

"I fear you may be right. But I still think the effort is worth it."

"And I have yet to be convinced."

"Just because the girl is a fast learner," Quiver said, "does not mean she is the Death Bringer."

"Cleric Quiver speaks the truth," Tenebrae nodded.

Wreath did his best to look humble, keeping his comments to himself. He'd been searching for their saviour, for the one who would save the world from itself, for most of his life. He knew full well the danger of false hope and blind alleys – he'd had his fair share of both. But Valkyrie Cain was different. He felt it. Valkyrie Cain was the *one.*

"She troubles me," Tenebrae said. "Does she have potential? Absolutely. With training and with study, she could be the best of us. But the best of us still falls far short of what the Death Bringer should be."

"I'll keep working with her," Wreath said. "In two years,

maybe three, we'll have a better understanding of what she's capable of."

"Three years?" Tenebrae laughed. "A lot can happen, as we have seen, in a short space of time. Serpine. Vengeous. The Diablerie. Dare we risk being sidetracked by a mistake? While we are busy testing Miss Cain, another one of Mevolent's disciples might actually succeed in their insane goals and bring back the Faceless Ones for good. What if, as you yourself fear, Cleric Wreath, Lord Vile returns to punish us all? If that happens, our plans mean nothing. There will be no world left to save."

"Then what does His Eminence suggest?" Wreath asked.

"We need to know if we are wasting our time with this one."

"A Sensitive," Craven nodded.

"We've tried this before," Wreath argued. "None of our psychics are able to tell us anything."

"Reading the future has never been a particular talent of the Necromancer Order," Tenebrae said. "Our Sensitives are somewhat lacking when it comes to fortune-telling. But there is another I keep hearing about. Finbar something..."

"Finbar Wrong," Wreath said. "But he knows Valkyrie personally. It would raise too many questions. Even if he didn't know her, I doubt he'd ever aid our cause. As I keep reminding you, nobody out there likes us."

"We're working to save them all!" Craven barked, and this time not even the High Priest paid him any attention.

"The psychic will help us," Tenebrae said, "and afterwards he will remember nothing about it. Cleric Wreath, I want you to take the Soul Catcher and release the Remnant we have trapped inside it."

Wreath's face slackened. "Your Eminence, Remnants are highly dangerous..."

"Oh, I trust your ability to handle any situation," Tenebrae said with an airy wave of his hand. "Have it possess this Finbar person, and if he sees a future where Valkyrie Cain is the Death Bringer, and he sees her saving the world, then we can put all our energies into making sure she fulfils her potential. If he does not see this future, we forget about her, and our search continues."

"But using the Remnant..."

"Once the job is done, simply return it to the Soul Catcher. What could be easier?"

2

THE SMILING DETECTIVE



Christmas was a few days away, and all but one of the houses on this suburban Dublin street had lights in the windows. Three of the most competitive neighbours had filled their small gardens with flickering Santas and frolicking reindeer, and some idiot had even wrapped a cable of fairy lights round the lamp post outside his gate. There was no snow, but the night was cold, and frost clung to the city like glitter.

The big car that rolled to a stop outside the house with no lights was a 1954 Bentley R-Type Continental, one of only

208 ever made. It was an exquisite car, retro-fitted with modern conveniences, adapted to the needs of its owner. It was fast, it was powerful, and if it received even the slightest of dents, it would fall apart**.**

That's what the mechanic had said. He'd done all he could, used all his knowledge and all his abilities to bring this car back from the brink so many times – but the next dent, he promised, would be its last. All the tricks he'd used to keep it going, to bend it back into shape, would be counteracted. The glass would shatter, the metal would rupture, the frame would buckle, the tyres would burst, the engine would crack... The only way to avoid complete and utter catastrophe, the mechanic had said, was to make sure you weren't *in* the car when all this happened.

Skulduggery Pleasant got out first. He was tall and thin, and wore a dark blue suit and black gloves. His hair was brown and wavy, and his cheekbones were high and his jaw was square. His skin was slightly waxy and his eyes didn't seem capable of focusing, but it was a pretty good face, all things considered. One of his better ones.

Valkyrie Cain got out of the passenger side. She zipped up her black jacket against the cold, and joined Skulduggery as he walked up to the front door. She glanced at him, and saw that he was smiling.

"Stop doing that," she sighed.

"Stop doing what?" Skulduggery responded in that gloriously velvet voice of his.

"Stop smiling. The person we want to talk to lives in the only dark house on a bright street. That's not a good sign."

"I didn't realise I *was* smiling," he said.

They stopped at the door, and Skulduggery made a concerted effort to shift his features. His mouth twitched downwards. "Am I smiling now?"

"No."

"Excellent," he said, and the smile immediately sprang back up.

Valkyrie handed him his hat. "Why don't you get rid of the face? You're not going to need it in here."

"You're the one telling me how much I should practise," he said, but slid his gloved fingers beneath his shirt collar anyway, tapping the symbols etched into his collarbones. The face and hair retracted off his head, leaving him with a gleaming skull.

He put on his hat, cocked at a jaunty angle. "Better?" he asked.

"Much."

"Good." He knocked, and took out his gun. "If anyone asks, we're scary carollers."

Humming 'Good King Wenceslas' to himself, he knocked again, and still no one answered the door, and no lights came on.

"What do you bet everyone's dead?" Valkyrie asked.

"Are you just being incredibly pessimistic," Skulduggery asked, "or is that ring of yours telling you something?"

The Necromancer ring was cold on her finger, but no colder than usual. "It's not telling me anything. I can only sense death through it when I'm practically standing over the dead body."

"Which is an astonishingly useful ability, I have to say. Hold this."

He gave her his gun, and crouched down to pick the lock. She looked around, but no one was watching them.

"It might be a trap," she said, speaking softly.

"Unlikely," he whispered. "Traps are usually enticing."

"It might be a very rubbish trap."

"Always a possibility."

The lock clicked open. Skulduggery straightened up, put his lock picks away, and took his gun back.

"I need a weapon," Valkyrie muttered.

"You're an Elemental with a Necromancer ring, trained in a variety of martial arts by some of the best fighters in the

world," Skulduggery pointed out. "I'm fairly certain that *makes* you a weapon."

"I mean a weapon you hold. You have a gun, Tanith has a sword... I want a stick."

"I'll buy you a stick for Christmas."

She glowered as he pushed the door. It opened silently, without even a creepy old creak. Skulduggery went first and Valkyrie followed, closing the door after them. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to this level of gloom, and Skulduggery, who had no eyes for this to be a problem, waited until she tapped him before moving on. They passed through into the living room, where she tapped him again. He looked at her, and she pointed to the Necromancer ring. It was buzzing with a dreadful kind of cold energy as it fed off the death in the room.

They found the first dead body sprawled across the couch. The second was slumped in the corner, amid the wreckage of what once had been a side table. Skulduggery looked closely at each of them, then shook his head at Valkyrie. Neither was the man they were looking for.

They moved into the kitchen, where they found a third corpse, face down on the floor. Were his head not twisted all the way around, he would have been looking up at the ceiling.

A bottle lay beside his hand, smashed against the tiles, and the smell of beer was still strong.

The rest of the ground floor was clear of corpses, so they went to the stairs. The first one creaked, and Skulduggery stepped back off it. He wrapped his arms around Valkyrie's waist, and they rose off the ground and drifted up to the body on the landing. It was a woman, who had died curled up in a foetal position.

There were three bedrooms and one bathroom. The bathroom was empty, as was the first bedroom they checked. The second bedroom had scorch marks on the wall and another dead woman halfway out of a window. Valkyrie guessed this woman was the one responsible for the scorch marks – she'd tried to defend herself, then tried to run. Neither attempt had worked.

There was someone alive in the last bedroom. They could hear whoever it was in the wardrobe, trying not to make a sound. They heard a deep breath being taken as they approached, and then there was absolute silence for all of thirteen seconds. The silence ended with a ridiculously loud gasping for air. Skulduggery thumbed back the hammer of his gun.

"Come out," he said.

The wardrobe burst open and a shrieking madman leaped

out at Valkyrie. She batted down his arm, grabbed his shirt and twisted her hip into him, his shriek turning to a yelp as he hit the floor.

"Don't kill me," he sobbed as he lay there. "Oh God, please don't kill me."

"If you had let me finish," Skulduggery said, slightly annoyed, "you would have heard me say, *'Come out, we're not going to hurt you'*. Idiot."

"He probably wouldn't have said *idiot*," Valkyrie told the sobbing man. "We're trying our best to be nice."

The man blinked through his tears, and looked up. "You're... You're not going to kill me?"

"No, we're not," Valkyrie said gently, "so long as you wipe your nose right now."

The man sniffled into his sleeve and she stood back, trying not to shiver with revulsion. He got up.

"You're Skulduggery Pleasant," he said. "I've heard about you. The Skeleton Detective."

"Season's greetings," Skulduggery nodded. "This is my partner, Valkyrie Cain. And you are...?"

"My name is Ranajay. I live here with my... with my friends. It's so nice, living next to all these normal people. We really liked living here. Me and my... Me and my friends..."

Ranajay looked like he was going to start sobbing again, so Valkyrie cut in quickly. "Who did this? Who killed everyone?"

"I don't know. A big guy. Huge. He wore a mask, and spoke with an accent. His eyes were red."

"What did he want?" Skulduggery asked.

"He came here looking for a friend of mine."

Valkyrie frowned. "Ephraim Tungsten?"

"Yes," Ranajay said. "How did you know?"

"That's who we want to talk to. We believe he's been in contact with a killer we've been tracking for five months."

"Davina Marr, right? That detective who went bad, blew up the Sanctuary? That's why the big guy wanted Ephraim too."

"Do you know if Marr has been in touch with Ephraim?" Skulduggery asked.

"Oh, she has, yes. Paid him to make her a false ID and arrange to get her out of the country. That's what Ephraim does. When people have to disappear, he takes care of it. Only this time he didn't. I think after he realised what she'd done, he didn't want any part of it. The detective, Marr, she came looking for everything she'd paid for after the Sanctuary fell into the ground, but he was gone. She tore this place up three times in the same month looking for him. Haven't seen her since then. Haven't seen Ephraim either. We all thought it'd be

safer if we stayed away from him, you know? Fat lot of good that did my friends."

"The man who killed them," Skulduggery said, "did you tell him where Ephraim is?"

Ranajay shook his head. "Didn't have to. *I* knew what he wanted to know. I think that's the only reason he didn't kill me. Ephraim had told me, ages ago, that the only thing he'd done for Marr was to set up places for her to stay in three spots across the city. That's all the information the big guy wanted, just to know where Marr was staying."

"Can you tell *us* the three spots?"

"Are you going after him?" asked Ranajay.

"Our main priority is Davina Marr, but the man who killed your friends has just made it to number two on our list."

"You'll stop him?"

"If we can."

"You'll kill him?"

"If we have to."

"Yeah. Yeah, I'll tell you."