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Opening extract from

Skulduggery Pleasant: Dark Days

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1

SCARAB



hen Dreylan Scarab had been locked away in his little cell, he'd thought about nothing but murder. He liked murder. Murder and long walks had been two of his favourite things when he was younger. He'd walk a long way to kill someone, he'd often said, and he'd kill for a long walk. But after close to 200 years in that cell, he'd kind of lost interest in walks. His passion for murder, however, burned brighter than ever.

They let him out of prison a few days early, and he stepped into the Arizona sunshine an old man. They had kept his power from him, and without his power his body had withered and aged. But his mind stayed sharp. Try as

they might, the years could not dull his mind. Still, he didn't like being old. He counted how long it took him to cross the road and wasn't pleased with the result.

He stood there for two hours. The dust kicked up and got into his eyes. He looked around for something to kill, then quelled the urge. The entrance to the underground prison was within spitting distance, and killing something while the guards were still watching was probably a bad idea. Besides, Scarab's magic hadn't returned to him yet, so even if there were *something in this desert worth killing, he might not have been able to manage it.*

A shape came through the shimmer of the heat haze, solidifying into a black, air-conditioned automobile. It pulled up and a man got out slowly. It took Scarab a moment to recognise him.

"Why the hell didn't you break me out?" Scarab growled. His voice depressed him. In the open air, away from the confines of the prison, even his growl sounded old and frail.

The man shrugged. "I was kind of hopin' you'd die in there, to be honest. You sure you didn't? You look pretty dead. Smell dead, too."

"I'm staying alive long enough to do what has to be done."

The other man nodded. "I figured you'd be wantin' revenge. Eachan Meritorious is dead though. Nefarian Serpine killed him. Few others've been killed since you were put away, too."

Scarab narrowed his eyes. "Skulduggery Pleasant?"

"Missin'. Couple of Faceless Ones came through their little portal ten, maybe eleven months ago. They were forced back, but

they dragged the skeleton with 'em."

"I miss all the fun *things," Scarab said without humour.*

"His friends have been lookin' for him ever since. You want my opinion, he's dead. For good, this time. You might get lucky though. They might find him, bring him back. Then *you can kill him."*

"What about Guild?"

A bright, white-toothed smile. "He's the new Grand Mage in Ireland. He's a prime target for you."

Scarab felt a tingle, a slight buzz in his bones, and his heart quickened. It was the sensation of magic returning to him after all this time of being kept locked away. He kept the elation out of his dry, croaky voice. "No. It's not just him. It's all of them. I'm going to make them all pay. Their world is going to crumble for what they did to me."

"You got a plan, I take it?"

"I'm going to destroy the Sanctuary."

The man took off his sunglasses and cleaned them. "You goin' to need some help with that?"

Scarab looked at him suspiciously. "I've got nothing to pay you with, and there's no profit in revenge."

"This would be a freebie, old man. And I know some people who might be interested in gettin' involved. We've all got scores to settle in Ireland." Billy-Ray Sanguine put his sunglasses back on, covering up the black holes where his eyes had once been. "I'm thinkin' of one li'l lady in particular."

2

HOME INVASION



She missed him.

She missed his voice, and his humour, and his warm arrogance, and those moments in his company when she realised that this was when she came alive – finally living, by the side of a dead man.

For eleven months he had been gone and for almost a year Valkyrie had been searching for his original skull, to use as a tool to reopen the portal and get him back. She slept when she had to and ate when she needed to. She let the search consume her. Time spent with her parents grew less and less. She'd been to

Germany, and France, and Russia. She had kicked down rotten doors and run through darkened streets. She had followed the clues, just like he'd taught her, and now, finally, she was close.

Skulduggery had once told her that the head he now wore was not his actual head – he had won it in a poker game. He said his real head had been stolen, while he slept, by little goblin things that had run off with it in the night. At the time he hadn't gone into any further detail, but he had filled in the blanks later on.

Twenty years ago, a small church in the middle of the Irish countryside was being plagued by what appeared to be a poltergeist. The angry spirit was causing havoc, terrifying the locals and driving away the police when they came to investigate. Skulduggery was called in by an old friend and he arrived, wrapped in his scarf with his hat pulled low.

The first thing he learned was that the culprit *wasn't* a poltergeist. The second thing he discovered was that it was most likely a type of goblin, and there were probably more than one. The third thing he unearthed was that the church, as small and as spartan as it was, had a solid gold cross set up behind the altar, and if there was one thing goblins loved, it was gold.

"Actually, if there's one thing that goblins love," Skulduggery had said, "it's eating babies, but gold comes in a close second."

The goblins were trying to frighten everyone away long enough so that they could pry the cross loose and make off with it. Skulduggery set up camp and waited. To pass the time, he sank into a meditative state, to be roused whenever anyone got too close to the church.

The first night the goblins came and he leaped out, screaming and throwing fireballs, scaring them witless. The second night they crept up, whispering among themselves to bolster their courage, and he appeared behind them and roared curse words and they ran off once again, crying in fear. But the third night they surprised him, and instead of sneaking up to the church, they sneaked up on *him* and grabbed his head while he was deep in a meditative trance. By the time he had figured out what was going on, they had disappeared, and Skulduggery had nowhere to put his hat.

Now wearing a head that was not his own, Skulduggery's investigations had revealed that the goblins later ran foul of a sorcerer named Larks, who had stolen their paltry possessions and sold them on. The investigation ended there, as other events began to call for Skulduggery's attention. He had always planned to get back to it, but never did, and so the rest was up to Valkyrie.

The skull, she had learned, was bought by a woman as a

surprise, and somewhat unsettling, wedding gift for the man she was to marry. The woman had then used the skull to beat that man to a bloody and pulpy death after she found him stealing from her. The murder inquiry was undertaken by "mortal" police – Valkyrie hated that expression – and so the skull had been logged as evidence. Now known as the Murder Skull, it had found its way on to the black market, and changed hands four times before a sorcerer named Umbra sensed the traces of magic within. Umbra had acquired it and within a year it came into the possession of Thames Chabon, notorious wheeler, unscrupulous dealer, and all-round shady character. As far as anyone knew, Chabon still had the skull. It had taken considerable effort to even get in touch with him, and Valkyrie had been forced to use quite unorthodox means to do so.

The unorthodox means stood by the side of the quiet street, hands in pockets. His name was Caelan. He had been maybe nineteen, twenty years old when he'd died. He was tall, his hair was black, and his cheekbones were narrow slashes against his skin. He glanced at Valkyrie as she approached, then looked away quickly. It was close to nightfall. He was probably getting hungry. Vampires had a tendency to do that.

"Did you arrange it?" she asked.

"Chabon will meet you at ten o'clock," he muttered,

"tomorrow morning. The Bailey, off Grafton Street."

"OK."

"Make sure you're on time – he doesn't wait around."

"And you're sure the head is Skulduggery's?"

"That's what Chabon said. He didn't know why it's so valuable to you though."

Valkyrie nodded, but didn't respond. She didn't tell him about the Isthmus Anchor, an object belonging to one reality but residing in another. She didn't tell him how it kept the portals between these realities active as a result, or that all she needed to open a portal near Skulduggery was his original head and a willing Teleporter. She had the Teleporter. Now she needed the skull.

Caelan looked across at the setting sun. "I'd better go. It's getting late."

"Why are you doing this?" Valkyrie asked suddenly. "I'm not used to people helping me out for no reason."

Caelan kept his eyes off her. "Some time ago you imprisoned a man named Dusk. I don't like this man."

"I'm not too fond of him either."

"You scarred him, I hear."

"He had it coming."

"Yes, he did."

He paused, then walked away. His movements reminded her of the terrible, predatory gracefulness of a jungle cat.

When he was gone, Tanith Low emerged from the alley on the other side of the street, all blonde hair and brown leather, hiding her sword under her long coat.

Tanith took her home, and Valkyrie stood beneath her bedroom window and swept her arms up by her sides, clutching the sharp air and using it to lift her to the sill. She tapped on the glass and a small light turned on. The window opened and her own face – dark-eyed and dark-haired – peered out at her.

"I thought you weren't coming home tonight," her reflection said.

Valkyrie climbed in without answering. Her reflection watched her close the window and take off her coat. It was as cold inside as it was out, and Valkyrie shivered. The reflection did the same, approximating a human response to a condition it had never experienced.

"We had lasagne for dinner," it said. "Dad's been trying to get tickets for the All-Ireland Championship on Sunday, but so far he hasn't been able to."

Valkyrie was tired, so she just gestured at the full-length mirror inside the wardrobe door. The reflection, having no feelings to hurt, stepped into the glass then turned and waited.

Valkyrie touched the mirror and the reflection's memories swam into her mind, settling beside her own. She closed the wardrobe and realised she hadn't been home in eight days. She had a sudden longing to see her parents and not just settle for the memories viewed through the eyes of an emotionless substitute. But her parents were asleep down the hall and Valkyrie knew she would have to wait until morning.

She took a black ring from her finger and put it on the bedside table. Ghastly, Tanith and China didn't like the ring – it was a Necromancer tool after all. But for what Valkyrie had had to face over the past eleven months she had needed something extra, and her natural aptitude for Necromancy had provided her with the sheer strength she had required.

She undressed, dropping her sleeveless top and her trousers on the floor over her boots. No clothes made by Ghastly Bespoke ever creased, and for that she was quietly grateful. Valkyrie pulled on her shorts and the new Dublin football jersey her dad had got her last Christmas then climbed into bed. She reached out and turned off the light before quickly pulling her arm back under the covers.

Tomorrow, she thought. Tomorrow they would find the skull and tomorrow they would use it to open the portal. Wherever Skulduggery was, the portal would open close by.

Valkyrie thought about this and what she would do when she saw him again. She pictured running to him and hugging him, feeling the framework beneath his clothes that gave him mass, and she tried to imagine the first thing he would say. Something dry, she knew. Something understated and funny. Probably a boast.

When she looked at her bedside clock, Valkyrie realised that she'd been lying in bed for over an hour. She sighed, flipped the pillow to the cool side and turned over, banishing such thoughts from her mind, and eventually she experienced the welcome embrace of sleep.

It was a fitful sleep though, uneasy, and she awoke in the night to find someone standing over her. Her heart lurched, yet even through the shock, she was going through a list of possibilities – *Mum Dad Tanith* –and then the man reached down and wrapped his cold hands around her throat.

Valkyrie squirmed, trying to kick out, but the bedcovers were trapping her legs. She fought to break the chokehold, but her assailant was far too strong. His fingers dug into her throat and blood pounded in her temples. She was going to pass out.

The covers came loose and she slammed her foot into his thigh. His leg moved back, but his grip didn't loosen. She got both feet against his belly and tried to shove him off. The dark

shape stayed where it was, looming over her. She was going to die. She took one hand away from his wrist and pushed at the air, but the push was too weak to have any effect. She reached for the Necromancer ring, desperately slipping her finger into it, and immediately she felt the darkness within, cold and coiling. She curled her hand and thrust it at him. A fist of shadow slammed into his chest and suddenly the choking fingers were gone and he was stumbling away. Valkyrie leaped off the bed, snapped her palms against the air and the man shot backwards off his feet. He hit the wall and fell, crashing through her desk. She clicked her fingers, conjuring fire into her hand, illuminating the room.

For a moment she didn't recognise him. The clothes were all wrong – layers of torn and filthy garments, mud-caked boots and fingerless gloves. The hair was longer, untamed, and the face was dirty. It was the beard that gave him away though. The pointy little beard that Remus Crux always wore to hide his weak chin.

She heard her father shout her name and she extinguished the fire. Her parents were about to barge in. She whipped a trail of shadow around her bed and dragged it so that it jammed the door shut.

"Stephanie!" her mother screamed from the other side as the

doorhandle turned uselessly.

Valkyrie turned back to Crux just as he grabbed her and hurled her against the wall. She rebounded and jumped into him, using her knee to drive him back. She jumped again, extending both legs, her feet slamming into his chest. He wheeled back, tripping over her discarded clothes and falling. His head crunched off her bedside table.

Her parents were doing their best to break down the door.

In an enclosed space Valkyrie's knowledge of Elemental magic wasn't going to get the job done. The Necromancer ring was cold on her finger as she drew in the darkness. She focused it into a point and then unleashed it. It hit Crux's shoulder and he jerked back. She did it again, hitting his left leg, and it crumpled beneath him.

"Steph!" her father roared. "Open the door! Open the door now!"

Crux came at her before she could strike him again. With one hand he grabbed her wrist, holding the ring away from him, and with the other he grabbed her throat. He pinned her against the wall, pressing against her, cutting off her weapons. His eyes were narrowed and through them she could see his madness.

The window shattered in on top of them. Valkyrie gasped as Crux was wrenched away from her. Shadows swirled and a

thousand arrows of darkness flew at him and he dived, barely avoiding the barrage. He snarled, flinging himself out through the broken window.

Solomon Wreath turned to her, checking that she was OK, while shadows wrapped themselves around the cane in his hand.

The door hit the bed and it moved sharply. Wreath followed Crux out of the window and Valkyrie shoved her bed aside. Her parents barged in, her mother wrapping her in a hug while her dad searched the room for an intruder.

"Where is he?" he yelled.

Valkyrie looked at him from over her mother's shoulder. "Where's who?" she asked, not having to act a whole lot in order to sound shaken.

Her father spun to her. "Who was here?"

"No one."

Her mum gripped her shoulders and took a step back so as to look at her properly. "What happened, Steph?"

Valkyrie scanned the room. "A bat," she decided.

Her dad froze. "What?"

"A bat. It flew through the window."

"A... bat? It sounded like you were being *attacked* in here."

"Wait," her mum said. "No, we heard the window break *after* everything else."

Damn.

Valkyrie nodded. "It was already in here. I think it was in the corner. It must have flown in a few days ago and, I don't know, hibernated or something."

"Stephanie," her dad said, "this room is a war zone."

"I panicked. Dad, it was a bat. A massive one. I woke up and it was fluttering around the room, and I fell against my desk. It landed on the floor and I tried to push the bed over it. Then it flew straight through the window."

Valkyrie hoped it wouldn't register with her parents that all the broken glass was on the inside.

Her father sagged as relief spread through him. "I thought something awful was happening."

She frowned. "Something awful *was* happening. It could have got stuck in my *hair*."

After enduring another few minutes of her parents worrying about her, and checking her feet to make sure she hadn't cut herself, her mother helped her set up the bed in the spare room and finally said goodnight.

Valkyrie waited until she was sure they were back in their own bed before she sneaked out of the window. She let herself drop, using the air to slow her descent. Her bare feet touched wet grass and she hugged herself against the freezing cold.

"He's gone," Wreath said from behind her.

She turned. Wreath stood, tall and handsome in a pale kind of way, dressed in black. He was as tall as Skulduggery, and as calm, but they shared other traits too. They were both excellent teachers. Skulduggery had taught her Elemental magic and Wreath was teaching her Necromancy, but they both treated her as an equal. Not every mage she met did that. Another one of Skulduggery's talents that Wreath shared was the knack of arriving in the nick of time, for which Valkyrie was particularly grateful. "What are you doing here?" she asked. She didn't thank him. Wreath didn't believe in thanks.

His eyes gleamed when he looked at her. "I heard Remus Crux had been sighted in the area," he said. "Naturally, I assumed he was coming after *you*. It seems I was right."

"And why didn't you tell me this?" Valkyrie asked, her teeth chattering.

"Bait doesn't needs to know it's bait. Crux might have sensed a trap and that would have sent him scurrying back into the shadows."

"I don't appreciate being *bait*, Solomon. He could have gone after my family."

"He doesn't want to hurt your family. We don't know *why* he's

after you, but at least we now know that he *is*."

Wreath wasn't offering her his coat. Skulduggery would have done that by now.

"I don't want this happening again," she said. "My town is off-limits to this stuff. China Sorrows can put up symbols and sigils to make sure he can't get into Haggard. Tomorrow that's what I'm asking her to do."

"Very well."

"Solomon, next time something like this comes up, I'm expecting you to tell me about it *before* I'm attacked."

He smiled. "I'll try to remember that. It's quite safe for you to return to your house. I'll keep watch until morning."

Valkyrie nodded and positioned herself beneath the spare room window.

"Oh, and the skull?" he asked. "Are you close to retrieving it?"

"We're meeting the seller tomorrow."

"And you're sure he has the one you're looking for? You've been disappointed before..."

"This time it's different. It has to be."

He bowed his goodbye then tapped his cane to the ground and invited the shadows in around him. By the time they had scattered, he was gone. It was a Necromancer trick, similar to teleportation but with far less range. It used to impress her.

It didn't any more.

She swept her arms up and a gust of cold wind lifted her up the side of the house. She climbed through the window and closed it behind her then wiped her feet on the carpet to dry them. She scrambled under the bedclothes and lay there, curled up in a shivering ball.

She didn't get much sleep.