

Skulduggery
Pleasant
DEATH-BRINGER

DEREK LANDY



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PROLOGUE

The closing door made the candlelight dance, waltzing and flickering over the girl strapped to the table. She turned her head to him. Her face, like every other part of her, was decorated with small, pale scars, symbols painstakingly carved into her flesh over the course of the last few months. Her name was Melancholia St Clair. She was his secret. His experiment. His last, desperate grasp for power.

“It hurts,” she said.

Vandameer Craven, Cleric First Class of the Necromancer Order, esteemed Scholar of Arcane Languages and feared opponent on the debating battlefield, nodded and patted her hand.

She had entered into this arrangement with the kind of zeal that only the truly greedy can muster, but recently her bouts of annoying self-pity were becoming more and more frequent. “I know, my dear, I know it does. But pain is nothing. Once our work is done, there will *be* no pain. You have suffered for all of us. You have suffered for all life in this world, in this *universe*.”

“Please,” she whimpered, “make it stop. I’ve changed my mind about this. Please. I don’t want it any more.”

“I understand,” he said sadly. “I do. You’re scared because you don’t think you’re strong enough. But I *know* you’re strong enough. That’s why I picked you, out of everyone. I believe in you, Melancholia. I have faith in your strength.”

“I want to go home.”

“You *are* home.”

“Please...”

“Now, now, my dear girl, there’s no need for begging. The Surge is a beautiful, wondrous thing, and it should be cherished. You’ve taken your next step. You’ve become who you were always meant to be. We all go through it. Every sorcerer goes through it.”

She gritted her teeth as a spasm of pain arched her spine, and then she gasped, “But it’s not supposed to last so long. You said I’d be the most powerful sorcerer in the world. You didn’t say anything about *this*.”

Craven made the effort to look her in the eyes. He despised people who sweated, and the perspiration was rolling off her in heavy rivulets. It turned his stomach to look at her wet, dripping, scarred face. “With the power I promised you, you’ve just had to suffer a little more than the rest of us,” he explained. “But all the work we’ve been doing, preparing you, it’s going to be worth it. Trust me. The symbols I’ve etched into you are seizing the power of the Surge and they’re keeping it, they’re looping it around, letting it build, letting it grow stronger.”

“Let me out.”

“Just another day or so.”

“Let me out!” she screeched, and shadows curled round her, rising and thrashing like tentacles.

He stepped forward quickly, gave her a smile. “But of course, my dear. You’re absolutely right – the time has come.”

Her eyes widened, and the shadows retreated. He doubted she was even aware of them. Strapped and bound as she was, she shouldn’t have been able to wield any kind of power. For once, Craven’s smile was genuine. This was a good sign.

“It’s done?” she asked, her voice meek. “You’re going to let me go?”

“Let you go?” he echoed, and gave a little laugh as he undid her straps. “You make it sound like I’ve been keeping you *prisoner!* Melancholia, I am your friend. I am your guide. I am the one

person in the whole of the world that you can trust to always be honest with you.”

“I... I know that, Cleric Craven,” she said.

He took a handkerchief from his robes and used it to take hold of her wet, slippery arm in order to help her sit up. “We have to choose the right time to tell the High Priest about you, but once we tell him what we’ve been doing down here for all this time, it’s all going to change. Word will get out that you are the Death Bringer, and there will be many people vying for your favour. Trust none of them.”

She nodded obediently.

“There will be some who won’t understand, even within the Necromancer Order itself. Whenever you feel unsure, or scared, or whenever you just want to talk – I’m here for you.”

“I’m scared now,” Melancholia said, her fingers closing around the skin of his wrist. It took all his self-control not to shiver with revulsion at her clammy touch.

He smiled reassuringly. “There’s nothing to fear, not while you’re with me. Rejoice, my dear. Very soon, you’re going to save the world.”

“Good and evil are so close as to be chained together in the soul.”

Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1941)

1

KENNY



Kenny Dunne wasn't an expert on cars. He knew enough, to be fair to him. He knew what wheels were. He knew how to open and close the doors. He even knew where to put the nozzle thing when the car needed petrol. He knew the basics, enough to get by, and nothing more. But even to a man like Kenny, smoke billowing from beneath the bonnet while you're driving is generally seen as a Bad Thing.

The car spluttered and coughed and retched, and Kenny's grip tightened on the steering wheel. "No," he said. "Please." The car belched and juddered in response, smoke filling his windscreen. Images flashed into his mind of the car suddenly exploding into

a giant fireball, and he tore off his seatbelt and lunged out on to the sun-drenched street. Horns honked. Kenny jumped sideways to avoid a cursing cyclist who shot past him like a foul-tempered bullet. Dublin traffic on a Sunday morning wasn't that bad at all. Dublin traffic on a Sunday morning with a big game on was *terrible*. Irate drivers with county flags stuck to their cars glared at him as they were forced to change lanes.

Kenny smiled apologetically, then looked back at his car. It was not exploding. He reached in, grabbed his bag and turned off the ignition. The car wheezed and slipped gratefully into an early death. Kenny left it there in the street and hailed a taxi.

He was late. He couldn't believe he was late. He couldn't believe that he hadn't learned his lesson, even after all these years of being late to things. How many interviews had he messed up because of his inability to arrive on time? Actors, rock stars, politicians, business people, citizens both rich and famous and poor and unknown – he had been late to meet all of them. It was not a good quality in a journalist, he had to admit, especially when every newspaper was cutting back on staff. Print was dead, they were saying. Not as dead as Kenny was going to be if he didn't get the piece finished by the end of the month.

This story was juicy. It was glorious and bizarre and unique – the kind of thing that stood a chance of being picked up by other papers around the world, maybe even a few magazines. Whenever

Kenny entertained that possibility, his mouth watered. A solid pay day. Food in the fridge, no worrying about rent for a while. Maybe even a half-decent car, if he got really lucky.

He glanced at his watch. Fifteen minutes late. He bit his lip and tapped his fingers on his bag, willing the road ahead to miraculously clear. He didn't know how long his source would stick around, and if Kenny missed this chance, he doubted he'd get another. Tracking down Paul Lynch in the first place had not been easy, but then finding one homeless person in a city like Dublin was never going to be straightforward. And it wasn't like Lynch had a *phone* or anything.

The taxi crawled along to another set of traffic lights and Kenny almost whimpered.

It was probably unhealthy to pin so much hope on one article that hadn't even been commissioned, but there was really very little choice. Kenny needed a break. He'd started off well, worked up to some high-profile interviews and articles, but then it all started to slide away from him. He could see it happening, but couldn't do anything to stop it. Now he was freelance, thrown the occasional job, but his editors left it up to him to go out and find the stories himself. And that's what he'd done.

When he'd first heard the rumours, years ago, he'd dismissed them. Of course he had. They were crazy. He wrote a few articles, noting the trend in the modern urban legend, but he'd never read

more into it than that. But they persisted, these stories of strange people with strange powers doing strange things. Wonderful stuff, and not just the ravings of lunatics and paranoids and the disturbed. These stories were everywhere. They popped up occasionally on the Internet, then vanished just as fast. A few of the reports he'd followed up on had turned out to be hoaxes, with the person who reported the sighting now claiming to have no idea what he was talking about. He'd been close to forgetting the whole thing when he met Lynch. Lynch was Kenny's link. In all his years of casual investigation, Lynch was his one solid lead – as solid a lead as a muttering homeless man could be, anyway – and Kenny had a feeling he was ready to reveal everything he knew. Kenny had spoken to him three times already, and felt he was beginning to earn his trust.

Today was the day, he knew. If only he could get there in time.

The taxi stopped again and Kenny lost patience. He paid the driver, lurched out of the car, swung his bag over his shoulder and ran.

Twenty seconds of running and he was seriously regretting this move. He hadn't run in years. Good God, running was *hard*. And hot. Sweat formed on his brow. His lungs ached. He had shin splints.

He staggered to the next corner and hailed a taxi. It was the same taxi he'd just got out of.

“Didn’t go too well for you, did it?” asked the driver smugly.

Kenny just gasped and panted in the back seat.

They finally reached the park and Kenny paid the driver, again, and hurried across the grass. There were people everywhere, stretched out in the May sunshine, laughing and chatting, walking and eating ice cream. Small dogs scampered after their owners. Music played. The pond glinted.

Kenny saw Lynch, sitting in the shade away from everyone, and a smile broke across his face like a wave of cool water. He wiped the sweat from his brow and walked over, taking it slower, holding up a hand to wave. Lynch didn’t wave back. He just sat there, his back against the railing, shoulders slumped. He was probably in a bad mood.

If only he’d really *been* a psychic, then he’d have foreseen Kenny’s late arrival and there wouldn’t be a problem. Kenny’s smile turned to a grin.

“Sorry,” he said once he stepped into the shade. “The traffic, you know, and the car broke down, and I had to get a taxi.”

Lynch didn’t answer. He didn’t even raise his head.

Kenny stood there awkwardly, then shrugged and sat down. “Glorious morning, isn’t it? I swear, you can never tell how an Irish summer is going to turn out. Do you want an ice cream or something? I’d love an ice cream.”

Again, no response. Lynch’s eyes were closed.

“Paul?”

Kenny reached out and nudged his one solid lead. Nudged him again. Then he saw the blood that drenched Lynch’s shirt, and he grabbed him and shook him. Lynch’s head rolled back, revealing a throat with a long, smooth slit, like a red eye opening.

ME AND THE GIRL



Kenny sat in the interview room and tried not to fidget. He was mildly disappointed that there was no two-way mirror built into the wall, like he'd seen on cop shows. Maybe they only had two-way mirrors in America. In Ireland, the Guards probably didn't even have *one-way* mirrors.

The door to his right opened, and two people entered. The man was tall and thin, dressed in a dark blue suit of impeccable tailoring. He wore a hat like a 1940s' private eye. He sat on the other side of the table and took the hat off. He had dark hair and high cheekbones. His eyes seemed to have trouble focusing. His skin looked waxy. He wore gloves.

His companion stood against the wall behind him. She was tall and pretty and dark-haired, but she couldn't have been more than sixteen years old. She was dressed in black trousers and a tight black jacket, zipped halfway up, made of some material Kenny didn't recognise. She didn't look at him.

"Hi." The man's smile was bright. He had good teeth.

"Hi," Kenny said.

The girl said nothing.

The man had a smooth voice, like velvet. "I'm Detective Inspector Me. Unusual name, I know. My family were incredibly narcissistic. I'm lucky I escaped with any degree of humility at all, to be honest, but then I've always managed to exceed expectations. You are Kenny Dunne, are you not?"

"I am."

"Just a few questions for you, Mr Dunne. Or Kenny. Can I call you Kenny? I feel we've become friends these past few seconds. Can I call you Kenny?"

"Sure," Kenny said, slightly baffled.

"Thank you. Thank you very much. It's important you feel comfortable around me, Kenny. It's important we build up a level of trust. That way I'll catch you completely unprepared when I suddenly accuse you of murder."

Kenny's eyebrows shot up. "What?"

“Oh dear,” said Inspector Me. “That wasn’t supposed to happen for another few minutes.”

“I didn’t kill Paul Lynch!”

“Could we go back to the nice feeling of trust we were building up?”

“Listen, I had arranged to meet him, I was going to interview him, but when I got there he was already dead.”

“You’d be surprised how often we hear the ‘he was already dead’ defence in our line of work. Or maybe you wouldn’t, I don’t know. The point is, Kenny, it’s not looking good for you. Maybe if you tell us everything you know, we can persuade our colleagues to go easy on you.”

Kenny stared at the man, then looked over at the girl. “Who are you?”

She returned his look, raised an eyebrow, but didn’t answer.

“She’s here on work experience,” said Inspector Me. “Don’t you worry about her, Kenny. You just worry about yourself. What was your relationship with the corpse?”

“Uh,” Kenny said, “I’m a journalist. He’s someone I’d interviewed a few times.”

“About what?”

“It’s... nothing. He is, or he *was*, a conspiracy nut, kind of.”

“Conspiracies? You mean like government cover-ups, that sort of thing?”

“No, not really. He was more...” Kenny sighed. “Listen, it’s a long story.”

“I don’t have anywhere else to be,” said Inspector Me, and glanced back at the girl. “Do you?”

“Yes, actually,” she said. “I have a christening to get to.”

“Oh,” said Me. “Of course.” He turned back to Kenny. “So maybe if you talk really fast, you can explain it to us.”

Kenny took a moment, deciding on the best way to avoid sounding like a lunatic. “Right,” he said. “For the past few years, I’ve been investigating some oddball stories. Nothing big, nothing major, but stories that get ignored because when you hear them, they sound insane. No newspaper is going to take this stuff seriously, so I can really only devote a small amount of time to them.

“It started when I did a piece on urban legends. You have all your usual stuff, modern myths and burgeoning folklore, some funny, some horrible, some creepy, everything you’d expect to hear. But I started hearing new ones.”

“Like what?”

“Just rumours, snippets of stories. Someone saw a gunfight where people threw fire. Someone saw a man leap over a building, or a woman just disappear.”

Inspector Me tilted his head. “So the modern urban legend is about superheroes?”

“That’s what I was thinking, but now I’m not so sure. I’ve been

hearing whispers about an entire subculture where this stuff goes on. Lynch said it's everywhere, if you know what to look for."

"I see. And did Lynch claim to be such a superhero?"

"Lynch? No. God, no. I mean, he wasn't well, obviously. He had visions, he said. That's what he called them, *visions*. He'd had them since he was a teenager. They scared the hell out of him. He was sent to psychiatrist after psychiatrist, given pill after pill, but nothing worked. He'd describe these visions to me and they seemed so vivid, so real. He couldn't hold down a job, couldn't maintain a relationship... He ended up homeless, drinking too much, muttering away to himself in doorways."

"And this," Inspector Me said, "was your source?"

"I know he sounds unreliable."

"Just a touch."

"But I stuck at it, listened to what he was saying. Eventually, I learned how to separate the ramblings from the... well, the facts, I suppose."

"What kinds of things did he see?" asked the girl.

Kenny frowned. He didn't really understand what gave a student on work experience the right to question him, but Inspector Me didn't object, so Kenny reluctantly answered. "He saw the apocalypse," he said. "He saw a few of them, to be honest. The first one concerned these Dark Gods, the Faceless Ones, whatever he called them. Someone banished them eons ago, nobody knows

who, and they've been trying to get back ever since. When he was seventeen, Lynch had a vision in which they returned. He saw millions dead. Cities levelled. He saw the world break apart. He kept having these visions, and every time it would be some new aspect, some new viewpoint from which to watch the world end. He was convinced we were all going to die one night, a little under three years ago. He said these things, these god-creatures, would emerge through a glowing yellow door between realities. Of course no one would listen to him. And then the night came when the world was going to end... and it didn't. And the visions stopped."

"I love stories with a happy ending," Inspector Me said.

"It wasn't over, not for Lynch. More visions came to him. He predicted the Insanity Virus, you know."

"The last I heard it wasn't a virus," said the girl. "It was a hallucinogen. They got the guys who did it."

Kenny laughed. "You actually believe that?"

Inspector Me looked at him weirdly. "You don't?"

"It's all a little convenient, isn't it? As a Christmas prank, a radical group of anarchists drop a drug into the water supplies around the country – and then months later they come forward and admit to it? Anarchists, taking responsibility for their actions? That defeats the whole point of being an anarchist, doesn't it? Do you know when the trial is? Do you know which prison they're locked up in until it happens? Because I don't."

Inspector Me sat back. “This sounds awfully like a conspiracy theory, Kenny. What do *you* think happened?”

“I don’t know, but Lynch said it wasn’t anarchists that did this. He said it was little slices of darkness, flying around and infecting people.”

To Kenny’s surprise, neither the Inspector nor the girl smirked.

“Do you know how many people reported seeing strange things over those few days?” Kenny continued. “I’ve read dozens of reports. There was a nightclub in Haggard that was apparently swarmed by the things, but it wasn’t even reported in the local paper.”

“Sounds like a bunch of people hallucinating to me,” said the girl. “Lynch didn’t think so. He had a vision of those things spreading out, infecting the world, making everyone do crazy things, kill each other, drop bombs...”

“All right, then,” said Me. “We have established that Lynch was psychologically disturbed, that he believed in a subculture of superheroes and evil gods. So why was he killed?”

Kenny blinked. “Uh, he was robbed, wasn’t he?”

“Was he?”

“Wasn’t he? That’s what the... that’s what the guy said, the Guard, the one who spoke to me. He said it looked like a mugging.”

“I see.”

Kenny frowned. “You think it’s got something to do with his visions, don’t you?”

“It’s a possibility,” said Me.

“Why were you meeting him this morning?” the girl asked.

“I’m sorry,” said Kenny, “I don’t mean to be rude, but why is she asking me questions? Why is she even here?”

“Work experience,” said Me.

“You accused me of *murder*. Do you make a habit of bringing schoolgirls into interview rooms with murder suspects?”

Me waved a hand. “Oh, I was only joking about that. I don’t *really* think you murdered anyone. Unless you did, in which case I reserve the right to say that I knew it all along. But she asks a good question, Kenny. Why were you meeting him?”

“For the past few months, he’d been having new visions, of shadows coming alive, of people dropping dead. His latest apocalypse.”

“What did he say about it?”

“Why is this important?”

“Everything is important.”

“But it’s not like he identified anyone. It’s not like he heard any names in his visions. He saw someone in a black robe, that’s it.”

“Male or female?”

“He couldn’t say.”

“Did he happen to mention the Passage at all?”

Kenny looked at him. There was something about the Inspector’s

face that wasn't quite right. As soon as Kenny noticed it, he looked away. His mother had taught him it was not polite to stare.

"He didn't use that word," Kenny said. "But I've heard it from others. How did you hear about it?"

"Who did you hear it from?" asked the girl.

"Others," Kenny said irritably. "Three or four people, who had overheard it in pubs or alleyways or whatever. It sounds like the Rapture, to be honest."

The girl frowned. "What's that?"

"The Rapture," Inspector Me said, "is a Christian belief in which God will collect the faithful and deliver them into Heaven. *'And the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be raptured together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air.'* Those found unworthy will be left here on earth with the rest of the sinners."

"The Passage sounds like that sort of deal," Kenny said. "Mass salvation before the end of the world. Whether or not there's any kind of a god at work behind it, I don't know, but there usually is."

"Did Lynch give any kind of a time frame?" Me asked.

"His visions were getting stronger and more frequent," Kenny answered. "The way it worked in the past is that he'd have another six or seven days at this level of intensity, then the apocalypse wouldn't happen and he'd be able to relax again."

"Seven days," said Me.

“Or thereabouts, yeah. How did you hear about the Passage?”

“We’re detectives,” said Me. “We detect things.”

“She’s a detective as well, is she?”

“She’s a detective-in-training.”

“Look, this is all very, very weird. Why are you focusing on rumours and urban legends? You haven’t even asked me any normal questions.”

“Normal questions? Like what?”

“Like, I don’t know, like if Lynch had any enemies.”

“*Did* Lynch have any enemies?”

“Well, not that I know of, no.”

“Then there really was no point in me asking that, was there? Unless you wanted to distract me. You didn’t want to distract me, did you, Kenny?”

“No, that’s not—”

“Are you playing a game with me, Kenny?”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

Inspector Me leaned forward. “Did you kill him?”

“No!”

“It’d be OK if you did.”

Kenny recoiled, horrified. “How would *that* be OK?”

“Well,” Me said, “maybe not *OK*, but understandable. Perhaps he said something that annoyed you. We’ve all been there, haven’t we?” He looked back at the girl. “Haven’t we?”

“I’ve been there,” said the girl.

“We’ve all been there,” said Me, looking at Kenny again. “We know how it goes. He says something that annoys you, you get angry, all of a sudden he’s lying dead and you’re wondering where *did* the time go.”

“I didn’t kill him! I didn’t kill anyone!”

“Anyone? You mean there’s more?”

“What?”

Me sat back, tapped his chin with a gloved hand. “You know what, Kenny? I believe you. You have an honest face. You have honest ears. So who do *you* think killed him?”

“I *had* thought it was just a mugging.”

“And now?”

“Now... I don’t know. Do you think someone killed him because of the Passage? Are there people out there who really believe in this stuff?”

“People are strange,” said the girl, then started humming a few bars from the song.

“Did Lynch talk to anyone else about this?” Me asked. “Did he have any friends? Any family he still spoke to?”

“No, no one.”

“So he only talked about his visions to you?”

Kenny hesitated.

“He’s hesitating,” said the girl.

“I see that,” said Me.

“There’s an old woman,” Kenny said, “Bernadette something. Maguire, I think. She helps out at one of the shelters. She used to be a teacher, or something. She’s retired now, lives in the country somewhere. He talked to her. She hasn’t been around that much lately. I think she’s just too old. The first time I’d seen her in months was a few weeks ago. She was talking to Lynch.”

“You think he told her about his visions?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“You think Bernadette Maguire killed him?”

“Uh... no. She’s, like I said, she’s old.”

“Old people can kill people too.”

“I know, but...”

“She could be a ninja.”

“She’s not a ninja, for God’s sake. She’s somebody’s great-grandmother.”

“I want you to think carefully about this, Kenny. Have you ever seen her with a sword?”

“What?”

“How about throwing stars?”

“This is ridiculous.”

“Have you ever seen her *dressed up* as a ninja? That would have been my first clue.”

The girl sucked in her cheeks so she wouldn’t laugh out loud.

“What kind of cop are you?” Kenny asked, resolutely unamused.

“I am the kind that is determined to get to the bottom of this mystery,” said Me.

The door opened, and a boy with blond hair poked his head in. Kenny was so startled by the way the boy’s hair stood on end that he completely missed Inspector Me getting to his feet.

“Thank you for your co-operation,” Me said, quickly following the girl out the door. “My colleague will be in to see you shortly.” Out in the corridor, the girl held the boy’s arm and reached for Inspector Me as he closed the door. It clicked shut, and all was suddenly quiet for a very brief moment.

The door opened again. A middle-aged man walked in, carrying a notebook. Inspector Me and his two teenage students were gone.

“Mr Dunne?” said the man. “My name is Detective Inspector Harris. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Kenny said, a little doubtfully. “The other Inspector kept me busy.”

Detective Inspector Harris smiled good-naturedly as he sat down. “Other Inspector?”

“The one who just left.”

“Hmm? Who was that, then?”

“Detective Inspector Me.”

“Detective Inspector You?”

“No, Me. That’s his... He said that’s his name. You just passed

him. He was with a girl on work experience and a boy with spiky hair.”

Harris blinked at him. “I didn’t pass anyone, Mr Dunne, and I’m the only Detective Inspector on duty right now.”

Kenny stared at him. “Then... then who the hell was I just speaking to?”

THE CHRISTENING



Valkyrie Cain cradled her little sister in her arms and hoped to God she'd get through the day without being splattered with regurgitated baby milk. She'd barely made it home from the police station in time to get changed, and one top had already been rendered unwearable before they'd even left the house. It had been a nice top, too. It had really gone with her jeans.

"Please," she whispered to little Alison, "do not throw up on me."

Alison watched her with big blue eyes, but wasn't promising anything.

Squinting slightly against the sun, Valkyrie glanced back into the church. Alison wasn't the only one who had just been christened today, so the place was full of chatting, laughing families with camcorders, saving every gurgle and wail. She may have been biased, but it was Valkyrie's sincere opinion that none of the other three babies were half as cute as her three-month-old sister. They just didn't measure up where it counted. It was sad, really. Those babies had already lost the cuteness war and they wouldn't even know it for years to come. A real tragedy.

She looked down at her sister. "You don't do much, do you? You're fairly limited, as far as most things go. Mum says I have to keep talking to you, to get you used to my voice. So, well, I suppose I'll keep talking. There are two of me, you know. There's me, the real me, and then there's my reflection. The reflection looks like me, and talks like me, and acts like me, but it isn't me. It steps out of my mirror and goes to school and does my homework and, yes, sometimes it babysits you. And I don't like that. I don't like leaving you in the care of something that has no emotions, but I'm a busy girl. Yes I am.

"When you're a bit older, we're going to read you stories about princesses and wizards and magic, and we're going to let you believe, for a few years, that some magic is real. And then, this is the sucky bit, we're going to tell you that most magic *isn't* real. We're going to tell you that people can't fly and they can't turn

each other into toads and that there are no magical, mystical monsters. Between you and me, though, *that's* the big lie. There *is* magic, people *can* fly, there *are* monsters... I'm not sure about the turning each other into toads bit, though. But who'd want that anyway? That'd be gross."

Valkyrie started swaying the top half of her body slightly as she walked in a circle. "Who's a cutie? Who's a cutie? You are, that's who. You're a cutie. And who's sounding pretty dim-witted right now? That'd be me, wouldn't it? Yes, it would."

She looked down, saw the baby gazing up, and she laughed. "Oh God you're adorable. I'd ask you to stay like this forever but, you know, that'd be a little awkward. Especially when you're old enough to go out on dates.

"We have a weird family, do you know that? You've probably already noticed. Mum's normal enough, in her own way. But when she gets talking to Dad, a different side to her comes out – an immensely silly side. He's a bad influence on her, that's what he is. Because our dad is an oddball. Mm-hmm. As odd as they come. Uncle Fergus is odd too, but not in a nice way. He's just mean all the time. It's a shame you never got to meet Gordon. You'd have liked Gordon. He was a cool uncle." She kissed the baby's cheek and kept her head down. "Want to know a secret?" she whispered. "Magic runs in our family. You might be magic. Someday you might be able to do all the things I can do. Someday you might

have to take a new name, like I did. Or you might not. But I don't know if I want that for you. Being normal isn't so bad, once you've seen the other side. I know it wouldn't be fair if I kept this from you, but I don't want you getting hurt. Do you understand me? Something like that, it'd kill me."

The baby reached out, took a small handful of Valkyrie's hair.

"I'm glad we understand each other. For someone with such a small brain, you're very smart, you know that?"

Alison gurgled.

Valkyrie took her baby sister back inside the church, made her way over towards her folks. Her aunt emerged from the crowd, hair pulled back off her face, pinching it tight. It was not a good look.

"Hello Stephanie," Beryl said. "You're holding her wrong."

"She seems pretty comfortable," Valkyrie responded, making sure she said it politely.

Beryl reached out thin hands. "No no no, let me show you." But, as usual, Alison's spider-sense picked up the incoming threat and she turned her head, saw Beryl's suddenly smiling face and wailed. Beryl recoiled sharply, fingers twitching. When their aunt had retreated to an acceptable distance, Alison stopped wailing and glomped her gums on to a button on Valkyrie's top.

"She's been grumpy all day," Valkyrie lied, pleased with how things had turned out. Beryl made a noise in her throat, obviously

unimpressed with her brand-new niece. Valkyrie jerked her head back slightly. “Mum and Dad are over there,” she said. “They’ve been wanting to talk to you. Mum said earlier what a lovely dress you’re wearing.”

Beryl’s eyebrows wriggled like two tiny tapeworms. “This?” she said. “But I’ve had this for years.”

It was a beige dress that would have looked better on an eighty-year-old. *Any* eighty-year-old, man or woman.

“I think you’ve really grown into it,” Valkyrie said.

“I always thought it was a little shapeless.”

Valkyrie resisted the urge to say that was what she meant.

Beryl broke off the conversation as she usually did, without any warning whatsoever and with her husband trailing after her. Hilariously, Fergus nodded to the baby as he passed, as if Alison was going to nod back, but he reserved a look akin to a glare for Valkyrie. She hadn’t a clue what *that* was about.

She watched Carol and Crystal walk towards her, and prepared herself for the onslaught to come. In the past, she would have been expecting poorly thought-out taunts and flatly executed jibes from her cousins at a time like this. These days, unfortunately, it was a whole lot worse.

“Hi Valkyrie,” Carol whispered.

Crystal jabbed Carol with an elbow. “Don’t call her that!”

Carol glared. “I whispered it. No one else could hear.”

“You still shouldn’t call her that! Call her Stephanie!”

A few more precious moments of life were sucked away from Valkyrie’s grasp, never to be seen again.

“Fine,” Carol said, not looking pleased. “Hello, Stephanie. How are you?”

“I’m doing good,” Valkyrie replied, talking quickly in an effort to hijack the conversation and steer it towards calm and unexceptional waters. “How are you guys? How’s college? Looking forward to the summer holidays? Crystal, I love your shoes. Your feet fit really well into them. Doesn’t Alison look adorable?”

She turned slightly so that they could see the baby. They both murmured something about cuteness, and then it was as if Alison didn’t even exist.

“We were thinking,” Carol said, and both twins stepped closer so they wouldn’t be overheard. “You know the way you said we were too short to learn magic? Well, we’re not sure that we *are*. You started to learn magic when you were shorter than we are now, didn’t you? And also, elves.”

Valkyrie blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“Elves,” said Crystal. “You know, with the pointy ears? They’re pretty small, aren’t they? I know in some movies they’re regular-sized, but mostly elves are small, and *they* can do magic.”

“Uh, elves aren’t real,” Valkyrie said.

Carol sighed at her sister. “*Told* you.”

Crystal glared back, then looked again at Valkyrie. “Why aren’t they real?”

“I’m not sure I can, uh, answer that.”

Crystal looked confused. “What about goblins?”

“Oh,” Valkyrie said. “Yeah, OK, goblins exist. Right, listen, it’s not a height thing, it’s a danger thing. The fact is it isn’t safe. I’ve been beaten up more times than I can count. I’ve had bones broken and teeth broken and five months ago I was technically dead for half a day. I even had an autopsy done on me.”

“What was that like?”

“Unsurprisingly unsettling.”

Carol’s eyes gleamed. “But you get to do magic, and save the world, and hang around with cool people.”

“And have friends,” Crystal added.

“And what do we get to do? We get to go to college and do exams and get spots and we don’t get to have boyfriends.”

Valkyrie attempted a smile. “I get spots too, you know. Everyone does. And you’ve both had plenty of boyfriends.”

Crystal shook her head. “Not like Fletcher. He’s nice.”

“And I wouldn’t call them boyfriends, either,” mumbled Carol. “Stephanie, we just want what you have. We want to have fun and we want to have powers and do exciting things. We’ve been talking, and we’ve decided that we want you to teach us magic.”

“I really don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“And we really do.”

“Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t. I just don’t have the time. Tanith is still out there, and she’s got a Remnant inside her, and she’s with Billy-Ray Sanguine and she knows much too much about my life and my family. I need to find her and get her some help, and I’ve also got to stop the end of the world and... It’s just not safe to start showing you things.”

“Just a few tricks,” Crystal pressed.

“They’re not called tricks,” said Valkyrie.

“Illusions, then.”

“They’re not illusions.”

“Spells?”

Valkyrie hesitated. “OK, you can call them tricks.”

“Just show us a few small ones,” said Carol, “like flying.”

“Flying is not one of the small ones.”

“Can you fly yet?”

“No, I can’t. Skulduggery’s the only one who can.”

“Maybe *he’ll* teach us.”

Valkyrie couldn’t help it, she had to smile. “I doubt that very much.”

The twins suddenly started fixing their hair, and Valkyrie knew that Fletcher had arrived.

“Hello, ladies,” he said to them while his left arm wrapped round Valkyrie’s waist.

“Hi, Fletcher,” the twins said in unison.

“Having a good christening?” he asked. “I’ve never been to one and I have to admit, it seems kind of... well, boring. But in a nice way.”

“I found it really boring too,” Carol said before Crystal had a chance. “And I didn’t understand most of what the priest was saying.”

“I wasn’t even listening,” Crystal said. “It was something about babies, I think. I really like your hair today. You have it sticking up really nicely.”

“Don’t encourage him,” Valkyrie groaned. Fletcher laughed, and gave her a quick kiss.

“Unfortunately,” he said, “we have to go for just a moment.”

“We do?” Valkyrie asked. He nodded to her, all serious. “Ah,” she said. “OK. Yeah. Guys, we have to go.”

Carol’s eyes widened. “Is there trouble? Are we in danger?”

“Is the world ending?” Crystal asked. The twins looked up at the church ceiling, like they were expecting to see it crack and fall in on top of them.

“Don’t worry about it,” Valkyrie said with a chuckle. She headed over to her parents, Fletcher beside her. “They *don’t* have to worry about it, do they?”

He shrugged. “I’m sure they’ll be OK for another few days.”

“Did you find Bernadette Maguire’s house?”

“Skulduggery’s there right now, waiting for me to return with you.”

She grinned at him. “Was it a nice drive?”

“It took two hours,” he grumbled. “And he wouldn’t let me speak. Do you know what it’s like to be driving for two hours and not be able to speak?”

“No. What’s it like?”

“It’s boring.”

She nodded. “I could probably have guessed that.”

They reached her parents, and Valkyrie’s mum lit up when Valkyrie passed her Alison.

“Here she is,” her mum said, cooing at the baby, “my special girl.”

“Oh, cheers,” Valkyrie said, rolling her eyes.

Her mum laughed. “Hello Fletcher, when did you get here?”

“I just arrived,” he said. “Sorry. The bus service on a Sunday is awful.”

“You should have called us – Desmond could have picked you up.”

“No, I couldn’t have,” Valkyrie’s dad said, stepping into earshot. “Sorry, Fletcher, but I had important fatherly duties to take care of, which included eating breakfast, showering, and finding my trousers. Of those three, I only managed two. Without looking down, can you guess which one I missed?”

Valkyrie's mother sighed. "Des, it's too early in the day for your nonsense. Fletcher, will you be joining us for the post-christening lunch?"

"Yes, I will," Fletcher smiled back. "I just have to borrow Stephanie for a moment."

"Take our daughter," Valkyrie's dad said, waving his hand airily. "We have another one now."

Valkyrie laughed, leading Fletcher through the crowd. They left the church and walked round the corner. When they were sure they weren't being watched, Fletcher turned to her, kissed her, and the moment their lips touched, they teleported. The church and the grass and the sunshine vanished, replaced by a cottage being lashed by rain.

Valkyrie broke off the kiss instantly and leaped sideways to the Bentley, which was under the cover of a tree. Fletcher joined her.

"The sun is splitting the stones in Haggard," she said, glaring. "Don't you think staying dry will be kind of important for when we teleport back?"

"You make a good point," Fletcher conceded. "See, there's a reason why you're the girl and I'm the boy. You think about things, while I..."

"Don't?"

"Exactly," he said happily.

Skulduggery walked towards them from the cottage, his gloved

hand raised to divert the rain around him. His suit was impeccable, his hat cocked just right. His face was sallow-skinned, but as he neared he tapped the two symbols etched into his collarbones, and his features flowed away, revealing the skull beneath. “Sorry to pull you away,” he said to Valkyrie.

She shrugged. “I was there for the christening itself. Once that’s done with, it’s just a family get-together, and Christmas is enough for me. Is the old lady home?”

“I knocked on windows and doors, but there’s no answer,” he said. “We’ll have to let ourselves in.” Fletcher held out his hands, but Skulduggery shook his head. “Relying on teleportation is making us lazy, so we’re going to do this the old-fashioned way. Valkyrie, would you mind keeping the rain off?”

He turned, started walking back to the cottage. Valkyrie hurried after him, raising her arms, moving the air into a shield.

“You should really get used to manipulating water instead of relying on air all the time,” he told her. “One of these days you’re going to wish you’d practised more. There’s very little point in being an Elemental sorcerer if you only use two elements.”

“But air and fire are the handiest,” she said, pretending to whine. “Manipulating moisture just doesn’t grab me that way. And as for earth...” She trailed off.

They reached the front door and Skulduggery knelt, working

the lock pick. Fletcher stood behind Valkyrie, trying to avoid the raindrops that got through her defence.

“And yet,” Skulduggery said, “your Necromancy lessons are continuing without interruption, are they not?”

“Well, yeah, but I need more lessons in Necromancy because Solomon isn’t as good a teacher as you are.” He looked at her and she grinned, then shrugged. “Besides, most of the training I do with you these days is combat. I’ll get the Elemental stuff back on track, I promise.”

Skulduggery grunted. Ever since Tanith Low had been lost to a Remnant, he had changed what he’d been teaching Valkyrie. There was no way she’d be able to match Tanith’s speed and agility, so going up against her using pure martial arts would end in disaster. The new stuff she’d been learning was ugly, brutal and effective – combatives, not martial arts. It had taken Valkyrie a while to adjust, but the threat of Tanith’s return had spurred her on. A rematch was inevitable, she knew, so when she did go up against Tanith again, she was making damn sure that it wasn’t going to be on Tanith’s terms.

The lock clicked, and Skulduggery stood up and opened the door, then poked his head in. “Hello? Mrs Maguire? Anyone home?” He waited. No answer. He stepped inside, Valkyrie following. His hair suddenly in danger of getting wet, Fletcher hopped in after her. Aside from the steady rhythm of the rain,

the cottage was quiet. It was orderly, and smelled of old person. Valkyrie took another step and the ring on her right hand grew colder.

“Someone’s dead in here,” she whispered.

Stepping slowly and carefully, they entered the living room, where small porcelain figurines lined every surface and an old woman sat in an armchair, very dead.

Skulduggery took out his gun.

“Wait a second,” Fletcher said, his eyes widening. “Look at her. This was natural causes. She was old. Old people die. That’s what old people do.”

Skulduggery shook his head. “There was someone else here.”

He motioned them to stay put, and left the room. Fletcher looked at Valkyrie searchingly, but all she could do was shrug. After a few moments, Skulduggery came back in and put his gun away.

“How do you know there was someone else here?” she asked.

He nodded behind him as he took a small bag of rainbow dust from his pocket. “Notice the figurines. Horrible little things, aren’t they? Little cherubs, cheap and tasteless. See how they’re so lovingly arranged, evenly spaced, all looking outwards? Now look at the ones beside you.”

Valkyrie looked down. Fat little figurines, holding harps and little bows and arrows, were positioned haphazardly along the

edge of the cabinet. “They fell,” she said, “and someone put them back in a hurry. Someone who didn’t care enough to face them all in the same direction.”

Skulduggery broke up the lumps in the powder. He took a pinch and threw it into the air. It fell gently in a small cloud, changing colour as it did so. “Adept magic was used,” he murmured. “Hard to tell what sort. But it was recent.”

“How recent?” Valkyrie asked.

Skulduggery put the bag away. “The last ten minutes.”

Fletcher glanced over his shoulder. “So the attacker could still be in the area?”

Skulduggery took out his gun again. “Always a possibility.”

Valkyrie patted Fletcher’s arm. “Don’t worry,” she said. “If the bad man comes, I’ll protect you.”

“If the bad man comes,” Fletcher responded, “I’ll bravely give out a high-pitched scream to distract him. I may even bravely faint, to give him a false sense of security. That will be your signal to strike.”

“We make a great team.”

“Just don’t forget to stand in front of me the whole time,” he said, and then yelled. Valkyrie jumped and Skulduggery whirled, and Fletcher pointed at the window. “Outside!” he blurted. “Bad man! Outside!”

Skulduggery charged, thrust his hand against the air and the

window exploded outwards. He jumped through, Valkyrie and Fletcher right behind him. The rain pelted them, made the ground muddy. A bald man in black slipped on the trail that led into the woods, fell to his hands and knees. He cast a quick glance behind him. He had a long nose and a ridiculous goatee beard that ended in wispy trails far below his chin. He fumbled with something they couldn't see, and then sprang up. He slipped and slid, but kept on running, leaving a wooden box open on the ground behind him.

“Back,” Skulduggery said. “Back inside the house. Move!”

Valkyrie went first, vaulted through the broken window, landing just as Fletcher teleported in. Skulduggery came last, flattening himself against the wall.

“Hide,” he whispered.

They ducked down.

The rain battered the cottage. Valkyrie risked a look up at Skulduggery.

“What is it?” she whispered.

“It's a box,” he whispered back.

“What kind of box?”

“A wooden one.”

She gave him a look. “OK, I'll try this. Why are we hiding from a box?”

“We're not. We're hiding from what's *inside* the box.”

“What’s in the box?”

“Is it a head?” Fletcher asked.

“It’s the Jitter Girls.”

He peeked out. Valkyrie raised herself up slightly so she could see over the windowsill. The wooden box sat there on the trail in the mud and the rain.

“Who are the Jitter Girls?” she asked.

“Triplets,” Skulduggery said. “Born in 1933. When they were six years old, something tried to get into this world through them.”

“*Through* them?”

“It planted seeds in their minds, changed them mentally and physically. It dragged them just out of step with our reality, tried to make them a conduit through which it could emerge.”

“What are we talking about here?” Fletcher asked. “A Faceless One?”

“No,” Skulduggery said, “I don’t think so. This was something else. Their parents panicked. Doctors couldn’t help. Remember, this was Ireland in the 1930s, cut off and isolated from a world that was advancing around it. Everyone thought the children were possessed by the devil. They tried exorcism after exorcism, but the girls just got worse. Then I was called.”

“Could you help?” Valkyrie asked. She took another peek. The box was still just a box.

“They were too far gone,” Skulduggery said. “They spent a

year in agony, twisting and squealing while strapped to their beds in the asylum.”

“Good God.”

“Their parents came in every single day. They’d sing to them. Nursery rhymes and old Irish songs. There was nothing I could do. The thing, whatever it was that was using them, I think it realised its plan wasn’t going to work. So it retreated. It went away, left them alone. They died soon after.”

“That’s terrible.”

“It is.”

“And so how are they in that box out there?”

Skulduggery shrugged. “They came back, didn’t they? Any poor soul tortured like that isn’t going to rest easy. They have too much pain to deal with by themselves, so they need to spread it around. That’s what I think, anyway. The truth is nobody knows why they came back, or why they started killing people. But that’s what happened.”

“And they’re in the box because...?”

“Everyone needs a home.”

“I see. I’m not altogether sure, though, why we’re hiding from them. If they can fit into that small box, how dangerous can they be?”

“It looks like you’re going to see for yourself,” Skulduggery said, his voice dropping back to a whisper.

Valkyrie peeked.

A pale hand emerged from the box. It trembled slightly as it lengthened, and it was an arm now, that curled. The hand gripped the edge of the box.

She ducked down.

“What’s happening?” Fletcher asked.

“They’re climbing out,” Valkyrie said dumbly.

“If they’re as dangerous as you say they are,” Fletcher said to Skulduggery, “then let’s go. Let’s get out of here.”

“They need to be contained,” Skulduggery said. “That’s why the killer brought them, to cover his escape. We can’t leave – there’s no telling what they’d do if they were allowed to roam free.”

Valkyrie took another look. At first, she thought there was something wrong with her eyes. A girl climbed out of the box. A little blonde six-year old, wearing a white dress with a bow, moving like bad animation. She was stiff, jerky, missing out the smooth motion between the lifting of the foot and the placing it down as she walked. There was no other word for it. She *jittered*.

Behind her, another pale hand emerged.

“How do we fight them?” asked Valkyrie softly.

“I don’t know,” Skulduggery said. “Fletcher. Go see China. She must have *something* in her books about fighting these things.”

Fletcher shook his head. “I’m not leaving.”

“It wasn’t a request.”

“Then come with me,” Fletcher said. “Valkyrie, at least. I’m not leaving her here.”

Valkyrie turned to him. “Yes you are. Go. Be quick.”

He grabbed her. “I’m not—”

She took his hand off her. “We don’t have time to argue. Do it. Go.”

He stared at her, torn, then narrowed his eyes. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

He didn’t even kiss her – he just vanished.

Valkyrie turned back to the window. “Hell,” she breathed.

All three Jitter Girls were out, and all three were walking towards the cottage.