

SKULDUGGERY
PLEASANT
THE FACELESS ONES

The Skulduggery Pleasant series

SKULDUGGERY PLEASANT

PLAYING WITH FIRE

THE FACELESS ONES

DARK DAYS

MORTAL COIL

DEATH BRINGER

KINGDOM OF THE WICKED

LAST STAND OF DEAD MEN

THE DYING OF THE LIGHT

RESURRECTION

THE MALEFICENT SEVEN

ARMAGEDDON OUTTA HERE

(a Skulduggery Pleasant short-story collection)

The Demon Road trilogy

DEMON ROAD

DESOLATION

AMERICAN MONSTERS

SKULDUGGERY
PLEASANT
THE FACELESS ONES

DEREK LANDY



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This book is dedicated to my agent, Michelle Kass.

I'm not going to be sappy here, OK? I'm not going to talk about how much you've done for me (which is a lot), or the impact you've had on my life (which is immense), and I'm not even going to talk about the advice, encouragement, and counsel you've given me since we met. And I'm not going to mention conversations on tractors either, or iPods at dinner tables, or the amount of Yiddish words you've taught me that I've promptly forgotten.

All of which, surprisingly, leaves me with nothing much to say.

Sorry about that.

1

THE SCENE OF THE CRIME

The dead man was in the living room, face down on the floor beside the coffee table. His name had been Cameron Light, but that was back when his heart had a beat and his lungs had breath. His blood had dried into the carpet in a large stain that spread outwards from where he lay. He'd been stabbed, once, in the small of the back. He was fully clothed, his hands were empty and there was no other sign of disturbance in the room.

Valkyrie moved through the room as she had been taught, scanning the floor and surfaces, but managing to avoid looking

at the body. She felt no compulsion to see any more of the victim than she absolutely had to. Her dark eyes drifted to the window. The park across the street was empty, the slides glistening with the rain and the swings creaking in the chill, early morning breeze.

Footsteps in the room and she turned to watch Skulduggery Pleasant take a small bag of powder from his jacket. He was wearing a pinstriped suit that successfully filled out his skeletal frame, and his hat was low over his eye sockets. He dipped a gloved finger into the bag and started to stir, breaking up the smaller lumps.

“Thoughts?” he said.

“He was taken by surprise,” answered Valkyrie. “The lack of any defensive marks means he didn’t have time to put up a fight. Just like the others.”

“So the killer was either completely silent...”

“Or his victims trusted him.” There was something odd about the room, something that didn’t quite fit. Valkyrie looked around. “Are you sure he lived here? There are no books on magic, no talismans, no charms on the walls, nothing.”

Skulduggery shrugged. “Some mages enjoy living on both sides. The magical community is secretive, but there *are*

exceptions – those who work and socialise in the so-called ‘mortal’ world. Mr Light here obviously had a few friends who didn’t know he was a sorcerer.”

There were framed photographs on a shelf, of Light himself and other people. Friends. Loved ones. From the photos alone it seemed like he’d had a good life, a life filled with companionship. Now it was over of course. There *was* no Cameron Light any more, just an empty shell on the carpet.

Crime scenes, Valkyrie reflected, were rather depressing places.

She looked over at Skulduggery as he sprinkled the powder into the air. It was called rainbow dust because of the way any residual traces of magic in an area would change its colour. This time, however, the powder remained the same colour as it drifted all the way down to the floor.

“Not one trace,” he muttered.

Although the couch was obscuring her view of the body, Valkyrie could still see one foot. Cameron Light had been wearing black shoes and grey socks with worn elastic. He had a very white ankle. Valkyrie stepped to the side so the foot was out of view.

A bald man with broad shoulders and piercing blue eyes joined them in the room. “Detective Crux is nearby,” Mr Bliss

said. “If you are caught at a crime scene...” He didn’t finish. He didn’t have to.

“We’re going,” Skulduggery said. He pulled on his coat and wrapped his scarf around the lower half of his skull. “We appreciate you calling us in on this by the way.”

“Detective Crux is unsuited to an investigation of this nature,” Bliss responded. “Which is why the Sanctuary needs you and Miss Cain to return to our employ.”

There was a slight hint of amusement in Skulduggery’s voice. “I think Thurid Guild might disagree with you there.”

“Nevertheless, I have asked the Grand Mage to meet with you this afternoon, and he has promised me he will.”

Valkyrie raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. Bliss was one of the most powerful men alive, but he also happened to be one of the scariest. He still creeped her out.

“Guild said he’d talk to us?” Skulduggery asked. “It’s not like him to change his mind about something like that.”

“Desperate times,” was all Bliss said.

Skulduggery nodded and Valkyrie followed him outside. Despite the grey skies, he slipped a pair of sunglasses into place above his scarf, hiding his eye sockets from passers-by. If there *were* any passers-by. The weather, it seemed, was keeping most sensible people indoors.

“Four victims,” Skulduggery said. “All Teleporters. Why?”

Valkyrie buttoned her coat, struggling a little. Her black clothes had saved her life more times than she wanted to count, but every move she made reminded her that she had grown since Ghastly Bespoke made them for her, and she wasn’t twelve any more. She’d had to throw away her boots because they’d gotten too small, and buy a regular pair in an ordinary, average shop. She needed Ghastly to change from a statue back to a man and make her a new outfit. Valkyrie allowed herself a moment to feel guilty about being so selfish then got back to business.

“Maybe Cameron Light, along with the other Teleporters, did something to the killer and this is his – or her – revenge.”

“That’s Theory One. Anything else?”

“Maybe the killer needed something from them.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Teleporter stuff.”

“So why kill them?”

“Maybe it’s one of those items where you have to kill the owner to use it, like the Sceptre of the Ancients.”

“And so we have Theory Two.”

“Or maybe the killer wanted something that one of them had, so he was just working his way through the Teleporters

until he found whoever had it.”

“Now that’s a possibility, and so becomes Theory Two, Variation B.”

“I’m glad you’re not making this needlessly complicated or anything,” Valkyrie muttered.

A black van pulled up beside them. The driver got out, looked up and down the street to make sure no one was watching, and slid open the side door. Two Cleavers stepped out and stood silently, dressed in grey, faces hidden behind visored helmets. They each held a very long scythe. The last occupant of the van emerged and stood between the Cleavers. Wearing slacks and a matching blazer, with a high forehead and a goatee beard pointing down in an effort to give himself a chin, Remus Crux observed Skulduggery and Valkyrie with a disdainful expression.

“Oh,” he said, “it’s you.” He had a curious voice, like a spoiled cat whining for its dinner.

Skulduggery nodded to the Cleavers on either side of him. “I see you’re going incognito today.”

Immediately, Crux bristled. “I am the Sanctuary’s lead detective, Mr Pleasant. I have enemies and, as such, I need bodyguards.”

“Do you really need them to stand in the middle of the

street?” Valkyrie asked. “They look a little conspicuous.”

Crux sneered. “That’s an awfully big word for a thirteen-year-old.”

Valkyrie resisted the urge to hit him. “Actually, it’s not,” she replied. “It’s fairly standard. Also, I’m fourteen. Also, your beard’s stupid.”

“Isn’t this fun?” Skulduggery said brightly. “The three of us getting along so well.”

Crux glared at Valkyrie, then looked at Skulduggery. “What are you doing here?”

“We were passing, we heard there’d been another murder and we thought we could get a peek at the crime scene. We just arrived actually. Is there any chance...?”

“I’m sorry, Mr Pleasant,” Crux said stiffly. “Because of the international nature of these crimes and the attention they’re getting, the Grand Mage expects me to conduct myself with the utmost professionalism, and he has given me strict instructions as regards you and Miss Cain. He doesn’t want either of you anywhere *near* Sanctuary business.”

“But this isn’t Sanctuary business,” Valkyrie pointed out. “It’s just a murder. Cameron Light didn’t even *work* for the Sanctuary.”

“It is an official Sanctuary investigation, which makes it

official Sanctuary business.”

Skulduggery’s tone was friendly. “So how’s the investigation going? You’re probably under a lot of pressure to get results, right?”

“It’s under control.”

“Oh, I’m sure it is. And I’m sure the international community is offering help and pooling resources – this isn’t just an Irish problem after all. But if you need any *unofficial* help, we’ll be glad to—”

“*You* may break the rules,” Crux interrupted, “but *I* don’t. You no longer have any authority here. You gave that away when you accused the Grand Mage of treason, remember?”

“Vaguely...”

“You want my advice, Pleasant?”

“Not especially.”

“Find a nice hole in the ground somewhere and lie in it. You’re finished as a detective. You’re done.”

Wearing what he probably thought was a triumphant sneer, Crux and the two Cleavers entered the building.

“I don’t like him,” Valkyrie decided.

KILLER ON THE LOOSE

The Bentley parked in the rear of the closed-down Waxworks Museum and Valkyrie followed Skulduggery inside. A thick layer of dust had collected on the few remaining wax figures who stood in the darkness. Valkyrie waited while Skulduggery searched the wall for the panel that opened the hidden door.

Idly, Valkyrie examined the wax figure of Phil Lynott, the lead singer from Thin Lizzy. It stood nearby, holding a guitar, and was actually a pretty good likeness. Her dad had been a big Thin Lizzy fan back in the 1970s, and whenever ‘Whiskey in the

Jar' came on the radio, he'd still sing along, albeit tunelessly.

"The panel is gone," Skulduggery announced. "The moment we left, they must have changed the locks on us. I don't know whether to feel flattered or insulted."

"I get the feeling you're going to decide on flattered."

He shrugged. "It's a fuzzier feeling."

"So how do we get in?"

Someone tapped Valkyrie on the shoulder and she yelped and leaped away.

"I am sorry," the wax figure of Phil Lynott said. "I did not mean to startle you."

She stared at it.

"I am the lock," it continued. "I open the door from this side of the wall. Do you have an appointment?"

"We're here to see the Grand Mage," Skulduggery said. "I am Skulduggery Pleasant and this is my associate, Valkyrie Cain."

Phil Lynott's wax head nodded. "You are expected, but you will need an official Sanctuary representative to accompany you through the door. I have alerted the Administrator. She should be arriving shortly."

"Thank you."

"You are welcome."

Valkyrie stared at it for a few more seconds. “Can you sing?” she asked.

“I open the door,” it said. “That is my only purpose.”

“But can you sing?”

It considered the question. “I do not know,” it decided. “I have never tried.”

The wall rumbled behind them, and a door shifted and slid open. A woman in a sombre skirt and white blouse stood there, smiling politely.

“Mr Pleasant,” the Administrator said, “Miss Cain, welcome. The Grand Mage is expecting you. Please follow me.”

The figure of Phil Lynott didn’t say goodbye as the Administrator led them down a spiral staircase, their way lit by burning torches in brackets. They reached the bottom and passed into the Foyer. It felt weird, walking into a place that had once been so familiar, and now seemed so alien. The irrational part of Valkyrie’s brain was certain that the Cleaver guards were glaring at them from behind their visors, even though she knew they were far too disciplined and professional to display such petty behaviour.

The Sanctuary, she had only recently realised, was shaped like a massive triangle that had toppled over, and was now lying flat beneath the surface of Dublin City. The Foyer

marked the dead centre of the triangle's base, with long corridors stretching out to either side and a central corridor running straight. The side corridors turned in at a 45-degree angle, and eventually met the central corridor at the triangle's point. Smaller corridors bisected these in a seemingly random pattern.

The rooms along the main corridors were mostly used for the day-to-day running of the Sanctuary and the Council of Elders' business. But down some of those narrower corridors lay rooms that were a lot more interesting – the Gaol, holding cells, the Repository, the Armoury and dozens more that Valkyrie had never even seen.

The Administrator chatted amicably with Skulduggery as they walked. She was a nice lady, brought in as a replacement for the Administrator who had died during Nefarian Serpine's raid on the Sanctuary two years before. Valkyrie closed her mind to the memory of the carnage. She had lived through it once – she saw no reason to do so again.

The Administrator showed them into a large room with no furniture. "The Grand Mage will be with you in a moment."

"Thank you," Skulduggery said, nodding politely, and the Administrator left.

“Do you think we’ll be waiting long?” Valkyrie asked, keeping her voice low.

“The last time we were in this building, we accused the Grand Mage of being a traitor,” Skulduggery said. “Yes, I think we’ll be waiting long.”

Almost two hours later, the doors opened again and a grey-haired man strode in, his face lined and serious and his eyes cold. He stopped when he saw Valkyrie, who was sitting on the floor.

“You will stand when I enter the room,” he said, barely managing to keep the snarl out of his voice.

Valkyrie had *been* getting up before he had spoken, but as she got to her feet, she kept her mouth shut. This meeting was too important to risk ruining because of something stupid.

“Thank you for agreeing to see us,” Skulduggery said. “We understand you must be very busy.”

“If it were up to me, I wouldn’t allow you to waste another moment of my time,” Guild said. “But Mr Bliss continues to vouch for you. It is out of respect for my fellow Elder that you are even here.”

“And on that positive note,” Skulduggery began, but Guild shook his head.

“None of your jokes, Mr Pleasant. Say what you came here

to say and leave the sarcastic comments to one side.”

Skulduggery’s head tilted slightly. “Very well. Six months ago, while preparing to bring down Baron Vengeous, you fired us over a disagreement. Later that same day, we defeated both Vengeous and the Grotesquery, and the threat they posed was averted. And yet our role in that operation was overlooked.”

“You’re looking for a reward? I have to say, I’d be disappointed if I didn’t already think so little of you. I didn’t think money interested someone like you. Or perhaps you’d like a medal?”

“This isn’t about a reward.”

“Then what *is* it about?”

“Four Teleporters have been murdered in the past month and you still have no idea who is responsible. You *know* we should be in on this.”

“I’m afraid I can’t discuss an ongoing investigation with civilians. I assure you, Detective Crux has matters well in hand.”

“Remus Crux is a second-rate detective.”

“On the contrary, there is no doubt in my mind that Crux is the best man for the job. I know him and I trust him.”

“And how many more people have to die before you realise your mistake?”

Guild's eyes narrowed. "You can't help yourself, can you? You come here, begging for your old job back, and even now you can't help but be insolent. Apparently, the only lesson you've learned since you were last here is how to shut that girl up."

"Bite me," Valkyrie snapped.

"And even at that you fail," Guild sighed.

Valkyrie's anger swirled inside her and she felt herself go red. At the sight of her flushed face, Guild smiled a smug little smile.

"This is a waste of time," Skulduggery said. "You were never going to even *consider* reinstating us, were you?"

"Of course not. You say you were fired over a *disagreement*. How simple that sounds. How innocent. How innocuous. What a very polite way of saying that you accused me of being a *traitor*."

"Vengeous had a spy in the Sanctuary, Thurid, and we know it was you."

"This is how you're spending your retirement, is it? Making up fantastic stories to fill in the gaps of whatever you call your life? Tell me, Skulduggery – since we're on a first-name basis – have you discovered what your purpose in life actually is? You've already killed the man who murdered your family, so it can't be revenge. You've done that one. So what is it, do you think? Redemption, for all the terrible things you've done? Maybe

you're here to heal all those wounds you've inflicted, or bring back all those people you've killed. What is your purpose, Skulduggery?"

Before Skulduggery could respond, Guild gestured to Valkyrie.

"Is it to teach this girl? Is it to train her to be just like you? Is that what gets you up in the morning? But here's a question you maybe haven't asked yourself – do you really *want* her to be like you? Do you want her to live like you – devoid of warmth, and companionship, and love?"

"If you suspect me of being this traitor, then you must think that I'm a monster, yes? A cold-hearted monster. And yet I have a wife I adore, and children I worry about, and a responsibility in my work that weighs on my shoulders every moment of every day. So if a cold-hearted monster like me could have all this, and you have *none* of it, then what does that make *you*?"

They left the Sanctuary, passed the wax figure of Phil Lynott in silence, and walked back to the car. Valkyrie didn't like it when Skulduggery went quiet. It usually meant bad things.

A man was standing by their car. He had tight brown hair and a few days' worth of beard growth. Valkyrie frowned, trying to remember if he'd been there a second ago.

“Skulduggery,” the man said. “I thought I’d find you here.”

Skulduggery nodded to him. “Emmett Peregrine, it’s been a while. Allow me to introduce Valkyrie Cain. Valkyrie, Peregrine here is a Teleporter.”

Peregrine was also a man who apparently didn’t indulge in small talk. “Who’s behind it? Who’s killing the Teleporters?”

“We don’t know.”

“Well, why don’t you know?” he snapped. “You’re supposed to be the big detective, aren’t you? Isn’t that what they say?”

“I don’t work for the Sanctuary,” Skulduggery replied. “I don’t have official sanction.”

“Then who does? Because I’m telling you right now, I am not going to that idiot Crux. I’m not putting my life in the hands of someone like that. Listen, we may not like each other, and I know we have never warmed to each other’s company, but I need your help or I’m next.”

Skulduggery motioned to the wall and all three of them stepped over to it. From here they could talk without being seen.

“Do you have any idea who could be behind the murders?” he asked.

Peregrine made a visible effort to calm down. “None. I’ve been trying to think of what anyone could have to gain by killing us all and I’ve come up with nothing. I don’t even have any

random paranoid conspiracy theories to fall back on.”

“Have you noticed anyone watching you, following you...?”

“No and I’ve been looking. Skulduggery, I’m exhausted. Every few hours I teleport somewhere else. I haven’t slept in *days*.”

“We can protect you.”

Peregrine’s laugh was brittle. “No offence, but you can’t. If you can guard me, the killer can get to me. I’m better off on my own, but I can’t run forever.” He hesitated. “I heard about Cameron.”

“Yes.”

“He was a good man. The best of us.”

“There is a way to draw the killer out.”

“Let me guess – you want me to act as bait? You want me to sit still and let him come to me, and then you’ll pounce and save the day? Sorry, I’m not in the habit of waiting to be killed.”

“It’s our best shot.”

“It’s not going to happen.”

“Then you need to help us. Even when they knew their lives were in danger, Cameron Light and the others still let down their guard. They knew the killer, Emmett, and you probably do too.”

“What are you saying? That I can’t trust my friends?”

“I’m saying you can’t trust anyone but Valkyrie and myself.”

“And why should I trust you?”

Skulduggery sighed. “Because you literally have no other choice.”

“Is there one person that all the Teleporters would know?” Valkyrie asked. “One person who you’d think you’d be safe with?”

Peregrine thought for a moment. “Sanctuary officials,” he said, “a handful of sorcerers probably, but nobody that stands out. Teleporters don’t tend to be well liked, maybe you’ve heard. Our social circles really aren’t that wide.”

“Have you made any new friends?” Skulduggery asked. “Any new acquaintances?”

“No, none. Well, apart from the kid.”

Skulduggery’s head tilted. “The kid?”

“The other Teleporter.”

“I thought you were the *last* Teleporter.”

“No, there’s a seventeen-year-old English kid, turned up a while back. Renn his name is. Fletcher Renn. No training, no discipline, no clue to what he’s doing – a right pain in the neck. Wait, you think he’s the killer?”

“I don’t know,” Skulduggery murmured. “He’s either the killer or the killer’s next victim. Where is he?”

“He could be anywhere. Cameron and myself went to talk to him a few months ago, to offer to teach him. Cocky little sod laughed in our faces. He’s one of those rare sorcerers, natural-born, magic at his fingertips. He has power, but like I said, no training. I doubt he could teleport a few miles at a time.”

“He doesn’t sound like a killer. But that means he’s out there alone, with no idea what’s going on.”

“I think he’s still in Ireland,” Peregrine said. “He grunted something about planning to stay here for a while, and how we should leave him alone. He doesn’t need anybody apparently. Typical teenager.” Peregrine glanced at Valkyrie. “No offence.”

“Valkyrie’s not a typical anything,” Skulduggery said before she could respond. “We’ll track him down, but if you see him first, send him to us.”

“I doubt he’ll listen to me, but OK.”

“How will we contact you if we need you?”

“You won’t, but I’ll check back every few days for an update. This would all be over a lot quicker if you’d take over the investigation. I don’t trust Crux and I don’t trust Thurid Guild. You’re in close with Bliss, aren’t you? Maybe you could get a message to him. Just tell him that there are a lot of us out here who would back *him* as the new Grand Mage, if he were interested. All he has to do is say the word.”

“You’re not talking about a coup, are you?”

“If a revolution is what it takes to get the Sanctuary back on track, Skulduggery, then that’s what we’ll do.”

“A little drastic, one would think. But I’ll relay the message.”

“Thank you.”

“There’s nothing else? Nothing you can think of to help us? No matter how small or insignificant?”

“There is nothing, Skulduggery. I don’t know why the other Teleporters were killed, and I don’t know how. We are exceptionally hard to kill. The instant we think something’s wrong, we’re gone. Until last month, the only time I can remember a Teleporter being murdered was fifty years ago.”

“Oh?” said Skulduggery, suddenly interested. “And who was that?”

“Trope Kessel. I barely knew the man.”

“Who murdered him?” Valkyrie asked.

“No one knows. He told a colleague he was going to Glendalough, and he was never seen again. They found his blood by the shore of the Upper Lake, but his body was never recovered.”

“Could Kessel’s murder have anything to do with what’s going on now?”

Peregrine frowned. “I don’t see why it should. If someone

wanted the Teleporters dead, why wait fifty years between the first murder and the rest?”

“Still,” Skulduggery said, “it might be somewhere to start.”

“You’re the detectives,” Peregrine said with a shrug, “not me.”

“You know Tanith, don’t you?”

“Tanith Low? Yes. Why?”

“If you’re in London and need someone to watch your back, you can trust her. It might be your only chance to catch some sleep.”

“I’ll think about it. Any other advice for me?”

“Stay alive,” Skulduggery said and Peregrine vanished.

3

THAT FIRST KISS

By the time they got to Haggard, the lights turning the streets of the small town a hazy shade of orange, it was almost ten. There was nobody walking in the rain, so Valkyrie didn't have to slump down in her seat. That was the only problem with the Bentley – it wasn't the type of car that went unnoticed.

Still, at least it wasn't yellow.

They approached the pier. Six months earlier, Valkyrie had leaped from it, followed by a pack of the Infected – humans on the verge of becoming vampires. She'd led them to their

doom, since salt water, if ingested, was fatal to their kind. Their screams of pain and anguish, mixed with rage and then torn from ruined throats, were as fresh in her memory as if it had all happened yesterday.

The Bentley stopped and Valkyrie got out. It was cold, so she didn't linger. She hurried to the side of her house and let her hands drift through the air. She found the fault lines between the spaces with ease and pushed down sharply. The air rushed around her and she was rising. There was a better way to do it – to use the air to *carry*, rather than merely *propel*, but her lessons with Skulduggery hadn't reached that level yet.

She caught the windowsill and hauled herself up, then opened the window and dropped into her room.

Her reflection looked up from the desk, where it was doing Valkyrie's homework. "Hello," it said.

"Anything to report?" Valkyrie asked as she slipped off her coat and began changing out of her black clothes into her regular wear.

"We had a late dinner," the reflection said. "In school, the French test was postponed because half the class were hiding in the locker area. We got the maths results back – you got a B. Alan and Cathy broke up."

"Tragic."

Footsteps approached the door and the reflection dropped to the ground and crawled under the bed.

“Steph?” Valkyrie’s mother called, knocking on the door and stepping in at the same time. She held a basket of laundry under her arm. “That’s funny. I could have sworn that I heard voices.”

“I was kind of talking to myself,” Valkyrie said, smiling with what she hoped was an appropriate level of self-conscious embarrassment.

Her mother put a pile of fresh clothes on the bed. “First sign of madness, you know.”

“Dad talks to himself all the time.”

“Well, that’s only because no one else will listen.”

Her mother left the room. Valkyrie stuck her feet into a pair of battered runners and, leaving the reflection under the bed for the moment, clumped down the stairs to the kitchen. She poured cornflakes into a bowl and opened the fridge, sighing when she realised that the milk carton was empty. Her tummy rumbled as she dumped the carton in the recycle bag.

“Mum,” she called, “we’re out of milk.”

“Damn lazy cows,” her mother muttered as she walked in. “Have you finished your homework?”

Valkyrie remembered the schoolbooks on the desk and her

shoulders sagged. “No,” she said grumpily. “But I’m too hungry to do maths. Do we have anything to eat?”

Her mother looked at her. “You had a huge dinner.”

The *reflection* had had a huge dinner. The only things Valkyrie had eaten all day were some bourbon creams.

“I’m still hungry,” Valkyrie said quietly.

“I think you’re just trying to delay the maths.”

“Do we have any leftovers?”

“Ah, now I *know* you’re joking. Leftovers, with your father in the house? I have yet to see the day. If you need any help with your homework, just let me know.”

Her mother walked out again and Valkyrie went back to staring at her bowl of cornflakes.

Her father walked in, checked that they weren’t going to be overheard, and crept over. “Steph, I need your help.”

“We have no milk.”

“Damn those lazy cows. Anyway, it’s our wedding anniversary on Saturday, and yes, I should have done all this weeks ago, but I’ve got tomorrow and Friday to get your mother something thoughtful and nice. What should I get?”

“Honestly? I think she’d really appreciate some milk.”

“The milkman always seems to bring her milk,” her dad

said bitterly. “How can I compete with that? He drives a milk truck, for God’s sake. *A milk truck*. So no, I need to buy her something else. What?”

“How about, I don’t know, jewellery? Like, a necklace or something? Or earrings?”

“A necklace is good,” he murmured. “And she *does* have ears. But I got her jewellery last year. And the year before.”

“Well, what did you get her the year before that?”

He hesitated. “A... a certain type of clothing.. I forget. Anyway, clothes are bad because I always get the wrong size, and she gets either insulted or depressed. I could get her a hat, I suppose. She has a normal-sized head, wouldn’t you say? Maybe a nice scarf. Or some gloves.”

Valkyrie nodded. “Nothing says ‘happy anniversary’ more than a good pair of mittens.”

Her dad looked at her. “That was a grumpy joke. You’re grumpy.”

“I’m hungry.”

“You’ve just eaten. How was school, by the way? Anything interesting happen?”

“Alan and Cathy broke up.”

“Are either of them anyone I should care about?”

“Not really.”

“Well, OK then.” He narrowed his eyes. “How about you? Do you have any... *romances* I should know about?”

“Nope. Not a one.”

“Well, good. Excellent. There’ll be plenty of time for boys when you leave college and become a nun.”

She smiled. “I’m glad you have such ambitious dreams for me.”

“Well, I *am* the father figure. So, anniversary present?”

“How about a weekend away? Spend your anniversary in Paris or somewhere? You can book it tomorrow, head off on Saturday.”

“Oh, *that’s* a good idea. That’s a *really* good idea. You’d have to stay with Beryl though. Are you all right with that?”

The lie came easily. “Sure.”

He kissed her forehead. “You’re the best daughter in the world.”

“Dad?”

“Yes, sweetie?”

“You know the way I love you so much?”

“I do.”

“Will you go out and get some more milk?”

“No.”

“But I love you.”

“And I love *you*. But not enough to get you milk. Have some toast.”

He walked out of the kitchen and Valkyrie sighed in exasperation. She went to put on some toast, but they were out of bread, so she took some hamburger buns and slid them into the toaster. When they popped up, she covered them with freshly microwaved beans and took the plate up to her room, closing the door behind her.

“OK,” she said, putting the plate on her desk, “you can go back in the mirror.”

The reflection slid out from beneath the bed and stood. “There are a few homework questions still to do,” it said.

“I can do them. Are they hard? Never mind. I can do them. Anything else happen today?”

“Gary Price kissed me.”

Valkyrie stared. “What?”

“Gary Price kissed me.”

“What do you mean? Like, *kissed you* kissed you?”

“Yes.”

Her anger made her want to shout, but Valkyrie kept her voice low. “Why did he do that?”

“He likes you.”

“But I don’t like him!”

“Yes, you do.”

“You shouldn’t have kissed him! You shouldn’t be doing anything *like* that! The only reason you exist is to go to school and hang around here and pretend to be me!”

“I *was* pretending to be you.”

“You shouldn’t have kissed him!”

“Why?”

“*Because I’m supposed to!*”

The reflection looked at her blankly. “You’re upset. Is it because you weren’t around for your first kiss?”

“*No*,” Valkyrie shot back.

The reflection sighed and Valkyrie looked at it sharply. “What was that?”

“What was what?”

“You *sighed*, like you were *annoyed*.”

“Did I?”

“You *did*. You’re not supposed to *get* annoyed. You don’t have any feelings. You’re not a real person.”

“I don’t remember sighing. I’m sorry if I did.”

Valkyrie opened the wardrobe to show the reflection the mirror.

“I’m ready to resume my life,” she said, and the reflection

nodded and stepped through. It stood there in the reflected room, waiting patiently.

Valkyrie glared at it for a moment, and then touched the mirror and the memories came at her, flooding her mind, settling alongside her own memories, getting comfortable in her head.

She had been at the lockers, in school, and she'd been talking to... No, the *reflection* had been talking to... No, it had been *her*, it had been *Valkyrie*. She'd been talking to a few of the girls, and Gary had walked up, said something that everyone laughed at, and the girls had walked off, chatting. Valkyrie remembered standing there, alone with Gary, and the way he smiled, and she remembered smiling back, and when he leaned in to kiss her, she had let him.

But that was it. There was the memory of the thing, of the act, but there was no memory of the feeling. There were no butterflies in her stomach, or nerves, or happiness, and she couldn't remember liking any of it because there was no emotion to accompany it. The reflection was incapable of emotion.

Valkyrie narrowed her eyes. Her first kiss and she hadn't even been there when it happened.

She left the beans on toasted buns on the desk, her hunger

fading, and sorted through the rest of the memories, sifting through to the most recent. She remembered watching herself climb through the window, then she remembered sliding beneath the bed, waiting under there, and then crawling out when she was told.

She remembered telling herself that Gary Price had kissed her, and the argument they'd just had, and then she remembered saying, "You're upset. Is it because you weren't around for your first kiss?", and the sharp "*No*" that followed. And then a moment, like the lights had dimmed, and then she was saying, "I don't remember sighing. I'm sorry if I did."

Valkyrie frowned. Another gap. They were rare, and they never lasted for more than a couple of seconds, but they were definitely there.

It had started when the reflection had been killed in Valkyrie's place, months earlier. Maybe it had been damaged in a way they hadn't anticipated. She didn't want to get rid of it and she didn't want to replace it. It was more convincing than ever these days. If all Valkyrie had to worry about was a faulty memory, she figured that wasn't too high a price to pay.