

SKULDUGGERY
PLEASANT
RESURRECTION

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1

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1

A new beginning.

That's what this was. A fresh start. He was going to deliver this one piece of information and then leave. He could go home, back to New York, or maybe Chicago, or Philly. Ireland didn't suit him any more. He was done with it – and it, apparently, was done with him. He was OK with that. He'd had some good times here. He'd had some fun. He'd made some friends. But a new day was about to dawn. All Temper Fray had to do was survive the night.

The wall up ahead cracked. By the light of the streetlamps, the cracks spider-webbed. Any last vestige of hope that he'd just be able to walk out of here vanished with those cracks. Temper had seen this trick before. A redneck psycho called Billy-Ray Sanguine used to jump out at people as they passed, kill them before they blinked. Temper had met Sanguine once. For a hillbilly hitman, he'd been all right. Whoever this guy was, he was no Billy-Ray.

The wall spat out a skinny little runt who came at him with a big knife and a bigger snarl. Temper ignored the snarl for the moment, focused on the knife, batting it away and slamming an elbow into the runt's mouth, dealing with the snarl almost by default. The runt went down, all flailing limbs and broken teeth, and Temper hurried on.

Yep. Things were going badly. But of course they were. Nothing ever went well for Temper Fray.

A motorbike came round the corner ahead of him, its single headlight sweeping the storefronts, and slowed almost immediately. Temper kept walking, keeping his head down, his hands swinging loosely by his sides. The guy on the motorbike wasn't wearing a helmet, and he wasn't looking at Temper. He was focused on the road, keeping his head straight. Just a guy on his bike, that's all, going about his business. As he drew parallel, his right hand drifted into his jacket.

Temper lunged, shoving him as he passed, and the bike toppled and the driver cried out as he fell. Temper kicked the consciousness right out of him and the guy flattened out. Bending over him, Temper reached into his jacket, found the gun and pulled it free. He checked it was loaded, then flicked off the safety. His own gun was on the kitchen table in the house he'd been staying in, alongside his phone. He'd have traded all the guns in the world for his phone right now. What he wouldn't give for a chance to call in reinforcements.

What he wouldn't give to call in Skulduggery Pleasant.

He hurried down a side street. There was a woman walking towards him, silhouetted by the lights, her shadow stretching long and thin over the cobbles. He couldn't see her face. It could be Quibble or, worse still, Razzia, or it could just be another citizen of Roarhaven going for a late-night stroll through the city. Temper held the gun behind his back and kept walking.

They drew closer. The gun felt slippery in his grip. He went left and so did she, and it was only when they passed each other that he glimpsed a face he didn't recognise. She gave him a courteous nod and he returned it, and they walked on and he breathed in relief.

"Excuse me," the woman said behind him, and he turned just as a shadow detached itself from their surroundings and

snapped the woman's neck. She crumpled and Razzia stepped over her body.

"Thirteen," Razzia said in her broad Australian accent. "Thirteen innocent bystanders. I'm not saying I'm breaking any records, but you gotta admit that's impressive." She looked up, smiling brightly. Beautiful, blonde, always dressed in tuxedos, Razzia was also completely and utterly insane. "You have been a naughty boy."

Her hand flashed up and Temper ducked, hearing tiny teeth snapping beside his ear. He glimpsed the black tendril retracting into Razzia's palm like a nightmarish tape measure and fired at her, but she was already sliding back into the shadows. There was someone behind her, striding up. A bald woman with a gun. Quibble.

She opened fire and he kicked a door open and fell inside, more bullets peppering the doorframe after him. Inside there was a man leaping off a couch and a woman with two mugs of coffee in her hands, staring at him in shock as he barged past her. Temper ran into the next room, saw two men through the window and turned back, took the stairs. The couple shouted and raced after him, and now he could hear a baby starting to cry. He ignored it, hurried to the master bedroom, and through the wide-open curtains glimpsed a young man on the rooftop opposite. Thin, with shockingly platinum hair. Nero. Temper blinked and the young man was gone.

"Dammit," Temper muttered.

He sprinted to the window and then Nero was beside him, sticking his foot out, and Temper tripped and collided with the wall. He twisted, bringing the gun up, but Nero was suddenly right next to him, snatching the weapon from Temper's hand before vanishing again.

Temper had a full second to get to his knees before Nero teleported back into the room, gun aimed squarely at Temper's chest. This time he'd brought a friend, dressed in black, a

uniform of rubber and leather. The mask he wore covered his whole head. Not even his eyes were visible behind those tinted lenses.

“Hey, Lethe,” said Temper, slumping back and offering a feeble wave. “What’s going on?”

Lethe observed him for a long few seconds. When he spoke, his voice was that familiar hollowed whisper that picked over every word with undisguised relish. “I knew you were never *truly* one of us.”

Temper shrugged. “Easy to say with hindsight...”

“I could see it in your *eyes*,” Lethe said. “Despite your protestations, despite your *wild claims*, you didn’t hate the mortals *nearly* enough.”

“Well,” Temper said, resting his back against the wall and crossing his legs at the ankles, “I’ve always had trouble hating people because they’re different than me. It’s a black thing; you wouldn’t understand. Or maybe you would. Could there be a brother hiding beneath that freaky mask of yours?”

There was movement out on the landing, and Lethe stepped aside as Razzia sidled in. Memphis and Quibble shoved the young couple into the room behind her.

“Look who we found downstairs,” Razzia said. “More innocent bystanders.”

“Please,” the guy said. “I... I don’t know what’s going on, but we’re not a threat to you, I swear we’re not. I’m – listen to me, we’re both Arborkinetics. We have a child in the other room, please let us—”

“What’s an Arborkinetic?” Memphis asked, his lip curling while he pressed his gun against the young woman’s head.

“Plants,” said Quibble. “He talks to plants. Makes them grow.”

Memphis laughed and said, “Man, that’s dumb,” which was rich coming from a guy who dressed like Elvis.

“Plants,” said the young man. “Exactly. We can’t hurt you. If you let us go, we’ll—”

Quibble raised her gun to shoot him in the head, but Lethe held up a hand. “Ah-ah,” he said. “They may talk to plants, but they’re still *sorcerers*. They’re still part of the *family*. We don’t kill family unless we absolutely *have to*.”

“Thank you,” the guy said. “Thank you so much.”

“*Hey*,” Lethe said, “we’re all on the same *side*.” The baby started crying again, and Lethe glanced at Quibble. “Kill the *child*.”

The young couple immediately tried to break free, but Razzia hit the guy so hard his legs gave out and then grabbed the girl, held her in a choke.

Lethe didn’t take his gaze off Quibble. “You’re still standing here. The child is *annoying* me. *Kill it*.”

Quibble had now gone quite pale.

“I’ll do it,” Razzia said happily, but Lethe shook his head.

“No,” he said. “I instructed *Quibble* to do it, so Quibble *will* do it.”

Quibble didn’t want to do it. “Please,” she said, her voice soft. “It’s just a baby.”

Lethe observed her through the tinted lenses of his mask. “I see.”

Tears in her eyes. “Lethe... come on, please...”

“You, ah, are refusing to *obey*, Quibble?” Lethe asked.

Memphis glanced away, refusing to meet Quibble’s eyes. Nero looked bored, while Razzia watched with growing enjoyment, completely oblivious to the fact that the young woman she was choking had passed out.

“I can’t kill a kid,” Quibble said quietly.

Lethe took a moment. “Oh, dear.”

She was dead. She knew it. Temper had seen that look before, that doomed expression on a slackening face. In his experience, there were only three possible options open to her at this point. The first was to run, but Lethe had a Teleporter on his side, which kind of ruled that out. The second was to

give up: to accept what was coming or start begging. But begging wasn't Quibble's style. Quibble was an Option Three kind of girl.

She raised the gun, aimed it straight at Lethe's face. Immediately, Memphis raised his, pressing the muzzle to Quibble's temple.

"Don't," Memphis whispered. "Don't you do it."

"This is exciting," Razzia said, and clapped her hands. The young woman slumped to the floor, unconscious.

"This is *unfortunate*," said Lethe. "Very, hugely, *unfortunate*."

"I can't murder a baby," Quibble said.

"Babies are just people who haven't grown up yet. You've killed *loads* of people. *Loads*."

"So let's wait eighteen years and I'll kill this one," said Quibble.

"Oh," said Lethe. "Oh, this is one of those... *principle* things, isn't it? That's... that's *sad*. I'm *sad* now. You've made me *sad*. Because now I'll have to kill you, Quibble, and... and I would prefer *not to*."

His hands flashed, stripping the gun from Quibble's grip and turning it back on her, pulling the trigger before she knew what was happening.

Her body toppled backwards. The wailing from the other room got louder, and Lethe handed the gun to Razzia. She looked at it like it was a piece of rotting fruit, and tossed it away.

"I'm sorry," Lethe said to Memphis. "I know you were *close*."

"She was my sister," Memphis said.

"Oh," said Lethe. "Didn't know you were *that* close. I feel I have to *ask*, though, Memphis, and please, try not to take *offence*. Are you going to try and *kill me* for this? To exact *revenge*?"

Memphis looked down at Quibble's body. "No, I guess I'm not," he said at last.

"Good," said Lethe. "That's good. It's best, after a *family tragedy*, that everyone tries to *move on*, and put the past where it belongs. In the *past*."

“Do you want me to kill the baby?” Razzia asked hopefully.

“What baby?” Lethe said, and turned back to Temper. “You’re coming with *us*, Mr Fray. We have *questions* to ask.”

Another man entered the room, a guy with a braided goatee. Temper tried to keep him away but one touch was all it took, and all the bad thoughts Temper had ever had swirled and swarmed and swamped his mind.