


Skulduggery  
Pleasant  
DEATH-BRINGER

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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.