

Skulduggery
Pleasant
KINGDOM ^{OF} THE WICKED

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THE BUTTERFLY AND THE WOLF

“I’m a butterfly!” screamed the fat man as he ran, flapping his arms like two really flabby, really rubbish wings.



“You’re actually not,” Valkyrie Cain told him for the eighth time. He ran around her in a big circle, bathed in moonlight, and she just stood there with her head down. He wasn’t wearing a shirt, and moments earlier she’d had to drag her eyes away from his wobbling bosoms before they made her feel queasy. Now that his trousers were starting their inexorable slide downwards, she was averting her gaze altogether. “Please,” she said, “pull up your trousers.”

“Butterflies don’t need trousers!” he screeched. A moment later, those trousers landed by her feet.

She took out her phone and dialled. “He’s in his underpants,” she said angrily.

Skulduggery Pleasant's smooth voice sounded uncharacteristically hesitant. "I'm sorry? Who is in his underpants?"

"Jerry Houlihan," she said. "He thinks he's a butterfly. Apparently they don't wear trousers."

"And *is* he a butterfly?"

"He isn't."

"You're quite sure?"

"Quite."

"He could be a butterfly dreaming he's a man."

"Well, he's not. He's a big fat man dreaming he's a big fat butterfly. What the hell am I supposed to do?"

There was another hesitation. "I'm not sure. You don't happen to have a large net handy, do you?"

"I want to hit him. I want to hit *you*, but I also want to hit him."

"You can't hit him. He's an ordinary mortal under some kind of magical influence. It's not his fault he's acting this way. I assume you have him out of public view at the very least? Valkyrie? Valkyrie, are you there?"

"I'm here," she said dully. "He's started leaping with every third step. It's kind of mesmerising."

"I can only imagine. The Cleavers should be with you in half an hour or so. Can you contain him until then?"

She gripped the phone tighter. "You're not serious. You can't be serious. We've saved the world. I, personally, have saved the world. This here, right now, this is not something I do. This is something other people do and then you and me laugh about it later."

“We do what needs to be done, Valkyrie. Once you’ve handed him over to the Cleavers, meet me in Phibsborough.”

She sighed. “Another busy night?”

“It certainly looks that way. I really must go. Sally Yorke has just set fire to her knees.”

The line went dead. Valkyrie gritted her teeth and stuffed the phone back in the pocket of her black trousers. This was not how a seventeen-year-old girl was supposed to spend her evenings. She blamed the Council of Elders for making this a priority. Yes, she accepted that it was a major problem that previously unremarkable mortals were suddenly developing magical abilities – aside from the threat they posed to themselves and others, they also risked exposing the existence of magic to the general public, and that was not something that could be allowed to happen. But why, out of all the cases that were popping up all over Ireland, did Valkyrie have to deal with the weird ones who thought they were butterflies? There were a few dozen sedated mortals back in the Sanctuary and not one of those was as weird and unsettling as Jerry Houlihan in his underpants.

Valkyrie frowned, and wondered why she couldn’t hear Jerry’s footsteps any more. Then she looked up and saw him flying through the night sky, flapping his arms and squealing with glee.

“Jerry!” she shouted. “Jerry Houlihan, get down here!”

But Jerry just giggled and jiggled, unsteady in the air but flying – definitely flying. He reversed course, flapping back towards her. Stupidly, she looked up as he passed directly overhead. The image

seared itself into her mind and she felt a little piece of herself die.

Jerry veered off course, drifting from the safety of the park towards the bright streetlights of Dublin City. Valkyrie reached up, felt the air, felt how the spaces connected, and then she pulled a gust of wind right into him, knocking him back towards her. She needed a rope or even a piece of string, just something to anchor him in place like a fat, man-shaped kite.

“Jerry,” she called, “can you hear me?”

“I’m a butterfly!” he panted happily.

“I can see that, and a very pretty butterfly you are, too. But aren’t you getting tired? Even butterflies get tired, Jerry. They have to land, don’t they? They have to land because their wings get tired.”

“My wings *are* getting tired,” he said, puffing heavily now.

“I know. I know they are. You should rest them. You should land.”

He dipped lower and she jumped, tried to grab his foot, but he beat his arms faster and bobbed up high again. “No!” he said. “Butterflies fly! Fly high in the sky!”

He was gasping for air now, losing his rhythm, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t keep himself from dipping lower once more. Valkyrie jumped, grabbed him, closed her eyes and tried to send her mind to a peaceful place. Jerry was sweating from all that exertion, and his skin was warm and sticky and hairy. Valkyrie remembered the good times in her life as she pulled him out of the sky, handhold after handhold. He made a last-ditch effort

to soar away and she had to grip the folds of flesh on his hips to hold him in place. Then Jerry gave up and stopped flapping, and Valkyrie fell screaming beneath his weight.

“I’m not a butterfly,” Jerry sobbed, as Valkyrie squirmed and wriggled beneath him.

The Cleavers arrived on time, as they usually did. They escorted Jerry Houlihan into their nondescript van, treating him surprisingly gently for anonymous drones with scythes strapped to their backs. Valkyrie hailed a cab, told the driver to take her to Phibsborough. They pulled over beside Skulduggery’s gleaming black Bentley.

Skulduggery was waiting for her in the shadows. His suit was dark grey, his hat dipped low over his brow. Tonight he was wearing the face of a long-nosed man with a goatee. He nodded up to a dark window on the top floor of an apartment building.

“Ed Stynes,” he said. “Forty years old. Lives alone. Not married, no kids. Recently split from his girlfriend. Works as a sound engineer. Possibly a werewolf.”

Valkyrie glared at him. “You told me there were no such things as werewolves.”

“I told you there were no such things as werewolves *any more*,” he corrected. “They died out in the nineteenth century. Unlike certain other creatures of the night that I could mention but won’t, werewolves were generally good people in human form. So appalled were they by their carnivorous lunar activities that they actively worked against their darker selves. They sought cures, isolation,

whatever they needed to make sure that they didn't spread the curse to anyone else."

"Unlike vampires," Valkyrie growled.

"You mentioned them, not me."

"So if werewolves are extinct, why do you think Ed Stynes is a werewolf?"

"Last night, people in the area reported sightings of a large dog, or a man dressed as a bear," Skulduggery said. "He didn't hurt anyone – werewolves seldom do on their first time out unless they're cornered. But on their second time, things get a lot more violent."

"But if werewolves are extinct..."

"The infection has been diluted down through the generations, but it's still there in a tiny fraction of the world's population. Too weak to ever manifest into any actual transformation – unless the carriers of this infection were suddenly and inexplicably to gain magical abilities."

"So Ed is like my butterfly man earlier."

"Yes. The latest in a worryingly long line of mortals developing magic. Unfortunately in Ed's case, it triggered a long dormant aspect of his physiology. You're going to need this." He handed her a long-barrelled gun.

Her eyes widened. "This is mine? You're giving this to me? This is so *cool*."

"It's a tranquilliser gun."

Her face fell. "Oh."

"It's still cool," he insisted. "But I'm going to need it back

afterwards. It's part of a set. I have the other one, and I like to keep them together. It's already loaded with a single tranq dart, so all you have to do is point and pull the trigger. The dart is loaded with enough sedative to bring down a—"

"Small elephant?"

He looked at her. "What?"

"You know. In the movies, if they're going after something dangerous, they always say their tranquilliser darts have enough sedative to bring down a small elephant."

"What do people have against small elephants?"

"Well, nothing, but—"

"There's enough sedative in these darts to bring down a werewolf, which is exactly what we're hunting. Why would we want to bring down an elephant if we're not hunting elephants?"

"It's just something people say in movies."

"In elephant-hunting movies?"

"No, not particularly."

"If we were hunting a were-elephant, I would understand the reference."

"There's no such thing as a were-elephant."

"Of course there is. There are were-practically-everythings. Weredogs, werocats, werfish."

"There are werfish?"

"They don't generally last very long unless they're near water."

"I don't believe you. I've fallen for this too many times in the past."

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He started across the road.

She followed. “Oh, don’t you? You’ll insist they’re real and I’ll eventually start to doubt myself, and then I’ll ask, *Are there really werefish?* And you’ll look at me and say, *Good God, Valkyrie, of course not, that’d be silly*, and I’ll stand there feeling dumb. Just like with that colony of octopus people.”

“The what?”

“You told me once that octopus people were real.”

“And you believed me?”

“I was twelve!”

They reached the door of the apartment building. “And yet most twelve-year-olds don’t believe in octopus people.”

“I was twelve and impressionable, and I believed whatever you told me.”

“Ah, I remember those days,” Skulduggery said fondly, then took out his revolver. “There is such a thing as a werefish, though.”

She watched him loading the gun. “Those don’t look like tranquilliser bullets.”

“That’s because they’re not. They’re silver. Only thing guaranteed to kill a werewolf. Apart from decapitation. But then—”

“Decapitation kills most things,” Valkyrie finished.

“Exactly.”

“Apart from zombies.”

Skulduggery slid the revolver back into his shoulder holster. “This gun is just for emergency, last-resort back-up. Ed Stynes is a good

man – I have no desire to take his life just because he changes into a wolfman a few nights a month.” He took a pair of lock picks from his jacket and started on the door.

“Why don’t we wait until morning to do this?” she asked. “Wouldn’t that be smarter?”

“And leave him free to roam and kill tonight?”

“It’s dark and the moon is full and I don’t hear any howling. Maybe it’s not as bad as you think.”

“He just hasn’t transformed yet. All day he’ll have felt grouchier than usual. This evening the headaches will have started. Once night fell, the cramps will have kicked in. Judging by the position of the moon, we have about ten minutes before he changes. He’ll spend roughly three hours covered in fur, and when the moon slips further away, he’ll change back.”

“So we tranq him while he’s still human?”

“Rarely a good idea,” Skulduggery said, opening the door and putting his lock picks away. “Sometimes it works, but most of the time the transformation occurs anyway, and the adrenaline rush clears the sedative from the system. The wolf wakes up angry and it takes a double dose to put it down again.”

“So we have to wait until he changes into a monster before we can do anything?”

“Indeed.”

“It seems a lot more dangerous.”

“It is.” He took out a tranq gun identical to Valkyrie’s. “Ready?”

“Uh...”

“That’s the spirit.”

They took the stairs to the third floor. The building was quiet, still, like it was holding its breath. They approached Ed Stynes’ door and Skulduggery picked the lock silently. He nudged the door open a little. There were no lights on inside. His hand went to his collarbones, pressing the symbols etched there. The false face melted away, revealing the skull beneath.

He entered, and Valkyrie crept in behind him and shut the door with a soft *click*. The tranq gun was heavy. She held it in a two-handed grip, just like Skulduggery had taught her.

So far, no growling.

They stepped into the living room, sweeping their guns from corner to corner, making sure Ed Stynes hadn’t lain down to sleep on the couch. It was hard to make anything out in the gloom, but since Skulduggery didn’t shoot anything Valkyrie figured the couch was empty. She may have been the only one with eyes, but his night vision was still better than hers. They moved across the hallway, checked inside the small kitchen. The moonlight washed over the headache tablets that were spilled across the countertop. There was a sudden groan from the bedroom and Valkyrie nearly pulled the trigger in response. Skulduggery tilted his head in her direction and she glared.

He moved through the hallway like he wasn’t even there. A cat would have made more noise. Valkyrie followed, keeping close to the wall, where the floorboards beneath the carpet would creak less. Skulduggery moved past the bedroom door, took up position on the other side.

Valkyrie edged forward, using the mirror on the opposite wall to look through into Stynes' bedroom. She heard a curse, and there was movement in the darkness, and then the bedside lamp came on. She froze, adrenaline pumping through her, but all Stynes did was push the covers away as he sat up in bed. He was unshaven, pale. Sweating. He looked to be in pain. He groaned as he stood up. Valkyrie glanced at Skulduggery, mouthing the word *Hide?* But he just shook his head and so she stayed where she was, eyes on the mirror.

Stynes took a step, then doubled over.

“Oh, God...” she heard him mutter.

He straightened up with a scream so sudden it made her jump. His fingers curled like his muscles were being tightened on some invisible rack, and still he screamed. She'd never heard anything like it.

The lamplight shone yellow over his skin as thick black hairs pushed through, matting and knotting across his chest and back, his arms and legs. He fell to his knees, his legs changing shape, his bones lengthening and re-forming. He stared in horror and dismay at his hands as his fingernails fell to the floor and sharper, longer claws grew in their place.

“Help me,” he gasped. “Somebody help—”

He dropped to all fours, another scream twisting up from his core, wrenching itself from his throat as his jaw dislocated. It cracked and popped and started to balloon outwards, his skin stretching over his newly formed muzzle. Fangs split his gums and his scream turned to an animal howl of rage and pain.

Skulduggery held up three fingers. Valkyrie watched him count down – two, one – and then he stepped into the doorway, tranquil rising. She took an extra moment to follow his instruction, too stunned by what she had just witnessed to operate with any speed, and so the wolf missed her completely when it came charging out of the bedroom.

Valkyrie fell back, falling in the darkness, trying to make out what was going on just a few metres away. Something broke and something fell and the wolf was snarling and Skulduggery was cursing, and all she could make out was a huge mass of fur on two legs. She looked at her empty hand, wondered where the hell her gun had gone. She swept her arm across the carpet, fingers tapping against something metal. She lunged, gripped the handle and stood, turned, finger on the trigger—

—and something knocked her backwards into the living room. She pushed at it, whatever it was, and Skulduggery clambered off her and the wolf leaped on him again and they crashed into the sofa, turning it over and falling behind it.

Valkyrie got to her knees, started looking around for that damn gun again.

Skulduggery yelled as he was thrown across the room. He hit the TV and glass broke, and he pulled the blinds from the window, and the wolf pounced, pinning him to the floor. It slashed, again and again, and Skulduggery cried out. In the moonlight Valkyrie could see the ferocity with which it struck, its claws tearing through his clothes, raking against his ribs.

She flicked her wrist and shadows wrapped round the wolf's neck, hauling it backwards, but she could feel the sheer strength that fought against her and could do nothing to stop it from tearing free. Its yellow eyes found her.

She bolted, sprinting back into the bedroom, the wolf on her heels. She used the air to smash herself through the window, the glass jabbing at her clothes, but at least now she was outside, falling through space, and the wolf—

—the wolf slammed into her and she lost control of the air and they spun as they fell, the wolf snapping at her, its claws trying to cut through her jacket. The wolf hit the ground with a yelp and they separated, with Valkyrie bouncing away from it and rolling across the courtyard. The wolf stood, shook itself to clear its head, and by the time it looked back at Valkyrie she was already running.