

**Skulduggery
Pleasant
ARMAGEDDON OUTTA HERE**

DEREK LANDY

ALSO BY
DEREK LANDY

THE
**Skulduggery
Pleasant**
NOVELS

THE
**Maleficent
Seven**

Skulduggery
Pleasant
ARMAGEDDON OUTTA HERE

DEREK LANDY



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This book is dedicated to my brand new nephew, Cameron.

Cameron, I'm sure you'll grow taller as you get older, but right now you're simply way too short. You also can't talk or stand up, and I have yet to see you read a book. None of this is entirely your own fault, however – I blame the parents – so I hope my words don't upset you too much.

The problem is, you're surrounded by a formidable sister and some formidable cousins, so you're going to have to grow up to be an exceptional person. I'll do what I can to help, but the rest is up to you.



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INTRODUCTION

I've always loved Introductions.

They remind me of when I was a kid, wandering through second-hand bookstores, pulling battered old horror paperbacks from the shelves. Those wrinkled covers, those dog-eared pages, that wonderful, slightly stale smell of stories... Those books pulled you into their own history, made you a part of it, and if you were lucky – like, *really* lucky – right before the story started you'd find the Author's Introduction.

This, to a kid who wanted nothing more than to be a writer, was a portal into imagination. I couldn't Google a writer's name and read his blog or watch every interview he'd ever done on YouTube (and I hereby wave to some reader way off in the future who's just read that and is now getting information about "Google" "Blog"

and “Youtube” downloaded directly into his brain), so I had to make do with what brief glimpses I was afforded. It was in the Introductions that authors talked about their work and their process, and I scoured these words, searching for the secret to writing, hunting for the Big Clue that would lead me to Where Stories Come From.

I found glimpses of the Big Clue in the words of Stephen King and other masters of the genre, but nothing definite. Still, in many ways it was enough. These glimpses brought with them their own kind of inspiration, and when I was a kid, when I was a teenager, that’s all I needed. My early stories dripped with blood. They were soaked in it. Drenched. I had yet to learn concepts such as subtlety or restraint, and there is definitely a place for subtlety and restraint – but it was not a place that held any interest for me. I was all about the blood, the rawness, the viscera. I was reading King and Clive Barker and James Herbert and Michael Slade and Skipp and Spector and Shaun Hutson and dear GOD the list goes on. My life was blood-soaked books, horror movies and heavy metal.

Ah, youth...

And yet, dig a little deeper and you reveal a love of film noir and craggy detectives in rumpled suits and cool hats. Dig a little more and you uncover a love of westerns inherited from a father, a love of screwball comedies inherited from a mother (and for a kid who has stammered all of his life, to find these movies where everyone talks really really fast was beyond exhilarating), and a love of science fiction and adventure that blossomed in the eighties

because of people like Spielberg and Lucas and shows like *Knight Rider* and *Airwolf* and *The Six Million Dollar Man*...

Taking all this into account, I am the sum of my obsessions. I am every movie I've ever seen and every book I've ever read. I am every song I've ever listened to. I am every comic I've ever bought. I am entire collections by Joseph Wambaugh and Elmore Leonard and Joe R Lansdale and I am *His Dark Materials* and I am *Harry Potter*.

And in all of these things, I have glimpsed the Big Clue. And these glimpses were enough to open my eyes to the ideas swimming naturally through the soup of my mind. It was from that soup that I plucked Skulduggery Pleasant himself, back in the summer of 2005, and he brought with him every genre I've ever loved.

He is a detective (crime) who is also a skeleton (horror) who takes on a partner (screwball) and they fight monsters (fantasy) and they save the world (adventure). With a little bit of sci-fi thrown in, to stop things from getting boring.

The stories in this collection – arranged here in chronological order for your reading pleasure – are but fragments of the world that Skulduggery has opened up for me. It is because of him that I am able to write a western and sit it comfortably beside a novella about a middle-aged man revisiting the horrors of his childhood. It is because of him that the tones of these stories shift so radically between one and the next. It is because of him that I have the freedom to write the kind of stories I loved, and continue to love, to read.

And if there is a fledgling writer out there who is searching through this Introduction in an effort to find the Big Clue – the secret to writing that I, along with all the other writers, share only amongst ourselves – I am afraid I must disappoint you. This is something you must find out for yourself, fledgling writer, as the Author’s Code expressly forbids me from speaking of it in public.

I may already have said too much...

Derek Landy,
Dublin
Saint Patrick’s Day, 2014



ACROSS
A
DARK
PLAIN

ACROSS A DARK PLAIN



It was the year of Our Lord eighteen hundred and sixty-one, and it was up west of the Missouri River in South Dakota, and the Dead Men were riding again.

This was still years before that damn fool Custer stumbled across all that gold in the Black Hills, years before Wounded Knee and the massacre that took place there. This was back before the territory was admitted into the union, back before Deadwood, back even before that pitiful Treaty of Laramie promised the region to the Lakota people, a treaty that, if ever that was one, was drawn up just to be burned.

It was a time of gunfighters and outlaws and hard living and easy dying and, of course, it was a time of mean-spirited, blood-slicked magic.

The Dead Men had travelled east from Wyoming, tracking their quarry, who'd led them a merry dance. But the longer they tracked, the easier it got. This was on account of the fact that their quarry had taken up with a Necromancer named Noche, who was developing a habit of leaving dead folk in his wake. Not regular dead folk, neither, but the kind that jumped up and ran around and had a madness in their dull eyes and a terrible, terrible hunger that could only be sated by human flesh. The kind only fire or a bullet to the brainpan could put down. Thankfully, fire and bullets were what the Dead Men specialised in.

Seven of them, all Irish, some of their accents a little muddled due to all the travelling and the living they'd done. There was Saracen Rue, all easy charm and easy smiles, like a man trying to convince himself he's nicer than he is. Beside him rode Dexter Vex, one of the more thoughtful of the group, though he wasn't one to show it. The quiet one with the week's worth of stubble was Anton Shudder, and a scarier man was hard to find, even in this forsaken land. There was Erskine Ravel, recently returned from his sojourn to lands even more foreign and forsaken than this one, and Hopeless, a man of one name and many faces.

Riding in the lead was the scarred man, Ghastly Bespoke, and beside him the living skeleton, the one who looked like the Grim Reaper himself, the first of the Four Horsemen written about in the Bible and shouted about from pulpits up and down this wounded and pockmarked country.

And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.

Skulduggery Pleasant's clothes were scuffed and faded, and his coat was long and may have been black once upon a time. Among normal folk, what these men called 'mortals', he'd take that kerchief from around his neck there and tie it over all those teeth that were fixed in that permanent grin, and he'd pull that hat down low over those empty eye sockets. He had two pistol belts, criss-crossing low and held in place with tie-downs, and in those holsters he had guns with pearl handles and long barrels. Colt Walkers, they were. Guns built for stopping men.

They'd been riding for days and their horses were tired and thirsty, and the riders with flesh were chafed and sore. They came upon the town of Forbidden, and didn't think much of it. A town of three streets and dirty people who bathed not often or well. There was a mangy dog lying in the middle of the street, who looked at them with mild indifference as they passed. When they were safely gone, the dog offered up a feeble growl, then lay back down and went to sleep or died. Didn't make much difference to anyone which one it was.

They found the livery down the other end of town and the owner, an ungrateful piece of work called Sully, limped out into the sun, scratching himself in places soap hadn't touched in a long, long time.

“Yeah?” he said with a mouth full of spit. “What the hell d’you want?”

The Dead Men dismounted. Pleasant and Bespoke stayed at the back, them being the most likely to draw attention, and Rue and Vex looked at the proprietor and frowned.

“What the hell do you think we want?” Vex said. “We want our horses fed and watered. You own this place, don’t you?”

The piece of work Sully looked at these men, saw the steel in their eyes and the steel on their hips, and he lost some of his scowl and swallowed some of his spit.

“I do,” he said. “Proud owner of Sullivan’s Livery. If the paint hadn’t peeled off years ago, you could see my name on the sign up there, even though it was spelled wrong and the ‘y’ was missing from Livery. I blame myself, not being able to read, and I blame the fella I hired to make the sign, him not being able to write. But regrets are what regrets are – we all have ’em, and those who don’t have ’em don’t miss ’em. Fed and watered, you say. You can depend on me, provided you have coin enough to pay for such a service.”

Vex tapped Rue’s arm. “Show the man some coin, Saracen.” He went to join the others, who were walking down the wide patch of dirt called Main Street towards the saloon. The townspeople gave them a decent berth, watched them with wary eyes and waited till they were out of earshot to start whispering. Men with guns were never a good sign. Men who looked like they knew how to use those guns even less so.

Bespoke was first through the doors into the saloon. Inside were

a few uneven tables, a solid bar and a cracked mirror. There was a small piano nobody played and the floor was dried mud and sawdust. As far as patrons went, there weren't many here, but all heads turned, and all mouths dropped open. To see a man of Bespoke's scarring was not something you're ever likely to see again, and most people seemed to realise that, so they made sure to stare extra hard when they first met him.

Bespoke tipped his hat to the room and walked up to the bar.

The other Dead Men followed, filing in one at a time. Pleasant came last, found a table in the corner to sit, watching the room from beneath the brim of his hat.

"Good day to you, barkeep," said Bespoke. "What sort of drinks do you serve here?"

The barkeep, a man who'd seen a lot and heard more, had never been one to allow ugliness to get in the way of making money. There was a time he'd even served a leper who had wandered through town, though he served him out back, away from the eyes of his regulars. Money was money, he figured, and it didn't matter a whole lot how many stumps for fingers a hand had if what it was holding could add to the coffers.

Fact is, the barkeep hadn't even washed the mug the leper had used all that much. So the barkeep told the scarred man what was on offer and the scarred man asked for six drinks. Saracen Rue came in as the sixth was poured, and they all drank like thirsty men. Except for Pleasant, of course.

"Now that," said Ravel, "was a long time coming. And it was

welcome.” He smiled at the barkeep. “We’re looking for a friend of ours. Two friends, actually, would’ve just passed through here. Maybe you saw them. Maybe you served them two of these delicious and refreshing beers.”

The barkeep said nothing.

“Our first friend,” said Vex, “is like us – he’s Irish. Tall and dark-haired and kinda pale, though in this sun he’s probably reddened up a little. Wears a glove on his right hand. The other fella wears black and carries a staff with him wherever he goes, the height of a man.”

The barkeep looked at the Dead Men and still said nothing.

“It is very important that we catch up to our friends as soon as possible,” Rue said. “We have news from home that requires their immediate and direct attention. Tragic news. Time is of the essence.”

“Haven’t seen anyone,” said the barkeep.

“You’re sure? Our first friend, he has green eyes. Normally eye colour means very little when talking about a man, but if you’d ever looked into those eyes, you’d remember them. Like a snake’s. And the second, as I said, carries a big old staff. That’s something to stick in the memory, isn’t it?”

The barkeep shook his head. “Can’t help you, fellas.”

“Well,” said Ravel, “that is a shame.”

Bespoke turned to the dusty, dirty patrons. “How about the rest of you? Seen anyone like the men we just described?”

A few people kept staring at Bespoke’s face. Others looked down

at their beers. One or two, and this caught the attention of the Dead Men, flickered their gaze to a man who sat alone with his eyes fixed on his hands. He was so knotted up, he was shaking. The long silence that followed grew heavy and seemed to weigh down on his narrow shoulders. It grew so heavy he evidently couldn't take it any more and he jumped to his feet and went for his gun all at the same time. He made a mess of both, went stumbling and fumbling and panicking, and Hopeless crossed to him so quick no one knew quite what was happening till the man hit the floor with a broken nose and no gun in his hand.

Hopeless walked back to the bar, put down the man's gun and picked up his drink, finished it just as the man realised he was bleeding.

"What did you do that for?" he said. He had a peculiar accent, German or Dutch or some such.

"You were going to shoot us," said Vex.

"I was not," said the man, though there wasn't a person there who believed him.

"People try to shoot me all the time," Rue told him. "Usually because of a wife or a daughter or a sister or a mother. The point is, I'm used to having people shoot at me. We all are. But we generally know why we're being shot at."

The man got to his feet, blood running freely through the fingers that cupped his nose. "I wasn't going to shoot you."

"I'm having a hard time believing you," Ravel said, "seeing as how you were going for your gun at the time."

The man didn't have much to say about that.

"What's your name, friend?" said Rue.

"Joost," said the man.

"Joost? What kind of name is that?"

"Dutch," said Joost.

Rue nodded. It figured. From the accent and all, and anyway, half the world had come west to search for gold.

This was when Anton Shudder stepped forward, and the five other Dead Men at the bar seemed to step back, even though no actual steps were taken. Shudder looked at Joost, and to the poor, panicking Dutchman it seemed like the world was narrowing to a very tight space.

"Tell us what the man with the green eyes said to you," Shudder said in his quiet voice.

"Church," Joost managed. "He said something about going to church."

The church, such as it was, stood on a hill a few miles south. A ramshackle place where not much worshipping went on – and when it did, half of it was half-remembered and most of it was made up. It catered to three different townships, of which Forbidden was one. Its roof sagged and let in water when it rained, its walls groaned and let in wind when it blew, and its doors creaked and let in hypocrites when it suited.

There were two sides of narrow pews and a narrow aisle in between, and there was a table for an altar and the pulpit was a

box to stand on. It had once been a barn, and it had never got rid of the comforting smell of cow dung.

In town, there'd lived a man named Wooley, a quick wit who always found amusing, if sometimes crude, names for people and places. He'd come up with a name for this falling-down church-barn that smelled of dung, and it was quite a clever and funny name, but he died of dysentery before he could tell anyone. Mighty unlucky man, that Wooley.

The Dead Men walked up from the bottom of the hill towards this sad-looking church with a single candle burning in its window. It was night, and a warm one at that, and they followed the winding trail between all those graves. They walked single file, with Pleasant in the lead, the moonlight making his skull shine beneath his hat. At the top of the hill the trail widened out, and it was at this point that the Dead Men stood abreast of each other, observing the double doors with the window on one side.

“Nefarian Serpine,” Pleasant called, “if you’re in there, come out. Come get what’s coming to you.”

The candle flickered behind the thin, cracked glass. The doors banged gently in the hesitant breeze. Pleasant looked at Rue, who shook his head. No one was in that church.

Pleasant made to step forward, then stopped. The other Dead Men watched him as he turned slowly. They started to turn, too.

Corpses lunged up from the graves all around them, pushing aside packed dirt and overturning markers of wood and stone. They burrowed out from six feet under and less, moaning and groaning

and uttering sounds that whistled through dried-up throats. They clambered to their feet and staggered and lurched and shambled, all going straight towards the seven sorcerers who were slowly backing away from them.

More and more crawled to the surface, breaking through to add their sounds to the growing chorus of the dead. Hundreds of graves, going back sixty years. Some of the dead, zombies they were called, were fresh enough, and some were little more than skeletons. Skulduggery Pleasant might've felt right at home at that moment. If he did, he didn't show it.

"Start shooting," he said.

Guns cleared leather and immediately the night was shaking to the thunder of gunfire. The Dead Men stood in a line and fired calmly, making every bullet count. Shots to the legs to slow them down, to the chests to drive them back, and to the heads to give them a death they wouldn't be walking away from. Bullets were easier than magic when it came to zombies. Quicker, too. Even the skeletons, those without a brain, went down when a bullet shattered their skulls.

Bone fragments flew. Rotten flesh burst. Soon enough the Dead Men were standing in a cloud of acrid gunsmoke, and still the zombies came.

"Reloading," Vex said, taking one step back. The other Dead Men closed in, filling the gap. When his guns were ready, Vex said, "Firing," and stepped into the space that was immediately made for him.

That's how they went, the Dead Men, doing this dance, covering for their partners. Guns got hot and fingers got singed, and still they fired and reloaded and fired, and still the zombies came.

Three zombies from the back pushed forward. Fresher corpses, these. They ran at Bespoke and he blasted one of them in the face and one in the throat. The bullet passed right through the spinal cord and the head flopped backwards, tearing decaying skin, then fell off. The third zombie he punched with a column of air that lifted it off its feet. He fired at it as it hurtled backwards, hit it in the back of the head.

The zombies were surrounding them now. The Dead Men moved into a tight circle, constantly turning, a spinning top of death. Empty cartridges fell. New ones slid into chambers. Hammers pulled back and struck down and powder lit and lead flew. Faces, heads and bodies disintegrated. The spinning circle of Dead Men spun its way halfway down the trail. The slower-moving zombies had to adjust their lumbering course a few times just to get within snarling distance.

Pleasant slipped into the middle of the circle and Ravel covered his back while he holstered his empty Colts. He held up his hands, gripping the air. It wasn't easy to do what he was doing. The rifles and shotguns that had stayed behind with the horses lifted from their holsters and packs, and he brought them up the hill, over the heads of the foul-tempered dead.

"I'm out," said Hopeless, returning his pistols to his belt. His rifle, a Sharps, fell into his waiting hands and he brought it to his shoulder and resumed firing.

Rue was next, and he made his Winchester sing, using the butt whenever a corpse got too eager. Shudder had the shotgun, a double-barrelled monstrosity he liked to call Daisy. He fired that from the hip, blowing apart any zombie dumb enough to go up against him. The others all had Henrys, except for Pleasant himself, who favoured the Spencer. They dug in their pockets for shells, reloading as fast as they were able, but it was clear there were more zombies than there were bullets.

A big zombie, a man who'd died scarcely two weeks before, charged into the circle and the circle split apart. Any rational mind watching might think that this'd be the moment to panic, but the Dead Men went about their business, hurried but calm, knowing that one mistake, one fumble or misfire, could lead to being swarmed and torn apart. They dodged among the grasping hands, firing and lashing out, reloading whenever they had a moment.

One by one, rifles were dropped and balls of fire flew. Coloured streams of light burst from Vex's hands, sizzled right through necrotic flesh. Rue went to work with his bowie knife and Hopeless took out that machete of his. Only Shudder was still firing, his pockets providing a seemingly endless supply of shells.

"To the church," Pleasant shouted when it became clear they were about to be overrun, and each of them started making their way back up the hill.

A wave of his hand opened the double doors and they grouped together once more, backing into the shelter of the Lord. But the Lord must've been busy that night, or else He was sleeping on the

job, because there was no respite in here. The carnivorous corpses kept coming, clambering over the pews, and the Dead Men kept backing up, shoulder to shoulder. They slowed their retreat some, only stopping when they had to, when the sheer numbers forced them to.

Bespoke gestured behind them and the makeshift altar and the pulpit slid to the side, out of their way. By the time they reached the single door at the other end of the church, every zombie still moving was packed inside.

At Pleasant's signal, Hopeless kicked open the door, held it for his friends, and the Dead Men turned and got the hell out of there. Shudder was last, but instead of running, he turned in the doorway and pulled open his shirt. Pleasant, Bespoke and Ravel held out their hands, forming a wall of solid air, keeping the zombies from getting at their friend. They dropped the wall when Shudder nodded. The zombies rushed forward.

There are types of magic that are easy, relatively speaking, that take no particular toll on the sorcerer using them. They'll get tired, sure. They'll get worn out, and drained. That's what happens when magic is used. Same as anything a body does.

But then there are types of magic that demand a price. Anton Shudder's magic was one such. The risk he took every time he used it, the pain and anguish it caused him, were immense. Few people ever mastered that discipline of magic. There were those who said it could never *be* mastered. Shudder himself was one such person.

His gist burst from his chest – a screaming, squawking, nightmarish

version of Shudder himself. It was made up of every bad thought and feeling the man possessed, and by the look of the fangs and the claws and the madness, those bad thoughts were many, and resourceful. Attached to Shudder by a twisting stream of light and dark, it went at the zombies like they were the things it hated most in the world. Which, at that moment, they were. It went through them and over them and back again, that stream looping over itself like an ever-growing snake. The zombies, with no room to duck even if they'd had a mind to, were reduced to tatters.

Shudder's knees gave out and Rue and Vex each grabbed one of his arms, held him up. With the last of his strength, Shudder called the gist back to him. It hollered and screeched and fought, but the thread between them shortened, and shortened again, and then the gist was sucked back into Shudder's chest, and the night was silent apart from the low moaning of the zombie remains.

Rue and Vex helped Shudder walk away, and Pleasant, Bespoke and Ravel clicked their fingers and filled their hands with flames. They tossed those flames through the door, manipulated them a little, and within seconds the whole church was burning, taking the last of the zombies with it.

The Dead Men headed back down to their tired horses, where Hopeless was waiting for them. He'd collected their fallen rifles and had picked up something extra along the way. A man in black, unconscious, with blood running from his nose and his hands in shackles. Beside him, as he lay in the dirt, was his staff.

* * *

They rode back into town, found an empty corner in Sullivan's Livery and dumped the Necromancer in there while the Dead Men took rooms for the night. Only Pleasant stayed to guard him – true dead men never needing sleep. Pleasant stood, arms folded, looking at Noche. Not saying anything. Not moving – not even to breathe.

A few minutes past eight the next morning, the rest of the Dead Men turned up, rested and fed. A bucket of water woke the Necromancer, who sat up with a lunging breath and then rolled over into a series of coughing fits. When he was done with all the spluttering, he looked up at his captors.

“What'll we do with him?” asked Bespoke.

“I think we should kill him,” Rue said. “I don't like him. Look at his eyebrows. They're odd. He's got odd eyebrows, and I think they might be magical. He's trying to hypnotise me with his odd, magical eyebrows.”

“Nobody is trying to hypnotise you,” Shudder said.

“We should shave them from his face and experiment on them.”

“I think the stress has finally got to our dear friend Saracen Rue,” said Ravel sadly. “He was a good man while he lasted. Annoying at times, perhaps, but a good man nonetheless.”

“I will be missed,” Rue nodded.

Noche frowned up at them. “You're all insane.”

“You should have the measure of insanity,” said Vex, “what with all the palling around you've been doing with Nefarian Serpine.

Why are you associating with the likes of him anyway? The Necromancers have been staying out of the war. Are you really going to join the losing side right before it ends?”

“My brothers and sisters remain neutral.”

“So it’s just you, then,” said Pleasant. “A rogue Necromancer teaming up with the last of Mevolent’s Three Generals. Why? To aid him in his escape? He’s been running from us for months, and we’re closer to him now than ever. It’s only a matter of time before we have him.”

Noche smiled, the smile adopting a certain smug quality. “But time isn’t on your side, is it? You’re absolutely right – Mevolent’s dead, Vengeous is in shackles, and the war is coming to an end. Last I heard, your Sanctuaries were talking of an amnesty. So long as the war is ended soon, and not allowed to drag out, they’ll be offering forgiveness to all of Mevolent’s followers who aren’t yet imprisoned. That’s why you’re so eager to get to Serpine – because you know that time is ticking away. If you don’t get him before the amnesties are granted, you’ll lose your chance to have your revenge. Won’t you, skeleton?”

Pleasant tilted his head in that way of his. “You’re working with him. I really don’t care why. Maybe he has something on you. Maybe you owe him. Maybe you’re just a glutton for punishment. I don’t care about you or your motives. All I want is a question answered.”

“You’ll not get any information out of me,” Noche sneered.

“We just want to know one little bit of information,” said Rue.

“It’s barely worth mentioning, really. Barely worth the breath that would carry the words from my lips.”

“Just one tiny bit of information,” said Vex, “and then we’ll let you go. You can run off and we won’t tell anyone you helped us.”

“We’ll swear to it,” said Bespoke.

“Our word is our bond,” said Rue.

“Serpine,” Ravel said. “Where is he headed?”

Noche glared. “I’ll never tell.”

“Please?” said Ravel. Another glare, and Ravel straightened up. “Right, well. You are of no use to us whatsoever, are you? I don’t even see why you went to the trouble of being captured, I really don’t. What’s the point of being a prisoner if you’re not going to divulge secret plans to your captors?”

“Defeats the purpose,” Vex grumbled.

“It does indeed, Dexter,” Ravel said. “What do you have to say for yourself? Are you suitably ashamed? You should be. If I were you, I’d have a good long think about what a disappointment you’ve been to us. We had high hopes.”

“The highest.”

“That’s right, Saracen, the highest. See? You’ve upset Saracen.”

“I just have something in my eye,” said Rue.

“I have never seen Saracen Rue weep,” Ravel said, “since this morning, but you’ve made him weep like a little child. I hope you’re proud of yourself.”

Noche looked at them warily. “You *are* all insane.”

Anton Shudder walked forward. “Tell us where Serpine is going. I don’t play games like my friends. They’re saying all this to confuse you and frighten you. I prefer to simply ask, and I expect a simple answer.”

“I would rather die,” said Noche, a touch less convincingly.

“Do you know my chosen discipline, little man?”

“You’re a... You have a gist.”

“That’s right. And when I let it out there are times when I just cannot control it. And it’s a sight to behold. Terrifying. Ferocious. Merciless. Tell us what we want to know or I shall release it, and believe you me you will garner its full attention.”

Noche swallowed like he’d something sharp stuck in his craw. “Serpine... he mentioned Lancaster County, in Nebraska, as somewhere he’d be safe. Sounded like that’s where he’s headed.”

Rue peered at him. “Are you lying?”

“No.”

“I don’t trust him.”

Ravel nodded. “I don’t trust him, either.”

“I trust him,” said Vex happily. “And I’ve changed my mind about his eyebrows, too. Skulduggery, can we keep him?”

Pleasant tilted his head at the Necromancer. “You’re lying.”

“No, I—”

Pleasant splayed his hand and Noche flew off the ground, hit the wall, his feet kicking at air.

The Dead Men fell silent, lost their smiles and looks of good humour.

“My friend Anton will kill you,” said Pleasant, “but I will kill you worse. Why are you with Serpine?”

“Please, I...”

“You have one chance. If you lie to me, I will start killing you.”

Something changed in Noche’s eyes, something dripped away. His melting resolve, most likely.

“He’s heading for the Temple,” he said. “I was to meet him, take him back to it.”

“The Necromancers are going to hide him?”

“Y-yes. I don’t know why. He has an... an agreement, of sorts. Made long ago.”

“He left you here to delay us,” said Pleasant, “and went on to the Temple without you. How far is it?”

“Three days’ ride,” Noche said.

Pleasant curled his fingers, and the Necromancer gasped for breath. “Tell us where it is.”

They rode.

On the second day they had grass under their horses’ hooves.

The third day they found Serpine’s horse. It had snapped its leg in a gully and Serpine hadn’t even had the decency to put it out of its misery. Hopeless laid his hand on its neck and put a bullet in its head, and it was a kindness, and then he remounted and they carried on.

They made good time. Serpine's tracks got fresher. They reached the top of a hill, looked down across the valley and saw a man running and falling, making his way to a rocky outcrop of curiously shaped stones and boulders. Standing outside the opening to what looked like a cave were a dozen figures in black, all in a line, watching Serpine approach.

The Dead Men tore down that hill like the devil's own demon dogs. They got close enough so that when Serpine glanced back they could see the fear and exhaustion painted across his dirty, sweating face.

Then he stumbled through the line of black, and disappeared into the cave behind them.

Pleasant leaped from the saddle, using his magic to propel himself through the air like he'd been shot from a cannon. He landed a couple of strides from the line of Necromancers.

"Move," he said.

The Necromancers, being the contrary lot that they were, showed no intention of budging an inch. The one in the middle, the one who'd stepped aside to allow Serpine pass, gave Pleasant a smile.

"Welcome to our Temple," he said. "Ours is a place of peace and learning. Do you have business here?"

"Move," Pleasant said again. His voice, usually so smooth, was coarse as the sand they'd travelled across to get here. The Dead Men dismounted behind him, walked slowly up till they formed a wedge at his back. They kept their hands close to their guns.

“Nefarian Serpine is a guest,” said the talkative Necromancer. “He has provided us a service in the past, and so he is under our protection. I’m afraid I can’t let you through.”

“If you side with our enemy,” said Pleasant, “you become our enemy.”

To his credit, the Necromancer didn’t seem all that intimidated by a walking skeleton with guns on his hips. He gave Pleasant another smile. “That’s a rather simplistic view of things, isn’t it? There’s really not much room for manoeuvring around that little philosophy. I prefer, personally, to take each moment as it comes, and to treat every obstacle as an opportunity to do something different. It makes life interesting.”

His patience worn to a frayed thread already, conversing with a smiling flannel-mouth such as this one was enough to snap it clean. Pleasant went to push by, and suddenly there was a wall of shadows looming over their heads. The Dead Men went for their guns, but froze before drawing. Once those guns cleared leather, death would come flying and there’d be no turning back.

“You think you scare us?” the Necromancer asked. “They call you the Dead Men, but it is my brothers, my sisters and I who wield the true death magic. You think we’re afraid to die? Really?”

“I think you talk big,” said Pleasant. “I think you talk about death like it’s your friend. But if you really want to get acquainted, we can help you with that.”

“Then kill us,” the Necromancer said. “But be warned. We stand at the mouth of a Temple. Beneath our feet, there are more of us

than you can imagine. They'll tear you to pieces and you still won't be any closer to your quarry."

"Then we'll wait," Bespoke said. "We'll make camp right here and we'll wait."

"As much as I would enjoy seeing you waste your time in such a fashion," the Necromancer replied, "our Temple has hidden entrances and exits leading far and wide. You're just going to have to accept the fact that Serpine is out of your reach, get on your horses, and trot away."

"We don't give up that easily," said Ravel.

"Then you should start," said the Necromancer. "Because you've lost this little game. The skeleton knows it. That's why he's gone so quiet. All this time, all this effort, all this building of hatred and anger... all for nothing. You were a few seconds too late, gentlemen. That can't be easy for you. You have my commiserations. But the game is done. It's over. You can pick it up again in another country, maybe. But in a few months or a few years there's going to be a treaty, and an amnesty, and then Mr Serpine will be able to walk free without a care in the world, and there won't be a single thing you can do about it."

The Dead Men took their hands from their guns. They'd been alive long enough to know when they were beaten, and they had enough wisdom between them to know there was no shame in it. Sometimes the cards flipped right, and sometimes they didn't.

At Pleasant's nod, they got back on their horses. The Necromancers began to file into the cave, and the wall of shadows became little

more than black smoke in the wind. Finally, there were just Pleasant and the Necromancer left standing there.

“What’s your name?” Pleasant asked.

That smile again. “Cleric Solomon Wreath, at your service,” said the Necromancer. He even gave a little bow.

“Mr Wreath, today you have prevented me from doing my duty.”

“On the contrary, I have prevented you from exacting your revenge.”

“Which amounts to the same thing. I won’t forget this.”

“I don’t expect you to,” said Wreath, but Pleasant had already turned his back on him.

That night they rested their horses by a stream and didn’t talk a whole lot.

Pleasant sat by himself, looking out into the darkness. To say he had a peculiar anger would of course be something of an understatement, but a peculiar anger it was, as it wasn’t the sort any normal folk could understand. It was a slow-burning heat, capable of firing up at a whim, but never in any danger of puttering out. It kept him. It sustained him. Maybe there was even a part of him that was glad Serpine had wormed his way free.

As long as the man who’d killed him and his family was alive, somewhere out there across the dark plain, Pleasant had a reason to fight, a reason to keep putting one foot in front of the other. But kill the killer, and what was left? Something cold and uncertain. Could be he hung on to what he had – his hate, his anger, his

job – because hanging on was all he had. The war was coming to an end. His time as a soldier was coming to an end.

What then? Was there something else out there, something he had yet to discover, that could keep him going when he'd used up everything else? Some thing or some person that would give him a purpose again, that would light a different kind of fire within him?

Most likely, he didn't know. He probably didn't care to think that far ahead.

The Dead Men slept. But not Skulduggery Pleasant.

No, Skulduggery Pleasant just hung on, waiting.

Because it was all he had.