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Red candles, maybe a dozen of them. Brick walls. Lot of rafters, lot of shadows, lots of big, empty patches of darkness. Wooden floor. She was in a cellar, a big one, upright against something metal. She could feel the struts digging into her back. Her arms were over her head, wrists bound with rope. Ankles tied, too.

Her tongue tasted sour. They'd drugged her. Her mouth was dry. She licked her lips. Her head was dull. She shot a little magic through her system and her mind cleared instantly.

She wondered if her make-up had been smudged. She hoped it hadn't. It had taken ages to put on. Her shoes were gone. Good. They were awful. She was still in the dress, though, the one that was too small and too tight and not very practical. It did have one thing going for it, however – the amulet of dark metal, in the shape of a skull, that fitted against her hip like some cool-looking clasp.

She raised her head slightly, gave her surroundings a closer inspection through the hair that hung over her face. Pedestals displayed occult paraphernalia in glass cases like this was someone's idea of a black magic museum, and good quality – though obviously plastic – skeletons, dressed in rags, hung from shackles along the walls. The ground was sticky against her bare feet. She was positioned in the exact centre of a pentagram painted on

the floorboards. She was pretty sure the dark stains had been made by copious splashes of blood.

“She’s awake,” someone said in the darkness ahead of her. “Hey, she’s awake. Get the others.”

The sound of feet on wooden steps, and then yellow light flooded in from above. A large shadow flowed across the light and then the cellar door closed and she was left with the flickering red candles and whoever had spoken.

He came forward, out of the darkness. Dressed in a red robe with the hood up.

“What’s your name?” he asked. His voice was gentle. American. Warm.

“Valkyrie,” she said.

“Valerie?”

“Valkyrie. With a K.”

“That’s a nice name. Unusual. Is it Irish?”

“Norwegian.”

“Oh. My friend said you were from Ireland.”

“I am. My name isn’t.”

“Ah.” He stepped a bit closer. She could see the lower half of his face, his square jaw and his even white teeth.

“You’re probably freaking out right now. I get that. I do. You wake up, you’re in a dark cellar, you see satanic stuff all around, you probably think you’re going to be horribly butchered in some ridiculous human-sacrifice ritual, yeah?” He pulled his hood down and his smile broadened. “Well, that’s exactly what’s going to happen.”

“I know you,” said Valkyrie.

“Do you?”

“You’re that actor,” she said. “From that movie. You’re Jason Randal.”

“You want an autograph?”

“How about a selfie? If you could just hand me my phone...”

He laughed. “Oh, I like you. That’s an impressive response.

Usually, the girls we sacrifice are full of panicked questions at this stage, like they think they can make sense of what's happening. Like they can't bring themselves to believe that they're about to be murdered."

"What was that movie you were in, with the guy from *The Big Lebowski*?"

Jason tilted his head slightly. "I haven't been in a film with—"

"No, you know the one. You both play dead cops who are still, like, solving crimes and stuff? You're not zombie cops, or ghost cops, but... what's it called? I want to say *RIP*, but..."

Jason's smile faded. "*RIPD*," he said.

"Yes," Valkyrie said. "That was a terrible movie. Why did you make that?"

He scratched his jaw. "That was Ryan Reynolds. You're thinking of Ryan Reynolds."

"That wasn't you?"

"No."

Valkyrie frowned. "Are you sure?"

"I think I know what films I've been in."

"I could have sworn it was you."

"Well, it wasn't."

"It's a terrible movie."

"I wouldn't know. I haven't seen it and I wasn't in it."

"It's bad."

"Then how about we stop talking about it?"

"Are you ashamed of it because it's so bad?"

"I wasn't *in it*."

Valkyrie looked at him. "Maybe if you had a better agent you'd get better movies."

Yellow light flooded the cellar and shadows moved, cast by the three people coming down the steps, all dressed in red robes.

"Is the Master here?" Jason Randal asked them, annoyance pinching his words.

"He's on his way," the woman in front said. Her name escaped

Valkyrie, but these days she was always being cast as the girlfriend or the wife of the hero. A few years ago, however, she'd headlined a few movies herself. Not bad movies, either. The guy behind her, one of the stars of a dreadful sitcom Valkyrie had pretended to like, was the one who'd bought her the spiked drink in the crowded bar. She recognised the last person – an actor in a TV show she'd never watched who had a ridiculous name that she couldn't remember.

The woman had an amazing smile and incredible bone structure and wonderful hair. It shone in the candlelight. "I take it Jason has explained what's going to happen," she said.

"Don't bother with this one," Jason said, somewhat grumpily. "She's not that bright."

Valkyrie ignored him. "I'm a huge fan," she said.

"Aw, thank you."

"That film where you were out for revenge on the men who'd killed your husband? That was brilliant."

"That's really sweet of you to say so. I did a lot of my own stunts for that one."

"The fight scenes were excellent."

The woman smiled at the others. "Do we have to kill her? She has such great taste!"

The others chuckled – all except Jason. He didn't chuckle even a little bit.

"We should do it now," he said.

The woman frowned at him. Victoria, that was her name. Victoria Leigh. "Before the Master gets here?"

"It's almost midnight. We'll have to do it anyway, with or without him."

"The Master will not be pleased," said the sitcom star.

"Then the Master should be on time for the human sacrifice," Jason snapped back. "The rest of us are all here, aren't we? And *we* have careers. I have to be on set in two hours, and don't you have an early call tomorrow?"

“I *do* have an early call,” murmured the sitcom star.

Victoria checked the slender gold watch on her slender pale wrist. “OK, fine, get everything ready to go. We’ll wait till the last second. If the Master arrives in time, excellent. If he doesn’t, we’ll do it ourselves on the stroke of midnight.”

The others nodded and went off to fetch whatever they needed to fetch. Victoria stepped closer, though, brushing Valkyrie’s hair back off her face.

“You’re a pretty one,” she said. “Not leading-lady beautiful, perhaps, but definitely girl-next-door pretty. And those shoulders! Good lord! Linebacker shoulders, that’s what we call them. I can see why Tadd picked you.” Her voice softened. “Was he respectful? I’ve warned him about this in the past.”

“Pretty sure he was.”

“Good. I’ve seen far too many girls being disrespected in my business and I’d hate to be a part of something that perpetuates this behaviour.”

“Aren’t you lot going to murder me in a few minutes?”

A little laugh. “I am aware of the contradiction.”

“Good,” said Valkyrie. “Because I was worrying.”

“I have to say... What’s your name?”

“Valkyrie.”

“Ah, from Norse mythology. Very nice. I have to say, Valkyrie, you’re surprisingly calm about this whole thing.”

Valkyrie shrugged as much as she was able. “I don’t want to brag or anything, but I’ve been in worse situations.”

“You have?”

“It’s all worked out in the end.”

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I don’t think that’s going to happen tonight.”

“We’ll see.”

“Indeed we will, Valkyrie. That’s a great attitude to have. We will indeed see. So tell me, what brings you out to LA? Aspiring actress?”

“Actually, I’m thinking of getting into stuntwork. I like being physical, you know? Throwing people around, crashing through windows, falling off rooftops... That’s my kind of thing.”

“Oh, I admire stunt people so much, I really do. I know this great little team down in Glendale. Such a shame you’re dying tonight – someone as athletic as you, you’d have fit in perfectly.”

“Can I ask you something? This Master guy you’re waiting on – who is he?”

“You sure you want to know? Well, why the hell not – you won’t be telling anyone, right? He’s a sorcerer. He’s *magic*.”

“Like one of those street magicians?”

Victoria’s laugh was as pretty as her eyes. “No, no, not like those street magicians. I mean he’s actually, really, *genuinely* magic. He can move things just by waving his hands. He clicks his fingers and he’s holding a ball of fire in his palm.”

“No kidding?”

“I swear it’s true.”

“And why does he make you sacrifice people?”

“Well, he gets his power from Satan, you see. He’s Satan’s emissary here on earth. All of us in our little group, we’re the ones who sacrifice the girls and, as a reward, Satan grants the Master the power to fulfil our wildest dreams.”

“Golly,” said Valkyrie.

“I know.”

“And does it work? Do your wildest dreams come true?”

Victoria made a seesawing motion with her hand. “It’s not an exact science. We get a lot of callbacks during pilot season, a lot of interest from casting agents and directors... but really Satan just opens the door. It’s up to us to walk through.”

“Right, right,” said Valkyrie. “So Satan is real, then?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Wow. And that’s all he asks for? Human sacrifice?”

“Yes. And a commission.”

“A commission?”

“That goes to the Master. For living expenses, you know.”

“So the Master gets a cut of whatever you make? How big a cut?”

Victoria hesitated. “Forty per cent.”

“Seriously?”

“But it’s worth it. Tadd wouldn’t have got that sitcom if it wasn’t for the Master, and I’m on a shortlist for the role of a wartime correspondent. It’s based on a true story and the script has a *lot* of buzz around it right now.”

“Good luck with that one. I hope you get it.”

“Thank you.”

The others came back. Tadd held a candelabra of seven long-stemmed, unlit black candles, and the other one, the actor whose ridiculous name Valkyrie couldn’t remember, carried a box of polished oak. Jason Randal opened the box, and took out a long, curved dagger. The corners of his mouth lifted when he looked at Valkyrie.

“We still have two minutes,” Victoria said.

“She needs to be dead at midnight,” Jason responded.

“I know the rules.”

“We should do it now, to be sure she dies.”

“We’ll do it at eleven fifty-nine. So long as you stab her in the heart, she’ll be dead in seconds. Light the ceremonial candles.”

The ridiculously named actor put the box down and came hurrying over, digging through his robes. He produced a silver Zippo, flicked it open and ran the flint wheel along his thigh. It sparked to a flame, and he put the flame to the seven black candles. Tadd held the candelabra aloft.

“The candles,” he said, “are lit.”

“The dagger,” Jason intoned, “is sharp.”

“The time,” Victoria said, eyes on her watch, “is now.”

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Jason grinned and raised the dagger and then the seven candles went out.

“Oh,” said Tadd. “Sorry.”

Jason glared. “Relight them.”

The actor with the ridiculous name flicked the Zippo open again, ran it across his leg again, and lit the candles again.

Sheepishly, Tadd held the candelabra aloft once more. “The candles are lit.”

Then they went out again.

“For God’s sake,” Jason muttered.

“Are you standing in a draught or something?” Victoria asked. “Move over there, and don’t hold them up so high this time. Come on, we’re running out of time. Relight them.”

The actor with the ridiculous name flicked the Zippo open.

“I swear,” said Jason, “if you run that up your leg one more time, I am stabbing *you* instead of this girl. Do you understand? Just light the damn candles.”

The actor narrowed his eyes. “You don’t have to be a—”

“Light the candles, Maverick!” said Jason and Victoria at the same time.

Maverick. That was his name. Maverick Reels. What a silly name. Not that someone who’d called herself Valkyrie Cain could throw stones, but still.

As Maverick fumbled with the Zippo, the cellar door opened and a man swept down the stairs. "Hail Satan!" he cried.

"Hail Satan!" the others cried back.

"Hail Satan," Valkyrie added, just to be in with the cool kids.

"Midnight is almost upon us!" said the Master, summoning fire into his hand and passing it over the candelabra, lighting each wick. "Why does this girl still live? Kill her! Deliver her soul to the Dark Lord!"

"Voldemort?" Valkyrie asked, frowning.

The Master pulled down his hood. He didn't look like a Master. He looked like a mid-level office manager with a bad goatee. He peered at her. "Do I know you?"

"Do you?"

"I've seen you before."

"Have you?"

"I've seen your photograph," he said.

"Where have you seen it?"

"I'm trying to remember," he said.

"Think hard now."

"Stop talking."

"Maybe it wasn't even me," Valkyrie said. "Was it a photo taken in a burning city? Then it wasn't me. It was a god who just *looked* like me."

His eyes widened. "Oh, no."

Valkyrie's magic crackled, white lightning dancing around her wrists and ankles, burning through the ropes.

Panicking, the Master grabbed the dagger from Jason just as one of the skeletons in rags stepped away from the wall and seized his wrist.

"Let's not do anything hasty," Skulduggery said, and everyone in the little group of satanic worshippers screamed and leaped away as he punched the Master right on the hinge of his jaw.

The Master's knees buckled and he collapsed into Skulduggery's arms, and Valkyrie broke free of the scaffolding

holding her and followed the actors as they scrambled up the cellar steps.

She caught Maverick just as the door crashed open, pulling him off the steps. He flailed madly and she ducked as he spun, then clocked him right on the chin. He stiffened and pitched backwards. Valkyrie left him there and ran after the others.

She emerged from the cellar into an impressively big house – a movie star’s house. Lots of glass and exposed brick and open spaces. She followed the sounds of panic to the front door, where Jason and Victoria and Tadd were cursing each other as they tried to navigate the locks.

They heard her coming. Tadd let out a roar and came charging. He was shorter than Valkyrie, and skinnier, and she stepped into him, stopping him with a shoulder. He staggered a little and her fingers curled into his hair and she smacked his face against the painting on the wall over and over until he fell down.

Victoria ran into another room as Jason Randal dropped his robe and squared up to Valkyrie. He was big. He had muscles. He moved like he knew what he was doing, or he’d at least worked with fight choreographers – but when he threw the first punch it was stiff and awkward and badly judged, and it stopped a good hand’s length short of where it needed to land. He didn’t have a clue, and this wasn’t worth bruising her knuckles over, so Valkyrie blasted him with a little lightning that threw him back against the door. He fell in a crumpled, unconscious heap and she went after Victoria. She was standing in the huge living room holding a poker like a baseball bat.

“This isn’t going to do me a whole lot of good, is it?” she asked after a moment.

Valkyrie gave a shrug, and Victoria sighed, and put the poker down.

“Was that an actual skeleton I saw downstairs, or was it some sort of special effect?”

“It was a skeleton. He’s alive and he talks. His name’s Skulduggery.”

“Of course it is,” Victoria said, and took a seat, wearily, on the couch. “So you’re a sorcerer, too, are you?”

“Yep.”

“You a Satanist also?”

Valkyrie sat opposite, and crossed her legs. “That guy’s not a Satanist. None of us are Satanists. Magic has got nothing to do with religion. Those people you sacrificed? The devil didn’t collect their souls. Those people just died.”

Victoria took a while before answering. “But then why did the Master tell us to do it?”

“Well, seeing as how all this is about money, I’m guessing that in order to get the lot of you to really commit, the idiot you call *Master* made you kill a bunch of innocent people so you couldn’t change your minds and back out at a later date.”

Victoria’s face slackened. “We didn’t have to kill those girls?”

“Nope.”

“But... but our careers... How did he—?”

“There’s a trick sorcerers can do once they know the name you were born with. They can tell you to do stuff. Not big stuff, not life-changing stuff – he wouldn’t have been able to coax a whole lot of money out of you that way – but he could certainly have suggested to casting agents that it’d be a good idea to call you in for a second audition, things like that.”

“Oh my God...”

“Yep.”

“What... what’s going to happen to me now?”

“You’re going to jail.”

“I should call my attorney.”

“You won’t need an attorney,” said Valkyrie. “You’re going to one of *our* jails. All four of you will disappear. No one will know where you are.”

“But my family... My fans...”

“They’ll never see you again.”

Victoria stared at her. “You can’t do that.”

“By our estimation, you’ve murdered sixteen young women between the four of you. We might be wrong. You might have murdered more.”

“But the Master told us we had to.”

“Stop calling him Master. He’s just some low-level sorcerer who couldn’t be bothered doing the work of a real agent so he invented this Satanist thing to make some money out of you morons. And I don’t care what he told you. You had a choice. You could have chosen *not* to murder sixteen innocent young women. Obviously, that’s not the road you decided to go down.”

Victoria sat forward, elbows on her knees, hands hidden by the voluminous sleeves of her robe, evidently processing what she could. “I can’t go to jail,” she said slowly. “I’m on a shortlist. That part could win me an Oscar.” She straightened up. She had a gun in her hand. “I’m really sorry.”

Valkyrie raised an eyebrow, but otherwise didn’t react.

“Sorcerers aren’t bulletproof, are they?” Victoria asked.

“No, we’re not,” said Valkyrie.

“I’m really sorry about this.”

“Are you, though?”

Victoria thumbed back the hammer. It made a pleasing little click. “I’m not the best shot in the world,” she said, “but I’m not bad, either. That revenge movie I was in? My firearms coach told me I was a natural. But, even if I *were* the worst shot in the world, I couldn’t miss from this range even if I wanted to.”

“Oh, I bet you could if you tried.”

“Will a gun kill your skeleton friend?”

“Not *that* gun.”

“Then I’ll just kill *you*.”

Valkyrie tapped the amulet on her hip and the black suit spread outwards, covering her skin and her clothes, flowing down to her feet and to her fingertips before Victoria’s eyes could even finish widening.

The gun went off. The bullet hit Valkyrie in the belly and she

grunted, sitting forward slightly. She pulled the hood up as a second bullet struck her chest. Christ, that stung. Her fingers found the mask in the hood and she pulled it down and felt it turn solid over her face as Victoria stood and proceeded to empty the gun into her. Valkyrie wondered what the skull mask looked like today. Every time she pulled it down, it was slightly different than the time before. It was like Skulduggery's façade in that way.

Victoria's final bullet hit Valkyrie in the forehead, making the mask reverberate. Valkyrie stood up.

"I thought you said you weren't bulletproof," Victoria said quietly, the gun hanging uselessly by her side.

"I'm not," Valkyrie responded, brushing a squashed bullet from her chest. "The suit is. I was going to give you the option of leaving this house in cuffs, as opposed to unconscious, but..."

"But I just tried to kill you?"

Valkyrie shrugged, took the gun away from her.

"Please," Victoria said, "not the face."

"Sure," Valkyrie said, and hit her in the face anyway.