

MIDNIGHT

The Skulduggery Pleasant series

SKULDUGGERY PLEASANT

PLAYING WITH FIRE

THE FACELESS ONES

DARK DAYS

MORTAL COIL

DEATH BRINGER

KINGDOM OF THE WICKED

LAST STAND OF DEAD MEN

THE DYING OF THE LIGHT

RESURRECTION

MIDNIGHT

THE MALEFICENT SEVEN

ARMAGEDDON OUTTA HERE

(a Skulduggery Pleasant short-story collection)

The Demon Road trilogy

DEMON ROAD

DESOLATION

AMERICAN MONSTERS

DEREK LANDY



MIDNIGHT

HarperCollins *Children's Books*

First published in Great Britain by
HarperCollins *Children's Books* in 2018
HarperCollins *Children's Books* is a division of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd,
HarperCollins Publishers
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

The HarperCollins website address is
www.harpercollins.co.uk
1

Text copyright © Derek Landy 2018
Skulduggery Pleasant™ Derek Landy
Skulduggery Pleasant logo™ HarperCollins*Publishers*
All rights reserved.

LIMITED EDITION ISBN 978–0–00–797291–3
HB ISBN 978–0–00–828456–5
TPB ISBN 978–0–00–828457–2
PB ISBN 978–0–00–828459–6

Derek Landy asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of the work.

Typeset in Baskerville MT by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in England by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

Conditions of Sale
This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form, binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

FSC™ www.fsc.org MIX Paper from responsible sources FSC™ C007454

This book is produced from independently certified FSC™ paper to ensure responsible forest management.

For more information visit: **www.harpercollins.co.uk/green**

1

The old castle stood dark against the star-filled sky, its tall windows empty, its battlements jutting like teeth. Upon those battlements, and indifferent to the cold winds that scoured the mountaintops, stood Wretchlings, monstrous things of scabs and sores whose insides boiled with poisoned blood and decaying meat.

Lying on a blanket on a snow-covered perch 809 metres west and 193 metres up, Skulduggery Pleasant put his right eye socket to the scope of his rifle and adjusted the dial.

He wriggled slightly, settling deeper into the blanket, then went perfectly still. His gloved finger began to slowly squeeze the trigger, and Valkyrie raised her binoculars, training them on the closest Wretchling.

The gun went off with a loud crack that the wind snatched away, but they were so far from the target that it took a few seconds for the bullet to hit.

The Wretchling jerked slightly, and looked down at its chest. A moment later, it started to tremble. The stitches that held it together unravelled, and the Wretchling came undone, its body parts falling, its stolen entrails spilling out, and it collapsed on top of itself, a pile of meat steaming in the cold air.

Skulduggery moved on to the next target and adjusted the scope once more.

"You think they feel pain?" Valkyrie asked.

Skulduggery paused for a moment, and looked at her. "I'm sorry?"

"The Wretchlings," she said. "Do you think they feel pain?"

"Not really," he answered, and went back to aiming his rifle.

"But they have brains, right? Fair enough, they might not be thinking great thoughts, but they do still think. And if they think, they might be able to feel. And if their body can feel physically, can't their minds feel emotionally?"

Skulduggery fired again. Valkyrie didn't bother looking to see if the bullet hit its target. Of course it did.

"They do have brains," Skulduggery said. "They're stolen from the dead, along with the limbs and the internal organs, and they're twisted and warped and attached to the Wretchling like the parts of a machine – because that's what they are. They look alive, but it's all artificial. Are you feeling guilty about what we're doing?"

"No." She watched him acquire his next target. "Kind of."

"They're just like Hollow Men." He put his eye socket to the scope.

"But Hollow Men don't have brains."

"I don't have a brain."

"But Hollow Men can't think."

"Believe me, the only thing on a Wretchling's mind is the messiest way to kill someone."

Valkyrie looked through the binoculars. "So we kill them first? That's hardly enlightened, is it?"

"We're not killing them," Skulduggery said. "These clever little bullets are designed to dismantle, not destroy."

He fired, and she watched as the next Wretchling was dismantled. Black blood gushed.

Skulduggery stood. "That's the last of them," he said, taking Valkyrie's hand and pulling her to her feet. He left the sniper rifle on the blanket and she handed him his hat. It was black, like his three-piece suit, like his shirt and tie. Valkyrie was dressed all in black, too – in the armoured clothes made for her years

ago by Ghastly Bespoke and the heavy coat with the fur-lined hood she wore over them.

Clouds were moving in from the east, scraping over the jagged peaks of the mountains, blocking out the stars. Below where they stood, the drop disappeared into gloom. The wind nudged Valkyrie, like it wanted to tip her over the edge, send her spinning downwards into the cold emptiness. She felt an almost irresistible urge to take a big step forward.

"Are you OK?" Skulduggery asked.

Her face, numb though it was, had gone quite slack. She fixed it into a smile. "Peachy," she said, taking off her coat. "Let's go."

He wrapped an arm round her waist. "Are you sure you don't want to try this alone?"

"If I knew I'd be able to fly, no problem," she said. "But I told my folks I'd be there for roast dinner, and if I plunge to my death before that they'll just think it's rude, so..."

They lifted up and drifted beyond the ledge, the world opening up beneath them. Skulduggery redirected the freezing winds so that not a single hair was disturbed on Valkyrie's head. It was strangely quiet as they flew, surrounded by the howls and shrieks of the mountains but tucked away from it all.

"The thought has occurred to me that maybe you'll only start flying when you absolutely need to," Skulduggery said.

"Do not drop me."

"Indulge me for a moment. The range of your powers is still largely unknown to us, yes? You can fire lightning from your fingertips, you certainly have destructive potential, and you have the burgeoning psychic abilities of at least a Level 4 Sensitive. Plus, you have flown before."

"Hovering is not flying."

"I bet if I were to drop you, you'd fly."

"I'm not sure if I can emphasise this enough, but *do not* drop me."

"The prospect of imminent death could release you from the mental barriers that are holding you back."

"It wouldn't be imminent death, though, would it? You'd catch me. There's no threat there. You'd save me because saving me is what you do, just like saving you is what I do. The only thing that dropping me would accomplish is to annoy the hell out of me."

Skulduggery was quiet for a moment.

"*Do not drop me*," Valkyrie repeated.

He sighed, and they continued over to the castle, landing beside a pile of Wretchling remains. A sudden gust surrounded them with the stench of putrid meat and human waste. It filled Valkyrie's nose and mouth and she gagged. As Skulduggery sent the foul air away with a wave of his hand, Valkyrie lunged for the battlements, sure she was going to puke over the side – but she swallowed, managed to keep it down.

"Sometimes I miss having a sense of smell," Skulduggery said. "Tonight is not one of those times."

Valkyrie spat, wiped her mouth, and stayed where she was for a moment to recover. She felt sure that she'd once been told the proper names for the different sections of the battlements, but couldn't for the life of her remember what they were.

The wind whipped her hair in front of her face, so she tied it back into a ponytail, then took a wooden sphere, roughly the size of a golf ball, from her pocket. She gripped the sphere in both hands and twisted in opposite directions, and a transparent bubble rippled outwards, enveloped her and stabilised. The personal cloaking spheres didn't have nearly the range of their regular-sized versions, but they were just as effective, and a lot handier to carry around.

Skulduggery took out his own cloaking sphere, did the same, and vanished from her sight.

She slipped the sphere back in her pocket and stepped closer to him. Her cloaking bubble mingled with his and suddenly she could see him again.

Sticking by each other's side, they set off down a set of stone

steps, a flurry of snow chasing them into the gloom. Skulduggery held up his hand just before they reached the bottom. A tripwire glinted on the final step.

"Sneaky," Valkyrie said.

They jumped the last few steps, and the moment before they landed Skulduggery caught her and kept them hovering off the ground.

"Pressure plates," he said.

"Even sneakier."

They drifted along the corridor, stopping at the end so that Valkyrie could push open the door. They touched down on the other side, took the next set of stone steps that spiralled downwards, Skulduggery leading the way.

Two guards with sickles on their backs stood at the open windows in the next corridor, their heads covered by black helmets. Rippers. It was freezing in here but they stood with their arms by their sides, as though the cold didn't bother them, keeping watch on the road leading to the castle.

"Which one do you want?" Skulduggery asked.

Nodding to the nearest Ripper, Valkyrie said, "This one," in a soft voice, even though she knew that her words wouldn't travel beyond the bubble that surrounded them.

"Count to ten," Skulduggery responded, and walked away, vanishing from sight.

Valkyrie moved up behind the Ripper, finished the count and stepped closer. Out of the corner of her eye, the second Ripper disappeared as Skulduggery did the same.

She wrapped her right arm round the Ripper's throat, grabbed the bicep of her left arm and hooked her hand behind the Ripper's helmet. His hands came up, trying to free himself. He put a foot to the wall and pushed out, shoving them both backwards. Valkyrie held on, her head down, her eyes closed. She kicked at his leg and dragged him backwards, laying him on the ground as his struggles weakened.

She looked up, watched as the second Ripper fell into view. He hit the floor and stayed there.

When her Ripper was unconscious, she released him and walked to the other end of the corridor. Her cloaking bubble intersected with Skulduggery's and he appeared before her so suddenly she jumped.

"Sorry," he said.

She waved his apology away. "I'm sure I scared you just as much as you scared me."

"Not really."

She took his hat and threw it out of the window, and was totally unsurprised when a moment later it floated in again and settled back on his head.

"Are you quite finished?" he asked, adjusting it slightly.

"It wouldn't kill you to admit to being a little startled every now and then," she said.

"I don't get startled," he responded, walking off again. She caught up to him before he left her bubble, and fell into step beside him. "I anticipate and adjust accordingly."

"You don't anticipate everything."

"Of course not. Where would be the fun in that?"

"I'm just saying you shouldn't feel like you have to keep up this unflappable demeanour around me."

"Has it occurred to you, after all these years together, that I just might not be flappable?"

"Everyone is flappable, Skulduggery."

"Not me."

They came to a door that took them to a tunnel that took them to a room, and in this room they chose an archway that took them to more stairs. Down they went, and down again, until the torches in brackets were replaced by bulbs and the steady thrum of power reverberated through the floor. They avoided large groups of Rippers, passed rooms where white-coated scientists murmured to one another, and kept going until they

came to a perspex window overlooking a large laboratory packed with machines that blinked with volatile energy.

Doctor Nye sat on a stool, its back stooped, working on the intricate insides of a rusted device. Nye's thin limbs looked smaller than when Valkyrie had seen it last, when it had towered over her, its head nearly brushing the ceiling, but she wasn't altogether surprised. Crengarrions shrank as they got older, and their skin colour tended to lighten. Now it looked, at most, about ten feet tall, and its skin was a delicate ash.

"It looks old," she murmured. "Good."

They found the stairs, followed them down, arriving at the double doors that led into Nye's lab. Two Rippers stood guard.

"I've got this one," Valkyrie said, walking towards the Ripper on the right. She was halfway there when the cloaking sphere started to vibrate in her pocket.

Alarmed, she pulled it out. The two hemispheres were ticking towards each other quickly – much quicker than they should have – counting down to the bubble's collapse. She tried to twist them back, then struggled to merely keep them in place, but it was no good.

The bubble contracted.

2

Her boots were visible.

Valkyrie crouched before either of the Rippers caught sight of her. There were sigils on the wall – she could see them now. She recognised one of them: a security sigil that attacked Teleporters. She was pretty sure the other one was forcing her cloaking sphere to malfunction.

And it contracted again. Not all the way, just enough to reveal the top of her head. Time was running out.

Keeping low, she pocketed the sphere and hurried over to the Ripper. The bubble contracted again. He heard her footsteps and his hands went to his sickles.

Valkyrie pulled her own weapons – shock sticks, held in place on her back – and launched herself at him. The first stick cracked against his helmet, but he ducked the second, spinning away. Valkyrie's bubble collapsed completely now, as did Skulduggery's, and she glimpsed him throwing fire even as her Ripper attacked, sickles blurring.

Valkyrie knew the pattern and countered, slipped to the side and struck the Ripper's knee, then spun and caught him in the ribs. His clothes absorbed the electrical charge, and he didn't seem to register the pain.

He left her an opening and she fell for it, committing herself to a swing that she regretted instantly. A sickle blade raked across

her belly, would have torn her open were it not for her armoured jacket. He kicked at her ankle, swept her leg, and she hit the ground and somersaulted backwards to her feet, defending all the while. His knee thudded into her cheek and the world tilted.

He leaped at her. She dropped the stick in her right hand and white lightning burst from her fingers, striking him in the chest and blasting him head over heels. He rolled and came up, his jacket smoking.

Valkyrie picked up the fallen stick, placed it end to end with the other one. They attached and she twisted, the staff lengthening, and when the Ripper ran at her she whacked it into his leg, then spun and cracked it against his head. He fell back and she followed, the staff striking him once, twice, and then a twirling third time. He dropped one of his sickles.

She went to finish him off and he dodged, dodged again, dodged faster than she could strike. He jumped over to the wall and rebounded, flipping over her head. She whirled but he was too close, and he grabbed the staff and pulled her into a headbutt that would have broken her nose had she not lowered her head. Even so, bright lights flashed, and she felt the staff being wrenched from her grip as she went staggering.

The Ripper let the staff drop, and swung his remaining sickle towards her neck. She raised an arm, her armoured clothes saving her once again, and snatched the weapon away. It fell, clattering against the stones.

Valkyrie ducked low and powered forward, grabbing him round the waist. Snarling, she lifted him off his feet and slammed him against the wall, then seized his helmet, searching for the twin releases, and tore it from his head. The Ripper fell back, blinking, and she swung the helmet into his jaw and he went down, and she hit him again and again until she figured that was probably enough.

She dropped the helmet and got her breath back.

"You got his helmet off," Skulduggery said, standing over the

motionless form of the second Ripper. "How did you manage that?"

She shrugged. "I adapted accordingly. Come on. We have a doctor's appointment."