Helping your children choose books they will love

I ♥ reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Skulduggery Pleasant: Last Stand of Dead Men

Written by

Derek Landy

Published by

HarperCollins Children's Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

First published in hardback in Great Britain by HarperCollins *Children's Books* 2013
HarperCollins *Children's Books* is a division of
HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd
77-85 Fulham Palace Road, Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

Visit us on the web at www.harpercollins.co.uk

Visit Skulduggery Pleasant at
www.skulduggerypleasant.co.uk

Derek Landy blogs under duress at
www.dereklandy.blogspot.com

1

Copyright © Derek Landy 2013

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

Illuminated letters © Tom Percival 2012
Skulduggery Pleasant™ Derek Landy
SP Logo™ HarperCollins*Publishers*

HB ISBN: 978-0-00-748920-6
TPB ISBN: 978-0-00-748921-3

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in England by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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. All rights reserved.

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

FSC™ is a non-profit international organisation established to promote the responsible management of the world's forests. Products carrying the FSC label are independently certified to assure consumers that they come from forests that are managed to meet the social, economic and ecological needs of present and future generations, and other controlled sources.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

FIVE YEARS AGO



The camp was dark and quiet, and the Warlocks slept. Up on the hill, watching them, a man with golden eyes pulled the collar of his coat tighter in a vain attempt to stave off the cold. His fingers and toes were already numb. His teeth were starting to chatter. How many times had he been in similar circumstances, enduring discomfort while he waited for the perfect time to strike? More than he could remember, that was for sure. It was worth it, of course. It was always worth it.

There was movement behind him, but he didn't turn. He recognised the footsteps. "I didn't think you were coming."

The old man stopped beside him, cupped his hands and blew into them to warm them. "I had visitors," he said. His voice was rough. Words scraped from his throat. "The Skeleton Detective and a girl. She has old blood in her. Ancient blood, I reckon. She's dangerous."

"She's thirteen years old. She's a child."

"She won't stay a child. A few more years and she'll be a threat, you mark my words."

"Consider them marked," said the man with the golden eyes. What had Madame Mist said about the Torment? Once upon a

time, he'd been formidable, he'd been dangerous, but he was an old man now, a good blade that had lost its edge. Maybe she was right.

"These plans of yours," the Torment said, "the plans you've made with my fellow Children of the Spider. These are good plans. They will suffice."

"You're onboard, then? What changed your mind?"

The Torment's lined faced was half hidden by the long grey hair and all that beard, but he didn't look like a dulled blade any more. He looked suddenly sharp. "My visitors. Their arrogance has stirred me from my apathy. The mortals they protect have run this world long enough. It's past time we took over."

"I'm so glad to hear it," said the man with the golden eyes. "In that case, there are some Warlocks down there in need of killing, if you're in the mood...?"

The man with the golden eyes approached the camp from the south, the Torment beside him, while the mercenaries closed in from all around. Mortals, in dark military clothing. Heavily armed. Not a sound was made, and yet one of the Warlocks stirred, woke, sat up, looked out into the night, a night that was suddenly lit up by the bright flashes of gunfire.

The three Warlocks leaped up, caught in the crossfire. Notoriously hard to kill, even they couldn't survive the relentless barrage of bullets. Light spilled from every wound as they jerked and fell and stumbled, and then the light faded and they toppled.

Silence followed, broken only by empty magazines being replaced.

The Torment put his gun away. He didn't like using mortal weapons. He didn't like having to work by their side. But he was going to like what came next.

The mercenaries walked into camp, made sure that the Warlocks were really dead.

"You three," said the man with the golden eyes, "take the jeep and go. I'll be in touch to arrange payment."

Three mercenaries faded into the darkness. The other two stayed close, waiting for orders.

The Torment grabbed the taller one's head, twisted till the neck broke. The smaller one stumbled back, going for his weapon, but the Torment took it from him and used it to beat him to death.

While the mercenary was being killed, the man with the golden eyes surveyed the scene. The other Warlocks would return to find their brothers slaughtered, and they would find the bodies of two of the soldiers who did it. Mortal soldiers, wearing no uniform, with no insignias or identification.

"Why did you let the others live?" the Torment asked when he was done. "They can identify us."

That was half right. The other mercenaries could identify the Torment, but the man with the golden eyes was already fading from their memories. "For this to work, they need to be able to boast about their missions. The three I let go have the biggest mouths. Their boasts will eventually reach the right ears."

The Torment scowled. "There is a faster way to do this."

"No," said the man with the golden eyes. "We're not ready yet. But we will be. Soon."

THREE MONTHS AGO



If its estimations were correct – and of course they were correct, they were never wrong – then the Engineer was going to make it. From the instant that warning *ping* had sounded in its head, it had had exactly four weeks to implement the shutdown procedure before catastrophe became somewhat inevitable. It used the caveat 'somewhat' because of course nothing was inevitable, not really. There were always hidden clauses to every eventuality. This the Engineer had learned in its travels, in what it called 'life experience'. That the Engineer was not, technically, alive, mattered not. It existed, and it had sentience, and as such it had life experience. Moving on...

If it had been where it was supposed to be when the *ping* had sounded, the four-week countdown would have mattered not one jot. Unfortunately, the Engineer was not where it was supposed to be. A regrettable unfolding of events, to be sure. The Engineer felt most bad about that. Not that it was the Engineer's fault. No one could possibly lay the blame at the Engineer's mechanical feet. Had it not stood guard for almost three decades? Had it not fulfilled its duty for the most part? Was it really the fault of the Engineer that its advanced programming, a wonderful mixture of technology and magic, enabled it to experience the human

phenomenon of 'boredom'? Was it really the fault of the Engineer that it had decided to go for a walk, or that when the *ping* sounded, when the Engineer was finally needed to leap into action, instead of being right there, ready to help, it was on a beach in Italy looking for unusual shells?

No, the Engineer thought not.

It was making good time now, though. The magical symbols carved into its metal body erased it from the memories of mortals the instant they saw it, allowing the Engineer to travel in broad daylight, through busy city streets. The Engineer smiled (internally, for of course it had no mouth). It was feeling good. It was feeling optimistic. Moving at its current speed, it would arrive back in Ireland in plenty of time to shut everything down before a series of overloads and power loops inevitably led to a sequence of events which would, in turn, eventually lead to the probable destruction of the world. The Engineer wasn't worried.

And then the truck hit it.

1

THE WITCHES



The sky was clear and the stars were bright and Gracious had fallen asleep on the grass. Donegan nudged him and he murmured and came round.

"You were supposed to be keeping an eye on the place," Donegan said.

"I was," Gracious yawned.

"You were asleep."

"I was resting my eyes."

"You were snoring."

"I was exercising my lungs."

"Get up."

Grumbling, he got to his feet and stretched. He didn't have to stretch very far. He wasn't that tall. Still, what Gracious O'Callahan lacked in height he made up for in muscle and cool hair. "Hi, Valkyrie," he said.

"Hi, Gracious."

"So is this your first time meeting a witch?"

She nodded.

"You'll do fine, don't worry. Witches are more afraid of you than you are of them."

"I thought that was bees."

He blinked. "You might be right. Yes, you *are* right. Bees are fine, witches are horrible. Always get those two mixed up." He was wearing baggy jeans and a faded *Star Wars* T-shirt. Valkyrie imagined that he had a special nerd room at home where he kept all of his weird clothes that referenced old movies, and she imagined him standing in the middle of that room for hours, slowly rotating on the spot, an unsettling smile on his face. By contrast, Donegan Bane, a tall and slender Englishman, favoured sports coats and narrow ties with his skinny jeans.

He glared at Gracious. "I can't believe you fell asleep."

"I *didn't* fall asleep."

"Then do you know if she's home or not?"

"I haven't a clue," Gracious admitted. "I fell asleep."

Valkyrie had first met them only a few months earlier, but she felt she knew them well enough by now to know that, if given the opportunity, they would stand on this hill and bicker for hours. So she turned and walked down to the cottage, and after a moment they followed her.

They arrived at the door and Donegan knocked three times. They waited and the door was opened by a frowning girl.

"Hello," Donegan said with a smile she didn't return.

"Do you know what time it is?" the girl asked. Valkyrie judged her to be around her age, maybe seventeen or eighteen. She had pale skin and full lips and luxuriant red hair that framed her face.

"Why no," Donegan replied as if it were a game. "What time is it?"

She scowled. "What do you want?"

"My name is Donegan Bane and this is my colleague Gracious O'Callahan – we're Monster Hunters. We're here with our associate Valkyrie Cain, and we were wondering if your grandmother was home."

"You're Monster Hunters?"

"Indeed we are. You've probably heard of us. Writers of *Monster*

Hunting for Beginners, The Definitive Study of Were-Creatures, and *The Passions of Greta Grey*, our first work of romantic fiction."

"And you want my grandmother?"

"If your grandmother is Dubhóg Ni Broin, yes."

"Are you going to kill her?"

"I'm sorry? Oh, no! No, nothing like that. We just want to talk to her."

"So you're not going to kill her?"

"No," Donegan said with a laugh. "I assure you, she's quite safe."

The girl's eyes narrowed. "How do I know I can trust you?"

"We came here unarmed," Donegan said cheerfully, and Gracious looked at him.

"You're unarmed?" he asked, surprised.

"Yes," Donegan said. "Aren't you?"

"Well, I suppose so. Apart from my gun."

Donegan glared at him. "What? Why did you bring a gun? I told you to come unarmed."

"I thought you were joking."

"Why would I be joking?"

"I don't know, I thought that's what made it funny."

Donegan looked like he might strangle his partner, but then forced the smile back on his face and turned once again to the girl.

"I'm sorry, miss, I didn't catch your name...?"

"Misery," the girl answered, suspicious.

"Misery, it's a pleasure to meet you. My friend here has many problems; he's quite bright in his own way, but likes taking guns to inappropriate places. Let me assure you that we mean your grandmother no harm. We just want to talk to her."

"Why?"

Valkyrie stepped forward before either of the Monster Hunters could make the situation worse. "We're looking for a friend of ours. Maybe you've seen him? Tall? Skinny? Wears nice suits?

Also he's a skeleton? His name's Skulduggery Pleasant and he's wandered off on his own and we think your gran might know where he is."

"Why would my grandmother know that?"

"Because he came to see her, and that's the last we heard of him."

"We don't have much to do with sorcerers," Misery said. "They don't like us and we don't like them. I don't recall seeing your friend, either. What did you say he was? A zombie? A mummy?"

"A skeleton."

"A skeleton, yeah. No, haven't seen one of those in ages."

"I think you're lying," Valkyrie said.

Misery smiled coldly. "What if I am? What are you going to do about it?"

"Whatever I have to."

"Ah, there it is, the arrogance that my grandmother is always talking about. And what kind of sorcerer are you, then? Let me guess. Standing here, dressed all in black... Are they armoured clothes you're wearing? They are, aren't they? And that big ugly ring on your finger – that's from that death magic thing, isn't it? Necromancy? But you... you're my age. You're too young to have had the Surge. You're probably still experimenting with your little sorcerer disciplines, like a good little girl. So I'd say you're an Elemental. I'm right, amn't I? See, witches don't have disciplines. Real magic isn't about choosing one thing over the other. Real magic is about opening yourself up to everything."

"Yeah," said Valkyrie. "That's really interesting. Is your granny home? Could we talk to her?"

"She's home," said Misery. "She's busy, though."

"Doing what?"

"Witchy things."

"Could we come in?"

"Nope."

"We're coming in, with or without your permission."

"I'd like to see you try."

"No, you really wouldn't."

"I think," Gracious said quickly, "that the wrong foot has been gotten off of. Misery, you seem to me to be a lovely girl, and I sense a sort of kindness in your eyes which reminds me of a newborn fawn, or the noble hedgehog. We've been looking for your grandmother for days now, and yesterday our dear friend Skulduggery went missing. We're very worried, as you can imagine, and some of us, without naming any names, might be a little more short-tempered than usual."

"I'm not short-tempered," said Valkyrie.

"Then how did you know I was referring to you?"

"Because you pointed."

"Getting back to the subject at hand, Misery, we would really appreciate it if you'd let us in. Please?"

Misery looked at him, but didn't respond.

"Um," said Gracious, "hello?"

"Quiet," she said, "I'm thinking." She chewed a plump lip, then sighed. "I don't really get along with my grandmother. She's stuck in her ways and... I look at her and she's all withered and stuff and I don't want to end up like that, you know? I don't want to live in a cottage in the middle of nowhere for the rest of my life. I want to live in the city. I want to wear high-heeled shoes every once in a while and do things that don't all revolve around being a witch."

Gracious nodded. "I understand and sympathise with everything you've just said, apart from the bit about the high-heeled shoes, which I wouldn't know about."

"Can you promise me you're not going to hurt her?" Misery asked.

Valkyrie frowned. "Why would we hurt her?"

"Because she has your friend trapped in the cellar."

Valkyrie stepped through the doorway. "He'd better be OK."

Misery held up her hands. "He's fine, he's fine. From what I

can hear they're just talking. If you can promise me you won't hurt her, I'll show you how to get down there. Deal?"

"I'll defend myself," Valkyrie said. "If she attacks me, I'll defend myself. But... we promise to go easy on her if it's at all possible."

"That's really the best deal you're going to get," Gracious added, a little apologetically.

"Fine," said Misery, after a moment's consideration. "Come on in. Wipe your feet."

The cottage was dark and weird and smelled funny, like boiled cabbage and wet dog. Valkyrie could see why Misery didn't like living here. She couldn't see a TV or even a radio. It was lit by oil lamps, and there was a brazier in the corner. In the winter, she imagined this place would get very cold.

Misery pulled back a rug and lifted a heavy trapdoor. She put her finger to her lips, and Valkyrie nodded.

The cellar was bigger than she'd expected, but about as gloomy. Valkyrie and the Monster Hunters walked down the stone steps, then crept through the tunnel towards a flickering light, following the sound of Skulduggery's voice and another, a woman's. The nearer they got, the more distinct the words became.

"—see what this has got to do with me," said the woman. "I'm just an old witch living out her life with an ungrateful granddaughter. What would I know about the affairs of Warlocks?"

Valkyrie peered round the corner. Dubhóg Ni Broin looked remarkably like the witches in fairy tales. She was old and small and stooped, with tangled grey hair and a long chin with a wart on it – an actual *wart*. She was wearing a black shawl over a shapeless black dress but, disappointingly, no pointy hat. Still, Valkyrie wouldn't have wanted her to slip *fully* into caricature. That would have been silly.

Facing Dubhóg, his back to Valkyrie, Skulduggery Pleasant stood in a chalk circle. She knew enough about symbols and sigil magic by now to know that the circle was binding his powers, but there were other symbols there she didn't recognise. Seeing

as how he didn't just step out of the circle, though, she guessed they were there to keep him in place.

"Witches and Warlocks get along like a house on fire," he said. He was wearing the grey suit he'd been in the last time she'd seen him. His hat was on the table in the corner, and the lamplight flickered off his skull. "You shop at the same stores, use the same recipes... If anyone would have heard what the Warlocks are up to, it'd be a witch."

"Maybe those *other* witches," Dubhóg said, somewhat resentfully. "Maybe the Maidens or those Brides of Blood Tears with their exposed bellies and their veils and their long legs... Is my belly exposed, Mr Skeleton? Am I wearing a veil? Are my legs long and shapely?"

"Uh," said Skulduggery.

"There are different sorts of witches and Warlocks," Dubhóg continued, "just like there are different sorts of sorcerers. There are male witches and female witches, just as there are male Warlocks and female Warlocks. There are all kinds. But we keep to ourselves. The business of others does not interest us."

"But the business of others *does* interest *me*," Skulduggery said. "I've been hearing rumours, Dubhóg. Disquieting rumours. I just thought you might be able to allay my fears."

"And that is why you attacked me?"

"I merely knocked on your front door."

"Then you attacked my *door*." Dubhóg squinted at him. "You think you're so clever, don't you? With your Sanctuaries and your rules. You think everyone should be like you. Well, I'm not like you. Witches aren't like you. Warlocks aren't like you. Why would we want to be? You live your lives restricted by rules. Even your magic is restricted. Sorcerers treat magic like science. It's disgusting and unnatural. It twists what true magic is all about."

"Control is important."

"Why? Why is it important? Magic should be allowed to flourish in whichever form it takes."

"That way madness lies."

"For the weak-minded, perhaps."

"Tell me what Charivari is up to."

"I wouldn't know," said Dubhóg. "I've never met the man. Why would you think I know anything about any of this?"

"A little over a year ago, you were seen talking to a Warlock who went on to try to kill me and my associate."

"A year? How can I be expected to remember that far back? I'm eight hundred years old. I get confused about the little things – who said what, who did what, who tried to kill who... My days are devoted to my granddaughter and my nights are spent making multiple trips to the toilet. I don't have time for anyone's grand schemes."

"So Charivari has a grand scheme?"

Dubhóg frowned. "I didn't say that."

"Actually, you sort of did."

"Oh, I see," said Dubhóg. "You're one of those, are you? You like to play around with words to try and get the better of me. Well, it's not going to work. With age comes wisdom, you ever hear that?"

"I did, but I've found that wisdom has a cut-off point of around one hundred and twenty years. Once you reach that, you're really as wise as you're going to get."

"Well, I'm wise enough to say nothing more on the subject."

"So you *know* more on the subject."

"I didn't say that."

"Again, you implied that you did. The Warlock you spoke to had been hired by the Necromancers to kill us – he said he owed them a special favour. Why?"

Dubhóg shrugged. "Why does anyone do anything?"

"What did the Necromancers do for the Warlocks? Did they give them something? They did? What was it – an item, an object, a person? Was it a thing, was it information, was it—? It was information? OK."

Dubhóg stepped back, horrified. "What are you doing? Are you reading my mind? No one can read my mind. Witches' minds cannot be read."

"I'm not reading your mind," Skulduggery said. "I'm reading your face. What information did the Necromancers give them? A strategy? A place? A name?"

Dubhóg screamed and covered her face with her hands.

"A name, then," Skulduggery said.

"You don't know that!" Dubhóg cried. "I have my face covered!"

"So that's what the Warlock wanted from the Necromancers, but what did he want from you? This will go easier for you if you just tell me what I want to know."

"Never!"

While Dubhóg reeled dramatically with her face covered, Valkyrie stepped out from hiding and approached the circle. Skulduggery gave her a little wave. She could have wet her finger and smudged the chalk, but instead she decided to put all those hours of practice to good use. Crouching by the edge of the circle, she put her hand flat on the ground and pushed her magic into the concrete until she was almost part of it, until she was cold and hard just like it was. And then she wrenched her hand to the side and the ground cracked, splitting one of the lines of chalk.

Dubhóg whirled at the noise, and stared at Valkyrie as Skulduggery stepped out of the circle. "How did you get in? Did you harm my granddaughter?"

"She's fine," Valkyrie said, straightening up.

"If you hurt her..."

"We didn't."

Dubhóg's face contorted in fury. "*You will pay!*"

"I told you," Valkyrie said, frowning, "we didn't hurt—"

But it was too late.

Dubhóg flew into the air, the space around her crackling with

an energy that made her long hair stand on end. She hovered there, looking like an electrocuted cartoon character, her face twisted in anger. Gracious leaped at her, and a stream of sizzling light caught him in the chest and sent him hurtling backwards. Donegan rushed in, his hands lighting up, but Dubhóg caught the energy stream he sent her way and responded with another one of her own. The air rushed in around Valkyrie and she shot towards Dubhóg, the shadows bunching round her fist. Dubhóg grabbed her by the throat, her grip strong, and Valkyrie clicked her fingers, summoning a ball of flame into her hand, and prepared to ram it into the witch's face.

"Granny," Misery called. "Granny, stop that. Gran. *NANA!*"

The battle froze, and Dubhóg looked round. "Misery? You're OK?"

"They didn't hurt me, Nana," Misery said, somewhat crossly. "Now put her down before you embarrass me even more."

Dubhóg drifted to the ground and let go of Valkyrie, who stepped back, rubbing her throat.

"Terribly sorry," Dubhóg said, her hair returning to normal, that ferocious power leaving her as quickly as it had arrived.

"That's quite all right," Skulduggery said, walking forward. "We all make mistakes, isn't that right? No harm done."

In the corner, Gracious moaned.

"Tell them what they want to know," Misery said, "then come upstairs. I'll put the kettle on."

Misery turned, walked away, and Dubhóg cleared her throat and smiled at Skulduggery.

"I'm a constant source of embarrassment to her," she explained. "I can't do anything right, really. All I want to do is protect her from the everyday cruelties of life, but I always do something wrong. I say the wrong thing, or I attack the wrong people..."

"Kids," Skulduggery said, sympathising.

"She'll miss me when I'm gone," Dubhóg said.

"So, the Warlock..."

"Oh, yes, him. I don't know what information the Necromancers gave him. He mentioned he'd been talking to one of them, a man with a ridiculous name."

"Bison Dragonclaw," said Valkyrie.

"Dragonclaw, yes," said Dubhóg. "That was it."

"And why did he come to see you in the first place?" Skulduggery asked.

"He thought I'd be able to convince my sisters to join with Charivari. But we Crones use magic differently from even other witches – it doesn't keep us so young. We are old women, and so I told him no."

"Join Charivari to do what? What are the Warlocks planning?"

"War," said Dubhóg. "They're planning on going to war."