



PLAYING WITH FIRE

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HarperCollins *Children's Books*



First published in Great Britain by
HarperCollins *Children's Books* in 2007
HarperCollins *Children's Books* is a division of HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd,
HarperCollins Publishers
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

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

Skulduggery Pleasant rests his weary bones on the web at:
www.skulduggerypleasant.com

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1

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ISBN 978-0-00-725705-8

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Printed and bound in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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1

HANGING AROUND



Valkyrie Cain hit the parapet and tumbled, unable to stop herself, and with a panicked gasp she disappeared off the edge.

The church tower stood high and proud, looking out over Dublin City. The night breeze was brisk and carried snatches of laughter from the street below. It was a long way down.

A man in a tattered coat walked up to the edge and peered over. He smirked.

“This is insulting,” he said. “Don’t they know how dangerous I am? I am very, very dangerous. I’m a killer. I’m

a trained killing *machine*. And still, they send *you*. A *child*.”

Valkyrie felt her grip on the ledge loosen. She ignored the goading of the man standing above her, and looked around for something else to grab on to. She looked everywhere but down. Down was where the street was, where the long drop and the sudden stop was. She didn’t want to look down. She didn’t want anything to do with *down* right now.

“What age are you?” the man continued. “Thirteen? What kind of responsible adult sends a thirteen-year-old child to stop me? What kind of thinking is that?”

Valkyrie swung herself gently towards the tower, planting her feet against a small buttress. The fear started to work through her and she felt herself freeze up. She closed her eyes against the oncoming wave of paralysis.

The man was Vaurien Scapegrace, currently wanted in five countries for various counts of attempted murder. He hunkered down at the edge and smiled happily.

“I am turning murder into an art form. When I – when I *kill*, I’m actually painting a big, big picture, using blood and, and... messiness. You know?”

Below Valkyrie, the city twinkled.

“I’m an artist,” Scapegrace continued. “Some people don’t appreciate that. Some people don’t recognise true talent

when they see it. And that's fine. I'm not bitter. My time will come."

"Serpine tried to bring the Faceless Ones back," Valkyrie managed to say. Her fingers were burning and the muscles in her legs were screaming at her. "We stopped him. We'll stop you, too."

He laughed. "What, you think I want the old gods to walk the earth once again? Is that it? You think Nefarian Serpine was my leader? I'm not one of those nutbag disciples, all right? I'm my own man."

Valkyrie had one chance, but she needed to be calm to take advantage of it. Her powers, limited though they were, were Elemental – the manipulation of earth, air, fire and water. But at this stage of her training they didn't work when she was panicking.

"So if you don't want the Faceless Ones to return," she said, "what *do* you want? Why are you doing this?"

He shook his head. "You wouldn't understand. It's grown-up stuff. I just want a little appreciation for who I am, that's all. That's not much to ask, is it? But of course, you wouldn't know. You're just a kid." He shrugged. "Oh, well. Time to die." He reached down to shove her.

"Have you killed anyone?" she asked quickly.

“What? Did you miss what I said, about turning murder into an art form?”

“But you haven’t actually *killed* anyone yet, have you? I read your file.”

He glowered. “Technically, yeah, all right, maybe I haven’t, but tonight’s the night. You’re going to be my first.”

She readied herself, controlled her breathing. “Find the space where everything connects,” she murmured.

Scapegrace frowned. “What?”

Valkyrie kicked upwards, taking her right hand from the outcrop and feeling the air against her palm. She pushed at it like she’d been taught, and it shimmered and hit Scapegrace, throwing him off his feet. Valkyrie clutched at the edge of the parapet, her legs swinging in open air. She grunted and pulled herself up, then flung her left arm across the edge and hauled herself the rest of the way. She got to her feet, her arms and legs trembling with the strain, and moved away from the edge. The wind whipped her dark hair across her face.

Scapegrace was already getting up and Valkyrie saw anger mottle his face. She clicked her fingers, generating a spark that she caught in her hand. She tried to focus, tried to build it into a flame, but Scapegrace was coming at her like a freight train.

Valkyrie jumped and thrust out both feet. Her boots

slammed into his chest and he hit the ground again and went sprawling. He turned to her just as she lashed a kick into his jaw. His body twisted and he tumbled back, came up to his feet then lost his balance, fell again. He spat blood and glared.

“You little brat,” he snarled. “You uppity, sneaky little *brat*. You don’t know who you’re messing with, do you? I am going to be the greatest killer the world has ever known.” He stood up slowly, wiping his sleeve across his burst lip. “When I’m finished with you I’m going to deliver your mutilated, bloody corpse to your masters, as a warning. They sent you up against me, alone. Next time they’re going to have to send a battalion.”

Valkyrie smiled, and Scapegrace’s anger flared. “*What the hell is so funny?*”

“First of all,” she said, her confidence growing, “they’re not my *masters*. I don’t have a *master*. Second, they don’t need a battalion to take you down. And third – and this really is the most important point – whoever said I came alone?”

Scapegrace frowned, turned, saw someone walking up behind him, a skeleton in a black suit, and he tried to attack, but a gloved fist hit his face, a foot hit his shin and an elbow slammed into his chest. He fell in an awkward heap.

Skulduggery Pleasant turned to Valkyrie. “You all right?”

“I’ll kill you both!” Scapegrace howled.

“Hush,” Skulduggery said.

Scapegrace launched himself forward and Skulduggery moved into him, grabbed his outstretched arm and spun him around, then abruptly cut him off by slamming a forearm into his throat. Scapegrace flipped in midair, landed painfully. Skulduggery turned to Valkyrie again.

“I’m OK,” she said. “Really.”

Scapegrace had his hands to his face. “I think you broke my nose!” They ignored him.

“He talks a lot,” Valkyrie said, “but I don’t think he knows what all the words mean.”

Scapegrace leaped up. “I am the Killer Supreme! I make murder into an art form!”

Skulduggery hit him again and Scapegrace did a little twirl before falling.

“Vaurien Scapegrace,” he said, “by the power endowed unto me under the Sanctuary Rule of Justice, I am placing you under arrest for the attempted murder of Alexander Remit and Sofia Toil in Oregon, Cothurnus Ode and Armiger Fop in Sydney, Gregory Castallan and Bartholomew—”

Scapegrace tried one last desperate attack that Skulduggery cut short by punching him very hard on the nose. The Killer Supreme wobbled, collapsed and started crying.