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Opening extract from
**Skulduggery Pleasant: Kingdom of
the Wicked**

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PROLOGUE

 t was a beautiful spring day and they were standing on the roof.

“Do it,” said Kitana. Her voice was low but urgent, tinged with an excitement that bubbled up from somewhere within her. Her straight white teeth bit lightly on her bottom lip. Her face was flushed. Her eyes sparkled. So eager to learn a new way to hurt people.

Doran turned to the chimney and held out his hand. He grunted, his face going red and the muscles in his neck standing out. It looked pretty funny until his hand started to glow. There was a light under his skin, and it was getting brighter the more he concentrated.

“Oh, great,” said Sean. “We have the power of flashlights. Let the world beware.”

“Quiet,” Kitana said sharply. “Let him focus.”

Sean didn't like it when Kitana dismissed him like that. Elsie could see it in his face. Angry, embarrassed, hurt. If Elsie had ever taken that tone with him, she doubted he'd even notice. Not that she ever *would* treat him like that. She wasn't like Kitana, who could spend a whole day mocking him and then, with one smile the next day, would have him back under her thumb.

Elsie wasn't mean like Kitana, but then she wasn't pretty like her, either, or blonde like her, or slim like her. She was fat and ugly and all the dyed hair and black clothes and pierced lips in the world couldn't hide that.

A beam of light shot from Doran's hand, crackling and sizzling, and blasted a hole through the chimney.

Kitana whooped with joy and Sean stared, mouth open. Doran dropped his hand and grinned.

“It was easier that time,” he said. “Gets easier the more you do it.”

Kitana ran to his side. “Teach me! Oh my God, teach me now!”

Doran laughed, stood behind her, used one hand to guide her arm while the other hand was on her hip. He spoke softly, into her ear, and she nodded as she listened. Elsie looked at Sean. He wasn't looking impressed any more. Now he just looked jealous. Elsie couldn't help it – she was disappointed. Doran was just a thug and an idiot who followed Kitana around like almost every other seventeen-year-old boy in their school. But Elsie had thought Sean was different. She walked over.

Light flared in Kitana's hand and the chimney blew apart. She screamed in delight, hugged Doran.

"That was cool," Elsie said to Sean. He murmured. She smiled. "Maybe we should try it."

"Knock yourself out," he said, and walked away from her.

Her heart did that sinking thing again. Sometimes it seemed like the only reason it ever rose up was just so it could sink back down. She followed Sean over to them, half-listened to the instructions they were given. Doran lost his temper, started calling her names, and Kitana laughed and egged him on. Sean was too preoccupied with figuring out how to do the new trick – she doubted he even noticed they were picking on her again. Maybe that was for the best. If he did notice and he didn't do anything to stop it, wouldn't that be worse?

Finally, after many curses and insults, Elsie began to feel the power in her hand, felt how hot it was getting. Beside her, Sean's arm was trembling.

"Feel that heat?" Doran asked. "Make it even hotter. Make it so that it almost hurts."

They stood in a circle, all four of them, with their arms held up towards the sky. Kitana had already done it twice.

"Feel it?" Doran asked.

"Yeah," said Sean impatiently. "Now what?"

"Now you just push it out of you," Doran said. "All the energy, just push it straight out. Like this."

A beam of crackling energy shot out of his hand. A moment

later, Kitana's beam joined it, a slightly deeper colour that mingled with his.

"This is so cool," she whispered.

Sean gritted his teeth. Sweat rolled off his forehead. But then the light in his hand flashed even brighter, and his own beam of energy raced towards the clouds and he laughed shakily.

Elsie became aware of Kitana's eyes on her.

"Last one, Elsie. You can do it."

Elsie licked her lips. "I'm trying."

"Try harder." Kitana's voice had lost the playful lilt she used with the boys. When she spoke to Elsie, there was always a harder edge to it. "You can't be the only one of us not able to do this stuff. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link, have you ever heard that?"

Of course Elsie had heard that. Who hadn't heard that? But that was part of Kitana's way, to treat her like an idiot. Elsie didn't respond. Instead, she took that frustration and added it to the heat in her hand. It was really burning now. It was like her hand was about to explode.

"Hurry up," said Doran, straining slightly. "Can't keep this going for ever."

Elsie felt that heat and pushed it, tensing every muscle in her body, pushing it up, out of her skin, away from her, and then it burst through, a beam of orange energy, flashing to the sky, joining the others. Elsie couldn't help it, she laughed. It was all so pretty. So beautiful.

Doran was the first to cut off his beam. He lowered his hand with a gasp. Kitana followed soon after, and then Sean, and finally Elsie. She was tired, like she'd poured all of her strength into that beam, but every part of her was tingling. Sean and Doran were both smiling, too. Only Kitana's eyes were narrowed, like she hadn't really wanted Elsie to be able to do it.

A car pulled up on the road below, and a man got out. He looked furious. "Get down from there!" he shouted.

"We're allowed up here," Kitana called out. "We have the owner's permission. Unless you are the owner, in which case get lost or we'll kill you."

"Let's use him for target practice," Doran whispered.

Before Elsie could object, the man swung his arms. A strong wind suddenly blew and he rose upwards like he was flying. Sean cursed and they all jumped back, and the man landed in front of them.

"Do you have any idea how risky this is?" he raged. "You're out in the open, for God's sake. How stupid are you kids?"

"You're... you're like us?" Kitana asked.

"I could see your damn lightshow from miles away. What were you trying to do? Were you *trying* to get noticed?"

"We didn't think there was anyone else," Kitana said.

The man stared. "Anyone else? What? What do you mean?"

"I mean other people like us, people with super-powers."

"What? What are you talking about? Listen to me, all right? You're not superheroes, you're sorcerers, and sorcerers don't use their powers where normal people can see. You've got to be very

careful. Secrecy has got to be the number-one rule for you from this moment on.”

“We’re very sorry, mister,” said Kitana.

He sighed. “My name is Patrick Xebec.”

“That’s a stupid name,” said Doran.

“Doran,” Kitana said, her tone scolding.

“We don’t have time to get into this now,” said Xebec, “but you need to take on a new name, otherwise other sorcerers will be able to control you.”

“Seriously?”

“I’m always serious. I’ve never had a very good sense of humour, and I’ve never been particularly good with children.”

“We’re not children,” said Doran, flipping up his hoodie. “We’re seventeen.”

“Anyone below the age of ninety is a child to me,” Xebec said. “Sorcerers live longer than mortal people.”

“Cool,” said Sean.

“So your name wasn’t always Xebec, then?” Kitana asked.

“This is a name I took. It felt right, so I took it, and it’s been my name ever since.”

“And if I changed my name from Kitana Kellaway to, like, Kitana Killherway, that would stop me from being controlled?”

“If you want that as your taken name, sure.”

Doran grinned. “I’ll be Doran Kickass.”

“That’s the stupidest name ever,” Kitana said, giggling. “Sean, what about you?”

“I don’t know,” Sean said. “How about Sean Chill? Or Sean Destiny, or something? Sean the King.” He laughed. “Yeah, I’ll be Sean the King.”

All three of them laughed. Kitana didn’t ask Elsie what her name would be.

“Look,” said Xebec, “pick whatever names you want, I don’t care. I’m not qualified to take you through this. I don’t get involved in any of that Sanctuary stuff. I just live my life and get on with it.”

“What’s the Sanctuary?”

“It’s like our own private government. It has cops and soldiers and they’re always saving the world or getting themselves killed. You need to go to them, they’ll tell you everything you need to know. But if you want my advice, the moment that’s done with, walk away. Don’t become part of it. You’ll just wind up dead.”

“Magic cops,” Kitana said. “I don’t like the sound of that. Can they do what we do?”

“There are all different disciplines of magic,” said Xebec. “I’m an Elemental. What can you do?”

“We don’t know yet,” said Kitana. “We keep on finding new things. Like, at first we were just strong, but then we could move things without touching them. And now today we can fire beams of energy from our hands.”

“I figured out how to do that,” Doran said proudly.

Xebec frowned. “You can do all those things?”

“Probably more, as well,” said Doran. “Every day there’s something new.”

“I don’t know what you are,” Xebec said. “You should only have one of those abilities, two at the most. But even then you’d have to train for years.”

“Maybe we’re naturals,” Kitana said, smiling. “So the cops can’t do the things we can do?”

“No,” said Xebec. “No one can, as far as I know.”

Kitana bit her lip. “Oh, that’s good to hear.”

“I’ll call the Sanctuary,” said Xebec. “They’ll be able to figure out what’s going on. Come on.”

He turned, walked to the edge of the roof. Sean went to follow, but Kitana tapped his arm, holding him in place.

“I don’t think you should make that call,” she said.

Xebec turned. “Listen, kid, I don’t know what to do. I wouldn’t be of any use to you.”

“Actually, you’ve been a great help already. Thank you so much for everything you’ve done. But we can’t let you tell the magic cops about us.”

Doran raised his arm and his hand glowed. Xebec stepped back, eyes wide, didn’t even have time to say anything before a beam of energy burned through his leg. He fell, screaming.

Kitana took a deep breath, narrowed her eyes, and Xebec stiffened and collapsed, as dead as anything could get.

Sean looked at Kitana. “What did you do?”

“I squashed his brain with my mind,” Kitana said, and she started laughing.