

The Kari True Chronicles:
Blood in the Air

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by

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KING'S ENGLAND PRESS

2014

ISBN 978 1 909548 30 5 (Print edition)
ISBN 978 1 909548 38 1 (Kindle edition)

BLOOD N THE AIR

is typeset in Times New Roman
and published by

The King's England Press
111 Meltham Road, Lockwood
HUDDERSFIELD
West Riding of Yorkshire

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by
4Edge Ltd, Hockley, Essex

To Mum and Dad, Emily Peach and Laura Flower

Thanks for believing in me and the book.

About the author...



Katherine lives in Derbyshire and her own imagination. She has loved fantasy from an early age and has been writing stories for almost as long. When she is not writing she is teaching in primary schools. She has many ideas for the future and loves to hear from fans. Please get in touch through Facebook or Twitter.

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One

The man ran down an alley, clutching a knife in his hand. Kari dodged a night soil cart and ran after him, trying to gain some speed. The man stopped suddenly and turned to look at her. His smile revealed pointed canines and red-tinted ears. *Why did they always find the teeth and ears hardest to imitate?* Kari thought as she watched him jump up the side of a three-storey building with little effort and land perfectly on the roof, only to carry on running towards the Palace. She could have chosen to let him run on, could have chosen to let the assassin go; even though she was a corporal in the Watch there were no laws about holding a knife and looking at the palace. But it was the way he had smelt, the way his eyes had an eerie glow that had caught her attention on the walk home at the end of a long day. No human smelt

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like that. That smell was pure underworld, pure demon.

She checked the alley to see if anyone had witnessed the impossible sight of a human leaping three storeys with apparent ease. Though the alley seemed clear, Kari still didn't feel safe enough to leap after him, so she climbed the heights using the windows as easy footholds. Humans with some demon blood from one of their ancestors were known as demokins, and had to be careful at the best of times. Showing you were so similar to the true demons did not help to ease the suspicions of the common people.

The view from the roof was stunning. The City's roofs were closely packed, with chimneys breaking into the sea of slate leading up to the Palace on the hill, with its shining dome dancing with moonlight in the darkness surrounding it. The demon was far ahead but Kari was faster; she ran, jumped and leapt over the wood and slate. The Palace loomed larger in the distance and Kari feared that she wouldn't make it in time to stop him before he entered the grounds. The demon stood before the walls of the palace, shed his clothes and

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disappeared to the human eye. *The bastard*, Kari thought as she caught up to him. There was no choice now. This guy wasn't just a Vasca, the most common demon to be found skulking around the seedier side of the City, but was a full blooded Azri, part of the ruling elite in the underworld and a dangerous assassin.

Kari climbed the wall easily. She would have to drop a few hints to the Palace guards about their patrols, this was not the first time she had followed a demon over the walls. She could sense the demon ahead, feel his presence. This time it was too close. She pulled the knife sheathed in her boot and followed him around the south wall, *still no guards, where the fuck were they?* She knew she was gaining on him now, even though she was restricted by her apparent normality. She rounded the corner and saw his claws gleam as they flashed before her face. Kari dived under them and kicked his leg out from beneath him on her way past. The Azri had changed to his stronger form whilst she had been catching up, thinking it would give him the advantage against a human. He was wrong about that. Faster than any human could move, Kari plunged the knife into the

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back of his neck, severing his spinal cord, but not quite killing him. She was no human.

He flopped to the ground, his body limp. Kari studied him, noticing the red hue of his skin, the black stripes coming down over his left shoulder, the long black tail that ended in a red tuft. He was more than the average assassin. She rolled him over, and watched his eyes swirling and his mouth spewing mewling, hissing noises; the demon equivalent of screams of anguish.

“Who sent you?” Kari asked in demon, their language a collection of grunts, growls and hisses.

“Drac-Shemal,” He choked out, flecking her with blood and spittle.

Shit. He was dying too quickly. “Why? Why did he send you?”

“Vendetta on family,” he spluttered a bit more and took a rasping shallow breath. “Broken oath... Prince betrayed....”

“Which prince? Tell me.” No use, the demon was dead. Just more questions, never any answers. And now one of the princes was dealing with demons.

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Earlier That Morning

“It says in here that the signs of a human murderer who takes more than one victim are ‘constant fantasists, often involving a sexual element, with a gradual escalation in the degree of severity in the offending acts,’” Constable Bailey quoted from the book in his hand. “Bailey, you just repeated what I already knew,” Corporal Kari True said, as she perused the left-over paperwork from her last case. She glanced at the cover of the book Bailey was reading: ‘The New Watch Officers Handbook.’ “Go on then, surprise me with a fact” she said sarcastically. The handbook was a useless standard textbook, in Kari’s opinion. The best bit of advice Kari was ever given was: “if they look like they are up to no good, or you just plain don’t like their face, take ‘em down, Constable True”. If only all constables could learn the ropes from Sergeant Bill Dawkins.

Bailey looked down at the book again. “It says that ‘another common indicator of an unstable and homicidally inclined mind is excessive masturbation’. How much do you think is classed as excessive?”

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“How much do you masturbate?” she asked back.

“A few times a day, why?” He looked worried now.

“Well I would definitely class that as excessive, what do you think, Plond?” Plond, the constable at the next desk, nodded his head solemnly. “What about you, Longtooth? Hills?” They both looked up. Longtooth with his shaggy mane of hair tied back was ruggedly handsome, in an unshaven way that Kari had once had some very disturbing dreams about. Hills observed with her penetratingly green eyes and a permanently cheery expression that was probably because she worked with Longtooth. Longtooth shook his head in an amused way and Hills suppressed a giggle.

Bailey’s lip started to quiver. *Newbies*, Kari thought. “Bailey, you are the most unlikely person to commit a series of horrific, sexual murders I have ever met, now if you want some good advice look up what it says on annoying a demokin.” Kari looked at Bailey and willed her eyes to change from blue to gold.

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“It says ‘to agitate a recognised demokin is considered suicide in most cultures, and if you survive you will be charged with antagonising a demokin and also attempted suicide. These are serious offences, as a provoked part-demon may rampage with little provocation.’” He looked up, terrified and starred at Kari. “Please don’t kill me.”

An avalanche of laughter started with the giggle Hills could no longer contain, swiftly picked up by Longtooth then the rest of the boys. Kari stood menacingly, her blonde hair matching the golden hue of her eyes, and growled, showing her slightly pointed teeth to best effect. She snapped at his nose, then couldn’t help but laugh at his terrified expression.

“Knock it off!” Chief Trollock stormed out of his office. He did not look happy. “Corporal True, get your skinny ass over here.”

Uh-oh. Not for the first time, Kari wondered if this was just a regular chewing out, new orders, or if the chief knew about her past. No one was smiling any more, she noticed, as she manoeuvred around the desks and bodies filling the room commonly known as the pit.

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She slowly opened the door and walked inside. She took in the papers on the desk first, mostly reports on the smuggling ring the Watch had discovered working to bring illegal demon goods into the city. They had found and booked more sellers than she could count, but gaining access to the ringleader was proving much more problematic. He was a powerful practitioner of magic and left traps and poisons wherever he went. The other problem they faced was the constant bureaucracy stopping their investigations.

The desk in the middle of the room dominated the office. Covered as it was in paperwork, Kari could make out the small dents made by various fists, some of them hers, some of nicks from various weapons, mostly not hers, and one or two claw marks, definitely all hers. She noticed the old filing cabinet, overflowing with documents, and the very uncomfortable guest chair, torn and ripped with a spring poking out just where the fleshy part of the left buttock would land.

“Have a seat,” he gestured to a chair, but Kari politely shook her head and remained at attention in front of his desk. She definitely

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knew now that he was in a bad mood, that chair was a form of punishment in itself and a clear indicator of his apparent favour. He didn't force the issue though so maybe he wasn't pissed off with her. "As you may be aware we are currently hunting the ringleader of a gang bringing damaging demon contraband into the City. The Lord Governor is currently unhappy with our progress in apprehending this miscreant, and because the Governor spent twenty minutes this morning telling me how it's my fault that the investigation is stalling because we don't have a magic user, I'm now making it your problem that we don't have a magic user. Report to the palace immediately, you're being re-assigned."

Kari left the small office in a state of shock. Re-assigned from demon investigation department to focus solely on bringing the ringleader down? And gods only knew what would be waiting for her at the palace. Maybe Governor Blackwood wanted to shout at her now, instead of the chief. She felt her claws extending, and had to force herself to calm down. Kari loved her job, but a demokin's anger was never far away and she had been

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known to throw desks across the pit upon leaving Trollock's office.

“She's not rubbing her left cheek, couldn't have been too bad,” Longtooth commented from across the room. Hills giggled, she did that far too much for Kari's liking. Her temper was back under control now, but only just, so her smile at the pair was more fangy canine than pretty white teeth.

The Palace dominated the hill at the centre of the City. It was formally called The Palace of Hope and Rejuvenation but that was a bit of a mouthful, so it was shortened. The name of the City was even worse: The City of Eternal Life, Lights and Songs. *Bloody elves had to make everything more complicated than it needed to be.* The City was once a bastion of the elves, before the retreat to the forests. That was a time so long before current living memory that many now thought it was a myth, not even knowing why it was just called the City. The houses near the Palace dated back to that time, and some still had the inscriptions referring to the founding. Of course they were in Elvish, a stupidly complicated language that was mostly made up of squiggles.

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The road sloped upward in a spiral leading to the Palace, the houses slowly turning from the vast human homes of the wealthy to the sprawling Elvish designs, home to the even wealthier. The elves must have thought this design was very pretty but if the City was ever attacked, it would be a bugger to defend, and Kari knew from personal experience that the roofs made an easy path to the Palace, with all the extensions and rooms added on since. *The problem with elves*, Kari thought, *was that they were too obsessed with the concept of beauty.* They rarely left the Eternal Forest in the west to visit the City, but when they came they usually demanded a guard to protect them from ‘the unclean advances of common humans’. Kari had turned up for her turn as a guard and the elf had nearly had an apoplexy. Apparently elves really didn’t like demokin, something about the smell offending their delicate, upturned noses. Kari had felt like ripping his throat out after some of the insults he had hurled but that would have given away her ability to understand and speak Elvish, always useful to have in reserve.

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It was only as she neared the Palace that she noticed the sheer quantity of people on the streets. The press of bodies was almost preventing her from reaching the main gates. Almost, but not quite. People seemed to sense her behind them, as they often did with a demokin and looked over their shoulder with an ancient reflex for self-preservation. They didn't always know what made them take a step to the left, or glance over their shoulder but they didn't do it when a normal human was behind them. Demons were dangerous and capricious, and nearly always violent sociopaths. Half-demons inherited this from their demon parent and nearly always rampaged in a path of uncontrollable anger that got them killed. It was only when you got down to the fourth and fifth generation of demokins that they started to be able to control those tempers. Typically loners who had a mean streak, many had gained a well-deserved bad reputation. That made it all the harder for those like Kari, who may have the ability to inflict great damage to someone but channelled that ability in constructive ways. Constructive for her, but destructive to criminals.

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Pushing her way to the gate she gestured at one of the guards, fortunately someone who she had been drinking with a few times, and was waved through.

“Come to piss the elves off, Kari? You know they don’t like demokins. Are you that desperate to start a fight?” Molbray remarked loudly, a young Palace guard with a pointy chin, pock marked face and a sharp tongue. If Kari didn’t know from previous experience that he pissed his drawers when threatened with a large set of teeth, she would have grabbed him by the throat to remind him why it was bad idea to irritate demokins. If she was meeting elves though, it wouldn’t do to turn up smelling of piss as well as demon, so this time she settled with just showing her fangs from a distance.

Elves! Fuck. Elves were bad news, and for crowds to be that deep there must have been more than one.

The Palace courtyard was busy with people hurrying to attend to the elves and the royals. No one gave her a second glance though, and the guards even gave her friendly waves now and then; she had worked closely with them to destroy a portal to the underworld

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that had turned up in one of the cellars. A shit-load of minor demons had come through that day before a royal magician had closed it. Kari was hailed as a hero that day, as she could feel where the invisible demons hid through her demokin senses. The respect from the Nobles didn't last long, and was hushed up for the general populace. Kari was a demokin, so she didn't get a medal like the other guards. The excuse was that she wasn't on duty, and so couldn't be officially honoured. But the guards remembered.

She was waved through the Palace to the upper levels, where a busy secretary told her to mind her manners and briefed her on proper etiquette when meeting elves. *'Cos the sun shines out of their fragrant arses*, she wanted to add when he had told her for the third time not to speak unless spoken to. *But why the hell am I here?* She wanted to scream, but knew it would do no good. The secretary probably had no idea and elves weren't forthcoming unless they wanted to be. They lived very long lives, and keeping secrets was in their nature.

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The secretary waved for her to follow him, and as they rounded the corner she saw the guards flanking the door at the end of the corridor. These were not the friendly Palace guards. Six elves stood to attention either side of the embellished door that led to a drawing room. As Kari walked past one actually went so far as to wrinkle his nose. For elves this was like shouting, ‘whoever farted needs to open the window now, before we suffocate!’ Kari glared at him, her eyes glowing now from real anger. She had to crane her neck to do it properly though, elves were stupidly tall in her eyes, and even the shortest was well over six feet. These guards were the pinnacle of Elvish physical perfection, or in their heads they were anyway, and were more like seven feet.

Kari had stopped growing at five foot two inches, which made a serious career in the Watch a lot harder. In her first few months criminals had actually laughed at her when she had told them to ‘Halt and desist’. It wasn’t until she had demonstrated her vastly superior speed and strength by throwing a man four times her own weight over her shoulder and carrying him to the Watch House with no

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discernible difficulty, that they stopped asking if she was part dwarf. In fact, very few people laughed at her petite size after that; usually those that did had a sincere wish to be punched in the face.

The elf slowly dipped his chin and met her gaze. “Corporal True, they are waiting for you,” the harassed secretary said. Begrudgingly, Kari tore her gaze away from the guard and walked through the doors.

Inside she found three more elves, several more secretaries, a man wearing the black and red robes of a royal magician, and a Prince. They all stopped and turned at her entrance. The range of expressions was vastly different from each individual when then they saw her. The elves displayed careful disgust and revulsion, the magician was curious, the secretaries decided to pay no attention to her and went back to whatever it was they did, and the Prince smiled. Kari decided to scowl at everyone, including the Prince. If he was involved in this, then there were definitely not going to be any smiles.

“Your Highness, is this your idea of a joke? How can this demokin assist us in our

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investigations?” said the tallest and apparently youngest (though that was difficult to tell with elves as they didn’t wrinkle, only their hair gave it away by going silvery). He looked Kari up and down, and she supposed that she didn’t look very intimidating at a glance. She was short, even for humans, and had blonde, shoulder length hair with a few chunks cut out of it which made it look scruffy and untidy. Her eyes were big and a bright sapphire blue, that turned orangey-gold (as they were at that moment) when she was angry. Her skin wasn’t very scary either, a creamy, pale colour with a few freckles across her nose due to the many hours she spent on patrol.

The elf’s eyes narrowed though, as he must have seen the glow behind her irises, the slight point to her ears, tinted blue, of all colours, and the fingernails that could easily be mistaken for claws. She could see his gaze reconsidering what she was. His nose wrinkled. *Fucking elves! And what gave this guy any excuse to judge her?*

She narrowed her eyes on him in return, and using skills she had honed after seven years serving the City, estimated his height at around

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six and a half feet, brown hair drawn back from his face in many tiny braids woven into a larger braid that reached down his back to his waist. His eyes were the colour of wet moss with silver flecks that you could call dew drops if you were of a poetic mind, but since Kari wasn't, she didn't. His face was handsome, in an elfy sort of way, like someone had taken an exquisitely beautiful human man and made it a little bit more slanted, pointy and angular. His long robe could probably conceal several weapons and if she were on the street she would probably have done a stop and search, on the grounds that she didn't like elves. Kari wasn't as bad as some officers: she had known people to be arrested for "having a shifty look about him", "eyeing up my young lady" and "being so fuck-ugly, he should wear a mask by law". Corporal Baxter Milton had been forced to release his brother from that last arrest, as well as the arrests for "not sharing when we were little", "being a little bastard" and "it's for your own bloody good".

The Prince turned to look at Kari, so she gave him the same considering glare. Prince Kevan was nearly six foot, with blonde hair and

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blue eyes, about twenty-nine years old and probably weighed one hundred and eighty pounds. He looked like he could handle himself in a fight - and Kari had seen him training a few times, so she knew he could. She also knew he had a very nice body under his formal clothing, one that she had once allowed herself to have a few fantasies about. But he was a Prince and she was demokin, and sometimes reality sucked.

He smiled at her again. “Corporal it has come to our attention that the Watch lacks a skilled magic user. This is Lord Elathir Aleanrae, you will be working with him from now on.”

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The elf snarled, as did Kari. “You said I would be working with a lead tracker from the Watch. as our investigations are connected. This half-breed, she is probably one of them!” He looked mildly annoyed.

The older elves looked disappointed. The one on the left, with the silver streaks above his ears and grey robes, cleared his throat. He didn’t look very happy. “What I think my colleague means to say is that perhaps working with a demokin, whilst hunting a dangerous felon with demonic connections, may involve a conflict of interest for the corporal.”

Kari understood about three words of that, but she knew it was insulting. She bared her teeth and snarled.

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“Kari, I mean, Corporal, I think he was asking if this would be difficult for you as you may have personal connections to hell through your racial heritage,” the Prince said diplomatically. “Lord Shalandalan, Lord Isililothina, Lord Aleanrae,” he nodded to the three elves, “let me assure you that the corporal has no familial connections or loyalties to the underworld and has been in service to the City for many years.”

Kari, confused and insulted, decided it was her turn to speak. “I have no loyalties to hell, demons or criminals and I’m insulted if you think I do.” She turned to the prince, “Your Highness, I don’t understand why I must work with elves when we have royal magicians in the City. Wouldn’t it make more sense to be assigned with one of them?”

Prince Kevan looked at her and smiled. Kari felt the smile right down to her toes and her eyes went back to being blue. No wonder he was more popular than his older and more arrogant brother. Prince Piron, the heir to the throne, was not a favourite, and he made difficult decisions about taxes and funding in the areas the King had allocated to his control.

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Currently Prince Piron controlled the budget for the Watch, and he had made some questionable cuts. Kari had thrown a desk through a window when she found out. The costs had then been taken out of her pay, which resulted in more breakages; she was still paying for a few of those items. Prince Kevan, on the other hand, was the “spare” and therefore lived the life of a Palace playboy. He stepped out with the most beautiful ladies in court, and, out of court, sponsored the arts and community projects and was generally very charming to everyone. Kari had once been assigned to escort him on a ride outside the City, and had actually enjoyed it.

“Corporal, the elves are also hunting a powerful mage who is importing demon contraband. This has now become a matter that needs co-operation between both peoples as the sources the elves have investigated have all pointed back to the City.” He turned to the elves, “Corporal True has also been investigating disappearances in the more deprived areas of the city, prostitutes and beggars usually, and we think they may be connected.” The Prince turned to look at Kari,

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and smiled again. “Corporal, your reports of missing people –“

“Someone actually reads my reports?” she interrupted. Kari was shocked anyone had even bothered to read her reports, since she had been investigating the disappearances of various drug addicts, low level dealers and prostitutes who she usually used for information, though her superiors had told her she was chasing shadows, as whores and addicts go missing every day.

“Yes, and they have coincided with large shipments of demonic materials making their way to the streets and into Elvish territory. This is why, Corporal, you will be working with Lord Aleanrae to discover the source of the shipments.”

*

“Then, after belittling the streets, people, market, constables and bull pen he then decided to set up his own office in the largest interrogation room. I swear, Bill, I would have ripped his throat out if he hadn’t decided to leave, in order to, and I quote, ‘review the meagre notes that have been made thus far’.”

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Bill swallowed a chuckle and decided to have another sip of his drink before asking, “So what was it you threw at him then? A chair? Or an entire desk this time?”

“Just a chair,” Kari grumbled, then grinned herself. Bill always had a way of calming her down. She didn’t know if it was blood speaking to blood, since he was demokin himself, or if it was just his easy-going manner; but things were never as bad as she first thought, when he was around. Easy-going was a phrase rarely associated with a demokin, as they were usually so highly-strung they went on a rampaging murder at the mildest slight.

“Seems like I picked the right day to have off then!” Bill Dawkins was not only Kari’s friend but her lieutenant and one of the best on the Watch.

At that moment her stomach growled loudly, and she did have the chagrin to look embarrassed. She had just eaten a large meal, but Rosie, Bill’s wife and mother to his six children, ladled some more of the stew onto her plate and then gave Kari a look. This particular look had been practised over the many years

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they had known each other and quite blatantly said “you’re not eating enough”.

“Kari, he is new and you’re going to have to make some allowances until he gets settled,” Bill said, always the diplomat.

“Allowances! He is the rudest, most ungrateful person I have ever met, and I grew up in hell!” She exclaimed.

Bill just sighed and glanced at his wife, who was trying really hard to smother a smile. They had heard this a hundred times before from Kari, something always firing up her temper. After having known her for ten years, he knew the difference between her being angry and her complaining. When she was complaining, you laughed as the chair or desk hit the wall and smashed into tiny pieces. When she was angry you ran very quickly away and that still wouldn’t be enough. He had only seen her angry once. He didn’t want to see it again.

“I don’t understand what elves have to do with demons anyway,” she said sulkily, her temper winding down now she was soothed by food and friends.

“The demons killed the heir to the Elvish throne, you know that.” He looked at her,

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seeing her clear blue eyes had lost all traces of gold.

“That was two hundred years ago, surely they can let it go now, it’s not like Princess Seclarul is going to come back from it.” Kari moved the last dumpling around on her plate, trying to absorb the last of the gravy.

“Princess Selaruil, Kari, and because of the attack the elves now have devoted two hundred years of study to anti-demon magic. They have some of the best anti-demon mages in the world and this elf they have assigned to us is apparently one of the best. He also has connections to the Elvish royals apparently and the high council so you probably should make some allowances.” It was his turn to give her the look now. This particular look was also a regular, and said “stop being so obstinate you wilful child, and do as I say”. “And before you ask, Captain Trollock and I were told yesterday about this, and I did some checking up on it today.”

“You knew? Of course you knew, you always know. Well, I will say my goodbyes and leave then,” she said and huffed out of the room.

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Dawkins heard noises and giggles upstairs and turned to his wife with a smile, “Do you think she’s getting better at controlling it? Her demon side? Something like this would have really upset her a few years ago.”

Rosie considered for a while then smiled and shook her head. Bill and Kari were two peas in a pod to her, with sometimes a brother-sister attitude and sometimes a father-daughter. She had known Kari since she was in her early teens; Bill had found her in street gang when he was newly married to Rosie and had adopted her into their little family.

“Remember when you first brought her home? Fresh from the street and still smelling of sulphur? She was so angry and I wondered how she would ever fit in with us, until I saw her with Lewis. He was bawling his eyes out and she calmed him right down just by being near him. That’s when I knew she was special, that the demon wasn’t all she was. It seems to get less every year.

“I just wished she still lived with us. I could keep a better eye on her then. She turns up here with fresh cuts and bruises every day, they can’t all be from patrolling on the beat! I think

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she's going out at night again." Rosie sighed, she didn't know what Kari did, but it definitely wasn't good. When Kari had lived with them and snuck out, Bill had tried to follow her, but she had a way with losing unwanted eyes. The most he had ever managed to find out was that she went where there were known demokin populations or portals sites. Of course where demons were you could also find every kind of vice and corruption known to man.

"If she was going to tell us about that she would have ten years ago when we took her in, and I don't think it's anything we should be worried about anyway. She's a demokin, it's different in each of us and I think she feels a need to go out and do whatever it is she does." Bill wrapped his arms around his wife and leant in to kiss her neck. "But with us around I don't think she feels it as much."

Kari came back in then, one child balanced on each hip with another four trailing after, Lewis, now taller than his adopted auntie at only ten years old, bringing up the rear. She kissed them all once more, and Bill and Rosie too, then left for her own rooms a few streets away.

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She wandered idly along the streets that were considered friendly by day and menacing by night. The City was a centre of commerce and as such, parts of it were ludicrously expensive even with a depressed housing market. This had been caused by the great banking crisis three years ago. It had turned out that ‘The Friendly Banke’ had in fact been run by unscrupulous humans who had lent money to some very irresponsible people who had no intention of returning it. They had then disappeared, thereby unable to return the vast amounts of now stolen cash. This had caused that bank to collapse and the monarchy to buy it out, raising taxes and making life miserable for the general populace. Kari always thought that if you named something as being friendly then you were asking to be swindled. It should really have been named the ‘Big Fucking Scary Banke’.

She lived on the edge of the cheap part, in a large house, but only two streets away from the small, squalid ones. It would have probably only cost an arm and a leg these days, instead of mortgaging her first-born like a few years ago. The problem was she didn’t have any

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money to spare, or not enough for a house anyway, though she probably *could* lay her hands on an arm and leg, if only that was an actual currency they would accept! Unfortunately, she didn't have much money, and most of that went on replacing bits of furniture she inevitably smashed anyway.

Something wasn't quite right, though.

The streets were empty, which meant the people round here could smell trouble. Since most of the locals were the underbelly of society they had an ear to the ground where trouble was concerned and knew when to stay in, no matter how many tricks they lost that night.

But wait, they weren't totally empty. There was one man walking slowing towards her. No, not towards her, actually, his eyes were focused on the Palace that rested like a giant glittering butterfly on the hill behind her. His eyes seemed to reflect the glowing light of it. They were still glinting when he glanced down to take a knife out of his pocket. Only one thing went through her mind in that moment. Demon.

*

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Present time.

Shit. Shit. The Prince and demons were dealing together. Which Prince, though, Piron or Kevan? *Please not Kevan.* Drac-Shemal was serious business, one of the top demons in hell, the Prince of Dragons. If he was involved someone was going to die, and Kari was not around all the time to keep demons from killing everyone in the Palace. Speaking of the Palace, she was smack bang leaning over a dead demon with her knife dripping blood, in the Queen's Courtyard without any sort of authorisation. This was not good.

For a human, carrying the body of a dead demon was difficult, as they were big and heavy. Some species of demons also had very strange ideas about personal hygiene so just going near them was a horrific experience. Kari was, however, a lot stronger than the average human, and the smell didn't really bother her (She had grown up in hell, which had a unique odour of sulphur, stale sweat, blood, decaying things and, oddly, cherries) so she lifted the dripping corpse up onto her shoulder and climbed back over the wall. Most people would not be familiar with the various ways to dispose

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of unwanted corpses but Kari, unfortunately, was quite experienced at this. Her favourite way was the river, though it was sometimes awkward if she bumped into a local criminal who was also disposing of a body. Usually they both pretended they hadn't seen each other and steered clear of trouble for a few weeks. Azri could be a bit of a problem, though, as they were noted if they turned up floating. So that left her with only one option.

Still moving silently through the back alleys she found what she was looking for, a night soil cart. The two men were busy collecting the refuse outside a disreputable bar which gave her enough time to throw the corpse on the back and make a dash for it. It quickly sank into the waste, so that only a few claws and tufts of hair were visible.

Kari wandered nonchalantly down the streets again back to her small set of rooms in Mrs Ling's house. Even though the moons were well and truly out, the small wrinkled woman was still awake and knitting in her rocking chair. Mrs Ling had rented out the top floor of her house for years, ever since her husband had died. The story she liked to tell was that he had

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been a pirate and had stolen her away from the faraway place she was born. In reality he had been a cloth merchant and retired to the city with his wife only to die two years later.

“Good evening, dear. How are Bill and Rosie?” She looked up and smiled, her face rearranging its wrinkles, some stretching and others compounding. After Kari’s mumbled reply, she went on to say, “Leave your shirt out and I will wash all that demon blood out in the morning.” When Kari’s eyes widened in surprise the little old lady just smiled again.

Since being mystified by both Mrs Ling’s kindness and apparent knowledge of exactly what Kari did was nothing new to her by now, Kari gave up and went to bed, though not before leaving her shirt out.

*

“So you’re just going to swan in here after I have done all the hard work, glance at my notes, and then command me about like your own personal slave?” Kari had had enough, and it was only half past nine in the morning. She had technically been on shift only half an hour, but had been summoned to the office at six that morning by the snobby elf sitting before her

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and then commanded to do all sorts of demeaning things. This was the last straw. She drew the line at bringing freshly brewed coffee for the elf.

“I am reviewing the information you have gathered thus far, and bad handwriting and poor hygiene aside, your notes seem to be quite thorough,” he replied haughtily, not even looking at her.

“What do you, mean bad hygiene? I wash every day!” She exclaimed, then thought about what he had said, which had in fact been a sort of compliment if in a back-handed elf way.

“If you wash every day, then you wouldn’t smell of sulphur,” He did look at her then, but not at her face, instead perusing the dented breast plate, slightly frayed sleeves of her padded surcoat and patched trousers of her uniform. He, however, was once again impeccably dressed, in a long blue robe that skimmed the floor. His hair had also been done in a practical yet incredibly intricate braid that reached down to his waist.

“Well at least I don’t look like I’d tumble over in a breeze.” *Yes, she thought, got you on this one.*

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“No, of all the things in this room Corporal, you are the least elegant,” he replied, not at all flustered or even seeming to care what she had said.

It took a moment for Kari to realise he had, yet again, insulted her. She was about to rip his face off with her claws when a thought occurred to her, “So, Elathir, why can’t you just track the demonic artefacts?” she said, trying to steer the conversation away from her personal department.

“Because every time we get close to discovering where the items or substances came from, everyone we wish to speak to suddenly disappears,” Elathir said through gritted teeth. His demeanour had changed from annoyed tolerance to downright malicious rage.

“So you failed,” Kari had found a nerve of her own to strum.

“It is not failure when everything you had vanishes and everyone who originally looked into it dies in one attack.” His eyes seemed to glaze over in memory. “Four elves went into that farmhouse, none returned, and the explosion killed the animals in every field for a half-mile radius. Another four to add to the list

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of murders by your kind.” The last part he said with genuine hatred, he didn’t even try to hide the expression of disgust on his face.

“What do you mean ‘my kind’?”

Before he could answer, six men were carrying something large and heavy on a blanket into the room. Immediately following them was the smell, which caught up quickly and then decided to greet everyone in the room simultaneously. The men seemed not to notice the chaos the smell was causing and placed the big, heavy blanket down in the middle of the room. When they moved back she managed to have a good look at the mess covering it.

It was an Azri, and it was covered in...

SHIT!