



KAT ON A HOT TIN AIRSHIP







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SAM STONE





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Prologue

The visitor was always there. Maggie could sense him, even from an early age. There would be a strange disquiet, a sense of gathering shadows that grew around one particular corner of the nursery. It didn't bother the small child in her early years, but later, as she grew, the visitor would feel closer and she felt eyes on her all the time. Sometimes she felt like a mouse caught in an open field being circled by an owl.

As Maggie became more self-aware, puberty approached. Changes happened in her body that she felt she had no control over. Nanny Simone sat her down one day and told her what was happening. Womanhood loomed on the horizon: a terrifying future of marriage suddenly became a real possibility. Nanny Simone moved her things out of the nursery, away from her younger sister, and into a new room. A grown-up bedroom for a growing-up girl.

There was a kind of excitement and relief in moving





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into the other room. This was a place of her own: no longer did she have to share any of her toys. She had a dressing table, a beautiful silver-framed mirror stood on top and Maggie watched herself as Nanny Simone brushed her long black hair one hundred times with a silver-handled brush. She could almost see the changes in her reflection. Her mouth had grown fuller. Her eyes were framed by brows that had a womanly curve. She also began to see Nanny Simone in a different light. The black nursemaid had always been there for her, but Maggie was recognising the differences between her and the house slave that had little to do with skin colour.

Her first night in her new, huge, double bed, alone in the room, was confusing and frightening. She had never slept alone before. But Nanny Simone said it was part of growing up: a relevant transition for a woman in her station.

‘Leave the light on, please Nanny,’ Maggie said. ‘It’s so dark in this room. So many dark corners.’

Nanny Simone chuckled. ‘You’ll get used to it, Miss Maggie.’

But she left a small oil lamp lit on the dressing table and Maggie stared at it with half-closed eyes trying to ignore the shadows that expanded either side of the room. Somehow the small light made the darkness worse.

As tiredness overwhelmed her, Maggie felt strangely homesick. She missed her sister, even though she was so much younger and often cried in the night, disturbing both of their sleep. She missed the familiar tick of the clock on the mantelpiece, the shapes of their toys scattered around the





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room. She felt an immense pressure inside her chest. A gripping fear of the unknown. Adulthood seemed to her to be the worst thing in the world. She fell into a restless sleep, anxiety wriggling around in the back of her subconscious.

Several nights after she had moved into her new room, Maggie became aware of the visitor. She usually sensed its presence only in the nursery and she was surprised and confused to experience this feeling here. She had begun to enjoy her new bed and surroundings. The novelty, instead of waning, had become increasingly exciting. The idea of maturity was now a fascinating prospect, no longer something to fear. She had begun to value her newfound privacy. Enjoying the ability to take herself away from everything, just to be alone in her room.

Her parents were treating her differently too. Instead of ignoring her presence they occasionally addressed her. Her mother had started to give her grown-up presents. Jewellery, French perfume and sweet-smelling soaps were luxuries she had begun to enjoy and appreciate. It made her feel special and different.

She was trying on some of the jewellery – an ornate necklace, way too big and fussy for her young throat, but it made Maggie feel as though she looked like a woman already. In the mirror her reflection turned left, then right, and Maggie examined the ostentatious jewels with interest as they caught the light from the lamps.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw something dark and blurred that seemed to rush across the room. She turned





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her head, looking over to the curtains that hung across the big window overlooking the back of the plantation and the beds of cotton. A figure stood there. Maggie was sure of it, and she knew who it was, could smell it in the air – like the smoke from extinguished candles.

She looked away quickly. Forcing her attention back to her own image. The visitor *must* be ignored. Only then would he – and yes, Maggie always thought it was male in essence, though she never knew why – would go away. Deep down she was sure that if she acknowledged his presence she would somehow grant him the right to be there. It was like a primitive knowledge, something she instinctively understood.

She took a deep breath, but her heart pounded. She feared the shadow more than any other imagined monster and she didn't know why. It was merely a shadow! Probably all just her imagination, like Nanny Simone had said when she had tried to tell her about 'him' some years ago.

'I wonder what Nanny Simone will think of these?' Maggie whispered as though by saying the imposing nanny's name she would scare the thing away.

Her voice broke the silence, and, she hoped, disturbed the spell of uncertainty that the visitor always brought with him. Maggie stood up and turned towards the door. But the shadow was oddly dense there too. She glanced back at the window. No darkness lurked there now. It had moved – she was sure of it! She gulped in another ragged breath. Fear of something nameless – some violence she didn't understand – came up into her throat like bile.





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Maggie wasn't sure what she should do. She wanted out of her room. She had to find Nanny Simone and tell her about this thing. But then, she recalled how the woman felt about what she called 'wandering imagination'. She knew she wouldn't believe her.

She sank down onto her new bed and closed her eyes. Willing the thing to go away and let her out. When she opened them again, the shadow was no longer there. Her eyes darted around the room, even as her heartbeat skipped. Then relief flooded her. It had gone again! Maybe it was some benign spirit that sometimes liked to watch the living? Maggie wasn't sure and was too afraid to tell anyone about it, for fear they would think she was going mad. Just like her Aunt Alice had all those years ago ...

She ran a hand over her forehead and noted it was trembling. Her body felt weak with anxiety and she no longer wanted to be alone.

She stood, hurried to the door to her room and opened it.

A brutal face, full of demonic darkness grinned at her from the other side.

Maggie screamed.





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New York – 1865

The creature had run from one shadow to another, as though avoiding daylight wherever it could. In outward appearance it seemed to be a middle-aged dock-worker. Wearing dusty, dark clothing that had seen better days. A flat cap, pulled down over his eyes, covered thinning hair. He was to the casual eye an ordinary man. Quite invisible to anyone of note.

I perhaps wouldn't have noticed him at all but for the bulky sack he carried. It looked too large and heavy for one person to bear, yet the man hefted it with little trouble. His bulging muscles barely registered the weight as he slung the straps over his back and hurried away towards the row of warehouses near the dock. I knew then that he wasn't what he appeared to be.

Keeping well back, and abandoning my plans to meet





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up with George Pepper and Martin Crewe in Battery Park, I followed.

There was a row of secure warehouses on the dock, and the nervous man hurried past a stack of empty crates that had been abandoned just outside the first structure. He paused, looking back, as though some supernatural sense told him he was being followed. I ducked down behind a mound of broken pieces of wood, and waited there until I was certain he had moved on.

By the time I looked around the heap, he had passed the first warehouse and was headed towards a doorway in the side of the second. I carried on then, pausing by the crates just as he had.

I placed my reticule on top of one of the crates, looked around, and then quickly unfastened the long skirt that would only delay me. After tripping over a dress and almost being ripped to shreds by a horde of demons out for blood, I'd learnt the hard way that female clothing wasn't conducive to my line of work. So, I wore a pair of tight breeches and calf-length flat-heeled boots underneath my formal clothing for these sort of occasions.

I opened my reticule and retrieved my weapons belt. On it hung a hand-held clockwork crossbow, the holster for a Crewe-Remington Laser, which when armed was connected to a wrist holster that contained a power pack that provided energy for the weapon when the sun was down, or when needed inside. The weapon itself stored a small amount of power but wasn't good for prolonged use without the pack.





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Martin Crewe had designed this gun for me, after his initial prototype worked so well some years before when the shop in which we worked, Tiffany & Co, was besieged by zombies. The failure of the previous model had always been its limitation to daylight use. Martin had harvested that power since. The weapon now lay inside the pack, and all I had to do to charge it was to leave it on the ledge by my window for a day. The sun was sucked inside by a small panel containing a module rigged with what Martin called 'electronic' wires. It somehow absorbed natural light and conducted it down the wires to operate the system. Martin called it a SunPan. Somehow this clever device captured and stored the energy and used it to power the gun. It meant that I could use it anywhere now, even in the darkest room.

I stuffed my brown velvet skirt behind the back of the crates, strapped the belt around my waist, the holster on my thigh, and the wrist holster around my right wrist. On my other thigh I added another holster. This one contained an adapted Colt 45. Instead of firing ordinary bullets the Colt now fired shells containing liquid nitrogen. The bullets were dangerous – guaranteed to explode on impact – fortunately my clever friend Martin had coated the bullets with a benign substance that kept the content cold and stable until they met with the warmer flesh of the target.

I pulled on a pair of leather gloves, removed the bullets from a metal cartridge and began to load them into the gun. It took six in all. And six were usually more than enough to deal with any enemy.





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I patted my ankle, making sure that the knife hidden there was still secure. It was made of steel and silver and encrusted with diamond shards. Hard. Deadly. And of course we had learnt in the last few years that silver and diamonds were poison to a lot of the things I fought. Yes, I was armed to the teeth. And weapons were something I had come to rely on in the fight against the Darkness, an unstoppable evil that used it's many minions to try to destroy the goodness in humanity.

I guess some would say the Darkness was the devil, and that the demons came from hell. Maybe they did, and I supposed that these things had been around for the whole history of mankind, which explained where the many superstitions of heaven and hell came from. In my case I had found hypocrisy in organised religion and, although I had every reason to believe that there was certainly an evil out there waiting in the dark ready to manipulate man, I was somewhat cynical about the idea of a 'god'. I had good reason to be. All I saw in our city was evil, and I was fighting every day to push it back. To stop it from consuming us all, plunging the world into a dark pit that would never be salvageable. That was why, if I saw even one of those things living among mankind, I killed it on sight.

The Darkness was an infection. It was a leech. It fed on our misery, making itself stronger.

And me? I'm Kat Lightfoot. Fighting the evil brought into the world by the Darkness was just an average day in New York. And so, I hid my reticule with the skirt behind the crates and slid along the wall, careful to remain unobserved.





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I reached the side door of the second warehouse, now armed and ready for the battle I would probably face.

Inside I quickly merged with the dark, hiding behind the nearest row of boxes. The warehouse was unusually dark and quiet. I could make out shapes of cartons, crates, pallets of goods, all stacked in neat rows. I had not expected it to be bustling, not if this thing were hiding out here. Humans tended to avoid them, even when they didn't know why. A natural dislike of the creatures ... or maybe we had all developed another sense since the first uprising, I wasn't sure. Most people, however, went about their daily life oblivious to the demons and monsters walking among them. I think I'd once been the same before my eyes were opened and New York nearly fell to the Darkness. That day we had been saved by our domestic cats, which had been carrying a venom in their claws that was deadly to the zombies and an effective cure for anyone newly-infected. The infection had spread too quickly, we were outnumbered. Without the cats we would have been doomed for certain.

Since then, though, the battle had continued, and Pepper, Martin and I were seemingly the only people who knew how to fight back when the things got greedy and came out of their hiding places again.

Something scurried across the aisle. I cocked the laser pistol, removed the safety, and switched on the battery. Then I looked down the sight, scanned the dark area and stepped out from behind the crates.

I took a few quiet steps, glanced down another cross-





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road of crates, then moved on. There was a strange chattering sound, like the faint twitter of crickets on a hot night. *Interesting.* I moved forward, with slow intent, checking the rows each time I reached an intersection. The layout reminded me of the Manhattan City grid, and I began to treat each section as a block that would take me closer to the target.

One step further on and the chattering, chirruping noise became louder. I glanced down the next aisle. Nothing there, but I was rapidly approaching an open space in the centre of the warehouse that could be dangerously exposed for me. As I edged towards the end of the rows, something moved across the bottom. I ducked back behind the nearest row of boxes. The chattering stopped. I held my breath, afraid I'd been heard, but after a moment the sound resumed, only this time I could also hear the scamper of feet ahead. It sounded like the scrape of thousands of insects, skittering across a wooden floor.

I peeped around the boxes, saw there was no-one there, then edged forward again. At the end of the row I looked into the gloom of the warehouse. Dull light filtered in from skylight windows above, casting the occasional spotlight glow down into the large, empty space. It was a dullish day out, perfect weather to encourage Darkness creatures to venture out. They were rarely ever found in bright sunlight.

I saw the one I had followed, placing his stolen wares down on the floor in the centre. From this distance it still appeared human, but experience had taught me that you couldn't take anyone at face value anymore. The sound of chirruping grew louder, and then I saw other things creep





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from the shadows, out towards the sack of stolen food the thing had brought them.

They were beings of the Darkness for sure. An ancient demon, three-legged, vile, with grey slime-covered skin, was moving faster than the rest towards the spoils. The smell of putrefaction wafted from his skin. I pressed my free hand over my nose to prevent the stench from making me gag. Another monster, disguised as an urchin, hobbled forward. Its flesh bulged with poison-filled boils. I felt a vague rush of sympathy for the urchin whose body had been stolen. He had probably been alive when they took him. But the demons cared nothing for human life, and the bodies they used were no longer fit for human souls to inhabit. The best I could do for this one now was kill the body, sending the demon straight back to whatever 'hell' it came from. Hopefully freeing the tortured human soul if it was still trapped inside: an issue of uncertainty that my colleagues and I had often debated upon.

I waited for all of the creatures to gather, to be sure that none was waiting in the shadows.

The chirruping sound picked up, and I realised with surprise that this was some form of private language they had. The demons I had conversed with usually spoke in English before I killed them. I guess it hadn't occurred to me until now that this was all part of the mimicking process.

The dock-worker demon bent down and opened the large bag it had brought. There were some 15 or 20 of them gathered now, and you have to pick your battles carefully. I was beginning to think that retreat would be the best course of





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action this time. All well and good taking one or two down, but this seemed too many. I was alone, possibly didn't have enough weaponry to finish them all, and it was likely that the creatures would turn nasty as soon as one of them was destroyed. I looked from one to the other, trying to work out exactly what they were. You see, not all monsters are the same. Some are demons, others zombies, some are shades. There are nephilims, and phantoms. All carnivorous in their own way ... These appeared to be ... *skinners* ... which meant that the package would contain ...

A small cry emerged from the sack. I had been right! There was a baby inside and it was screaming its lungs out, while a mother somewhere was undoubtedly mourning the loss of her child.

The condition of the bodies made more sense now. The demons were losing their grip on them, the human tissue was rejecting the evil inside – hence the boils, lesions and smell of rot. They could no longer pass as human. This was a desperate time for them.

I had to act. If I left now the child would be killed, its lifeforce used to rejuvenate the bodies the skinners had stolen and were wearing like old clothes. These warped and twisted creatures were hoping to save their pelts. To mend them, like crudely stitched rags, so that they could once again merge with the populace. They would appear as beggars, urchins, sweeps, factory and dock-workers. The type of humans that people treated as invisible and would barely spend time scrutinising. And they would do this by skinning the flesh from a newborn, each consuming a piece: the only way to restore this kind





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of demon's power. Or so it was rumoured. I didn't know for certain, because I had never come across one before. I just recalled hearing about them from a water demon I despatched some time ago.

We had coerced some truths out of the thing before we killed it. He had told us about nephilims, water nymphs – something sailors called sirens – and skimmers.

Skimmers *were* different from the usual demons and cross-breeds, because they borrowed bodies to live in. At the time I hadn't believed him when he'd described the awful ritual they performed to sustain themselves. I had thought the demon had been lying to save his own life, but obviously he had told the truth.

The group drew closer to their meal, and now I saw vicious claws and fanged teeth as the glamour that hid their true nature dropped, warping the stolen bodies into animalistic changelings. I had to do something! It was foolhardy, but I would act regardless: I couldn't stand here and let the child die.

'Back away from the kid,' I said, stepping out from behind my hiding place.

The creatures rounded on me immediately. Gaping maws snapped vicious, shark-like teeth. Black eyes took in my weapons, and the one I had followed – possibly their leader – began to laugh in that awful chirruping way.

'You are no match for us, girl!' Its voice was a breathy hiss. 'But we know of you. You and your companions ...'

Its face, though still mostly human, was showing signs of wear and tear. Soon none of them would be able to blend in, so





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they were all as desperate as they could be. And desperate meant extremely dangerous when survival was the ultimate prize.

I was pointing the gun on instinct. Taking this one out first might help, but I didn't know what type of weapon would work best.

'I'm not alone,' I bluffed, hoping they really did know of me and my companions. 'This whole place is surrounded.'

The creatures looked around nervously. The chittering started up again and a furious row seemed to take place between the dock-worker demon and the urchin with the pustules.

The urchin looked over at me, assessing my nerves to see if I was bluffing. But I'd learnt to keep my poker face in place some years ago. And I *always* had a steady hand, even though I felt that familiar rush of fear and excitement that normally came before a fight.

'We are only trying to survive ...' said the urchin.

Its face now looked cherubic, pustules hidden, I knew, behind a wall of their hypnotic glamour. He was an adorable child. I could see why the demon had chosen this body to inhabit. He could hide safely inside, while the unsuspecting mortals around him patted his innocent-looking head and fed him crumbs from their own tables.

I blinked away the glamour spell with little hesitation. That kind of simple magic required the person to be complicit in receiving it. I wasn't, and therefore, could not be fooled. The face of the urchin returned to the bloated plague-covered mass it had been.

'Nice try kid, or whatever you are. I'm not taken in





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by parlour tricks. Now back away from the baby. I won't ask nicely again.'

The urchin glanced back at the other skimmers and barked a chattering order. They backed away.

'Not too far. I want you all to stay where I can see you,' I warned.

'But why do you even care?' said the urchin. 'If we take this one life, then 20 others will be spared.'

'What are you talking about?'

'We have to survive, just as you do. These bodies are deteriorating. We need to repair them, or take new ones. One life ... this baby ... will spare many others.'

'I'm not letting you eat that child, skimmer,' I warned.

There was a collective gasp as the creatures reacted to the knowledge I held about them.

'You think you *know* what we are?' said the urchin.

And yes he was beginning to annoy me in the way most arrogant demons always do.

'I know what you are, and how you obtained those bodies. Back away from the child or I'm going to ensure that that body won't be any use to any of you anymore.'

The urchin feigned backing away as I knew he would. He turned as though to go, then dived back towards the crying child. I fired the laser gun, severing the clawed hand that reached out for the baby's delicate flesh.

The skimmer-urchin gave a satisfying scream and fell back onto the floor, clutching his maimed arm. It was good to know that they would feel pain, but I had little time to think about





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it as the other skimmers used the distraction to sink back into the shadows and disappear, leaving the urchin and the dock-worker. Both of whom were unwilling to abandon their prize.

I now had a dilemma. I could kill the two remaining and try to take the baby, but I was certain that the other skimmers were circling around the warehouse in an attempt to cut off my exit.

I had no time to waste. I blasted the laser into the face of the urchin, which exploded in a mass of blood, pus, skull and brain. I then arched the beam over to the rapidly retreating dock-worker and caught him as he reached the edge of darkness. The laser lit up the corner, exploding into his back, sending him smashing face first into a pile of crates. The boxes tumbled and scattered with the force of the bulky, now dead, body that crashed into them. I heard the chattering spreading all around me. I could wait for them to come at me, one at a time, while protecting the child, or I could take my chances and try to get back to the door I had entered.

I hurried to the sack, pushed aside the severed hand of the urchin and lifted the baby out of the middle. The sack was filled with all kinds of spoils – tools, food, clothing – hence the bulk of it. The baby was wrapped in a thin blanket. He looked bruised but mostly unharmed. I lifted him up and tucked him in my left arm, while scanning the area for possible attack.

A burst of chittering filled the air. I stood up, gun ready, and made my way cautiously back to the stack of crates, and the shadows that hid my waiting foe.

Once in my arms the child hushed its constant sobbing,





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as though he knew he was safe for now. I passed the first aisle without incident, but rushed onwards because now I felt speed was more essential than stealth.

A skinner burst out from behind a pallet containing canned food. It caught my leather-gloved hand, severed the connection to the power pack and knocked the laser clear of my fingers. I heard the gun fall to the floor, skidding off somewhere to the left. I ducked as the skinner swung its clawed fingers at my head, then holding tight to the baby, I dived between two rows of crates. I switched arms, pulling out the Colt 45, grateful that I'd had the foresight to load it before entering the warehouse. The skinner was soon behind me and I pulled the gun up to face him, just as a second skinner dived down into the gap between us from the crates above. The gun went off into the chest of the nearest demon, blasting a hole through him. The skinner's body exploded backwards, taking out the demon behind him as the blast burst from the back of the first, into the chest of the second. The carcasses crashed back into the pallet of tin cans.

The air was rank with the smell of burnt demon and rot as the bodies, sustained long beyond their natural death, now rapidly fell into total decay.

The baby was crying loudly again: I made no effort to hush it. There wasn't any point; the skimmers knew exactly where we were.

I weaved through the crates, as cautious as was possible in the circumstances. All I needed to do was get outside: the skimmers were unlikely to follow in their current condition.





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I saw the door, light filtered in around the edges as it was slightly ajar. Maybe the row had raised the alarm and someone else had come in? I hoped not. Another civilian to save would be an inconvenience. I paused. It could be a trap, of course. The skimmers may have opened the door to encourage me to rush forward, taking less care, while they gathered at the sides waiting to pick me off.

The baby had quieted. I glanced down at him, noted with surprise that he had fallen asleep. Then I felt the heavy breath of a demon standing right behind me. I threw myself aside, smashing into a pile of empty crates, that tumbled over with the impact – less dramatic than the earlier fall of full crates as the urchin and dock-worker died, but no less useful because as I knocked over the crates, I immediately ducked away to the other side of the aisle. By that time the clumsy skimmer had thrown itself forward, and now it fell down onto the floor at my feet. I pulled the trigger of the gun and blew the bastard back to hell. It was very cathartic.

I ran for the door as it opened wide before me. Daylight poured in, blinding me momentarily before my eyes could adjust from the gloom. A shape loomed, outlined by the light, shadow large. It lifted something it was carrying and swung. Then I noticed that a skimmer had been running almost parallel to me down the aisle to my right. The creature fell at my feet, head crushed by the handle on a very familiar cane ... a cat's head made from silver ...

George Pepper pulled out the hidden sword from inside the cane and pierced the prone body for good measure.





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‘When I heard the explosions I knew you were in trouble,’ Pepper said as he pulled me and the baby out of the warehouse.

He slammed the door shut as a skinner crashed against it in a last-ditch attempt to snatch back the prize. Then Pepper wedged a piece of shattered crate into the handle to prevent it being opened from inside.





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‘We have to blow this place,’ I said.

‘Lucky for you I have this then,’ said Pepper, showing me a stick of dynamite. He had several more sticks in a bag by his feet.

‘I’m blessed to have such a useful friend,’ I said.

‘What’s with the kid?’ Pepper asked.

‘Skinners ...’

‘Ah,’ said Pepper, catching on immediately to the importance of the devastation needed.

The door heaved behind us. Pepper leaned on it.

‘Just one problem,’ I said. ‘I don’t think that dynamite will be enough to bring this place down.’

Pepper looked down at the pack and nodded.

‘But I have something inside my reticule that could boost it.’

I hurried back to my hiding place, pulled free the





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reticule, and wrapped the baby in my skirt to cushion him from the sounds of explosion that would soon occur if the plan I was formulating worked out well. I then laid him inside one of the open crates.

‘You should be safe here for the time being,’ I said. The baby slept on as though he knew now he was completely safe. I hoped for his sake that the door held out until we could prepare the dynamite.

I took my reticule back to the doorway. Then we began the process of pressing the nitrogen bullets into the sticks.

‘Good thinking,’ Pepper said.

‘The dangerous part will be lighting them, opening this door and throwing them inside without allowing the skimmers to escape.’

‘I have an idea,’ Pepper said.

Pepper’s idea sounded insane and dangerous. He planned to climb up on the roof, enter the warehouse through the skylight windows, and then to distract the skimmers long enough to allow me to enter by the door. Then between us we would place the bombs at various points in the warehouse. Once the dynamite was lit though, we didn’t have much time to get out again. It would rely on us both making our way back to the door, and out again before the whole thing blew.

‘I can’t imagine you climbing up onto the roof with your bad leg,’ I pointed out. ‘I’ll have to do it. But instead of going inside, why don’t we just drop the bombs through the skylights?’

‘It won’t be as accurate, or as devastating to the structure





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as placing them directly under the support beams will be.

Pepper drew a map in the dirt with the tip of his sword.

‘This is where the bombs need to be placed,’ he said.

Indicating where he thought the support walls and beams of the building were most likely to be. ‘From what you say, they die fairly easily. Bringing the structure down on their heads might just be enough to finish the whole lot of them.’

‘Their weakness is the human bodies they’ve decided to live in. Bodies that can still be injured or killed and I’ve discovered that they feel pain. Which is always a bonus.’

We argued for a moment about who would take the chance on entering and as always I won. Pepper couldn’t run as fast as I could, due to his injury, and I already knew the layout of the warehouse.

‘Keep them by the door until I’ve placed the bombs,’ I said.

I cut down some of the fuses on the dynamite, and lengthened those on the others. Then I removed a further roll of fuse that was in my reticule, tying it to my belt.

‘When you hear the first commotion, get the door freed but leave it closed. I’ll yell when I’m near.’

I made my way silently across the roof. I was carrying a sack containing the bombs, and had a long length of rope coiled over my shoulder. I glanced down the first skylight and noted a cluster of skinnners pounding on the door. We had already made sure that they couldn’t escape by any other route. Fortunately the huge warehouse doors overlooking the dock were held together by a heavy chain to protect the contents





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from potential thieves. The skimmers must have known this, as they had made no attempt to leave this way. The only way out was through the side door, and Pepper had this blocked.

I walked to the back of the warehouse, stopping at points to look down. I could see the clearing and the bodies of the dock-worker and urchin still there along with the carnage I'd left behind after exploding the other skimmers. None of them had attempted to move the decaying bodies, which meant that they were all too focused on their own survival now. Making this particularly dangerous for Pepper and I.

I opened the skylight closest to the back of the warehouse. There was a beam crossing the centre of the building, just below the window. I lowered myself in and onto it. Then tied the rope around the beam, quietly lowering it down into the warehouse. I squinted down into the dark. It looked long enough, but I wasn't sure if it reached the bottom. I would just have to take the chance.

I slid onto the rope, wrapping one leg around it for extra support, then shimmied downwards as silently as possible.

I heard the chittering of the skimmers, but it sounded far away. As I reached the end of the rope, I realised it didn't quite stretch down as far as I would have liked. I looked down. It was maybe ten feet from the ground, but I had jumped down further distances in the past with only a few scrapes. The problem here of course would be the noise I'd make. I wasn't ready to attract attention just yet. I needed to do that on my terms when the first bombs were in place.

I slid down the rope as far as possible, then let go,





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landing with a soft thud, and a roll, to try and prevent injury and noise. As I landed the skinner chatter peaked and grew louder. I heard Pepper banging on the door to aggravate them, and blessed his timing. My slight thump went unnoticed and I hurried off towards the first corner and quickly placed the first bomb.

After that, moving around the warehouse was easy. I kept low, placed the bombs, joining them all to the long fuse that I would light as soon as the skimmers became aware of my presence.

I retraced my steps from earlier, heading back towards the door, wire falling between the aisles of crates, in a way I hoped the skimmers wouldn't notice until it was too late. Then I found myself back near the pallet of tin cans. I picked one up, weighing it in my hand.

The time had come to draw them away from the door. I threw the can over the crates to one of the corners furthest away from me, and nowhere near any of the bombs.

The skinner chatter halted. I threw another can. Then sank back behind the pallet and waited as two skimmers hurried past towards the area I had thrown the cans. I lit the fuse and moved away, but first loaded a few more cans into the now almost empty sack. I had one more bomb to place near the door, and for that the skimmers would all have to be drawn away. I began tossing the cans in various directions away from myself. Then circled the area that the skimmers had previously searched which was easy because they made no attempt to hide themselves. I reached the door to find that two of the





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creatures remained.

I was hoping that Pepper had silently removed the cane from the handle and I would be able to make a quick exit, but the two skinners were blocking my way. I had the Colt 45, but the blasts from the bullets would most likely bring the rest of the creatures running back. That was the last thing I needed. I made my way back towards the stack of cans, and as I refilled the sack two skinners turned the corner and headed towards the pallet. I ducked down before they saw me, then crawled across the row towards another aisle. My hand fell on something cold. It was the barrel of a gun. My Crewe-Remington Laser was once more in my hands. I was no longer wearing the battery pack, thinking the gun lost, but I hoped that it still had enough energy to work one final time for me.

I hurried back towards the door, weaving in and out of the rows to avoid contact with the searching monsters. Time was running out. The fuse was lit and this whole place was due to go up any second.

As I reached the door, the first explosion went off at the back of the warehouse. The building shook and the two skinners blocking my exit looked around surprised.

'Pepper, open the door!' I yelled as I barrelled out from behind the crates and ran full pelt towards the creatures. I aimed the laser and pulled the trigger, a burst of light poured from the gun, striking at the eyes of one of the skinners. He fell aside, blinded and screaming. The other threw himself sideways away from the door as I rushed forward.

I lit the final bomb as I ran. Its fuse was so short I knew





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I would just have time to drop it and run but so far Pepper hadn't opened the door. I glanced over my shoulder. More than six of the skimmers were making their way back towards me. I ran full pelt, dropped the bomb and tugged the door just as Pepper opened it.

I fell out, tumbling to my knees on the floor. Pepper slammed the door shut, grabbed my arm and lifted me up. Though winded, I ran as fast as my legs could carry me, and was astounded as Pepper half-hobbled, half-ran, refusing to let his bad leg hold us up. We reached the stack of empty crates where I had hidden the baby and I scooped him up, ducking down as the warehouse went up in a series of explosions.

Pepper, ever the gentleman, threw himself over the baby and I, shielding us from a spray of glass that rained down from the roof windows.

I heard the yawn and groan as the timber beams gave in and the old building stumbled and fell as the support collapsed in on itself.

Pepper jumped up with more agility than he should have, and rushed back to the building to ensure that none of the skimmers had escaped.

I looked down at the little baby in my arms and I could have sworn he was smiling in his sleep.



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3

New Orleans: A Few Months Later

The train rattled along the tracks. Steam and smoke blew past the window of our first class carriage. Mother had been pleased that we were able to afford one, and not have to mix with the ‘rabble’ outside. We were on the final leg of the journey after travelling for three days, with two overnight stops.

‘How much longer?’ my kid sister Sally whined. She was thirteen and had become even more difficult recently.

‘We’re almost there,’ Mother said. ‘Have a lemon drop ...’

Mother had been feeding her candy for the last hour and Pepper had been trying his best to entertain her by performing a few card tricks he had learnt in his army days. I was impressed with him because it was obvious that the journey was taking its toll, and his old war wound was causing him discomfort.



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‘Why don’t we stretch our legs a little?’ I suggested.

‘That’s a great idea,’ Pepper said. He winced as he stood, but he followed me, reticule and all, out into the train corridor.

‘I propose we walk down to the dining car and back ...’ I said. ‘That should help relieve some of the fatigue.’

It had been a trying journey for us all, especially as Mother wasn’t too impressed that George Pepper had insisted on coming with us, and I had done little to discourage him.

‘Don’t be long, dear,’ Mother said as Pepper turned to close the door behind us.

Mother didn’t quite understand how Pepper and I could spend so much time together yet have no romantic interest in each other. Mother, of course, hadn’t seen the things that we had seen. She saw that Pepper was an attractive man, with his pale blond hair and bright blue eyes. His soldier’s physique and sharp wit would probably appeal to most women. But he and Martin were my trusted friends and colleagues in a way that Mother couldn’t relate to and thought was inappropriate.

I didn’t want her to know the full facts of how I now earned my living even though I think she knew on a subconscious level. She quite literally turned a blind eye when I left the house dressed as a man. Breeches were so much more practical than a wide skirt when you were chasing down a banshee, or scaring off a demon dressed as a little boy. And she never questioned the frequent visits I made to the police station. Nor the odd telegraphs I received from Inspector Stark asking me for urgent assistance. On those occasions, I would rush upstairs, change, arm up, and then call next door





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for Pepper. The two of us would hail a cab and disappear for hours, often returning dirty, bedraggled and with a pouch full of money.

Even so, being funded by the police to rid the city of these pests would only remain lucrative while the demons were around. Although I sometimes wished that we had seen the last of them, and I could take a 'normal' job to support Mother and Sally, I knew that I would miss the action and adrenaline that had become so important to my survival. Somehow I doubted that I would be able to work and live in a way that would be deemed 'normal' now.

Pepper and I moved along the narrow corridor towards the buffet car. As we walked his limp became less pronounced and he stopped wincing and I realised that stretching out was helping him a great deal. His injury had improved a lot over the last few years, and although he would never walk completely without a hobble, he had certainly improved his ability to run.

We opened the door and stepped out onto the short bridge between the cars. The rush of air from the moving train felt wonderful. The closer we got to New Orleans, the more the temperature rose. It was late October and so the continued heat was something of a surprise to me. I held onto the railing and looked out over the land either side of the track, breathing in the warm air, feeling the rush of the wind, while Pepper stared out of the other side.

'Almost there,' I said, a feeling of anticipation fuelling the strange enthusiasm I felt for the trip.

'This will be a well earned rest for us all,' Pepper said.





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‘Yes,’ I nodded. ‘I know.’

The door to the buffet car opened and a striking young man came out. I leaned back against the rail as he went to pass me. Then his eyes met mine and I gasped. They were a bright amber in colour and I had only ever seen eyes like this once before: he was nephilim.

‘Excuse me, Miss’ he said politely.

I was too surprised to react, and it was too public a place to despatch the creature without drawing attention to ourselves.

He frowned a little as he noticed my scrutiny. He was dressed as any Southern gentleman might be. Smart breeches in grey, a pristine white shirt under a long black jacket, and a wide-brimmed hat to shade his face from the sun.

‘Are you alright?’ he drawled, running his finger over his handle-bar moustache as though he felt that this might be the cause of my shocked expression.

I wasn’t all right. I felt *strange*. A previous neph that I had encountered had told me things about the underworld in an attempt to save his life. He had also told me that not all nephs knew what they were. That didn’t mean they weren’t evil though. I wondered if this neph knew his identity, or whether he truly believed he was the Southern gentleman he appeared to be.

‘Kat?’ said Pepper behind the neph.

The man turned. ‘Good day, Sir,’ he said. ‘Your lady seems to be feeling a little ...’

Pepper drew in a breath as he caught sight of the man’s eyes.





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‘Let me introduce myself. I’m Orlando Pollitt.’ The nephew held out his hand to Pepper. ‘And believe me I’m used to that reaction to my eyes, so no need to be embarrassed.’

Pepper shook Pollitt’s hand warily while I regained my senses. I had been momentarily lost in the beauty of his eyes, especially the kindness that seemed to be in them. I was intrigued and my natural instinct to maim and kill anything remotely linked to the Darkness was completely numbed.

‘Pollitt ...?’ I stammered. ‘Are you any relation to Margaret Pollitt?’

‘Why yes ... that’s my sister,’ Orlando said.

Pepper and I exchanged glances.

‘I’m Katherine Lightfoot,’ I said, quickly regaining my composure. ‘And this is my colleague, Mr George Pepper. Your sister married my brother, Henry, and we are travelling to visit and take part in the festivities.’

Maybe Orlando had no clue that he was a cross-breed. He had been brought up, I hoped, in a normal family environment. Although I wouldn’t know that until I reached the plantation and took stock of the Pollitts. You see nephilims aren’t just demons. They are the result of an unholy coupling, of a demon male with a human female, which meant that Orlando’s mother had been seduced by one. She may not even know that her child was different. But all of this raised the question of the wife my brother had chosen. Could it be that my brother Henry had married the offspring of a demon?

‘Why, that’s wonderful!’ Orlando said. ‘I didn’t realise that Henry Lightfoot had such a darling lady for a sister. This





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is going to be so much more fun that I had ever imagined it would be. Welcome to New Orleans, Miss Lightfoot, Mr Pepper. It's great to have you folks here.'

I was tired from the journey and Mother and Sally's impatience, but it wasn't like me to be so confused by a demon. Demon blood meant 'evil' as far as I was concerned, but I wasn't getting Darkness vibes from Orlando. My reaction to him was quite the reverse and I was sure that Pepper was feeling the same. And he really was rather lovely to look at. He looked angelic, not demonic. But then I recalled the urchin in the warehouse. Perhaps Orlando was using some form of glamour? I blinked several times, but my vision didn't alter, in fact the more I looked at him, the more attractive he appeared to be. Even so, I could see no evidence at all of magic.

'You must come and meet my mother and sister,' I found myself saying.

I ignored the frown that appeared on Pepper's brow as I led Orlando back to our car. But I knew he didn't know how to react to Orlando either. Plus, what else was I going to do? I couldn't just kill the brother of Henry's new wife, in public, for no apparent reason. Particularly when he seemed so normal.

A few minutes later, soon after the introductions were made, the train pulled into the station.

As we climbed from the carriage, Orlando was greeted by a tall black man.

'Why, Mister Orlando! You back. We weren't expecting you for a day or two.'

'I suspect you're here to collect these good folks then,





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Isaac?’ said Orlando.

‘Mrs Lightfoot?’ Isaac said nodding. ‘Oh yes, Sir. Big Daddy and Big Momma is looking forward to meeting them ...’

‘This is incredible,’ said Mother as Orlando sent Isaac to organise two carriages. I could see that all of her concerns about the trip were being laid to rest by the charm Orlando exuded. Both she and Sally were calmer than they had been since the start of the journey, or indeed since we received the letter telling us of Henry’s elopement.

We climbed into an open top carriage that Isaac brought to take us all to the Pollitt Plantation, while our luggage was loaded onto a hired cart.

‘Let me take that bag for you, Miss Katherine,’ said Orlando.

‘That’s fine, I prefer to carry this one myself,’ I said.

Orlando looked confused, but allowed me to hold onto my carpet bag without further comment. Demons were good at pretending to be people, and although Orlando appeared to be genuinely unaware of his heritage, I wasn’t going to take any chances with Mother and Sally’s lives.

‘Kat!’ said Sally rudely as she climbed up into the carriage. ‘What’s with his eyes?’

The carriage afforded us a cool breeze, and Orlando was charming Mother almost as much as Sally, who had become uncharacteristically shy around him.

Orlando had seated me in the back, facing our journey and had placed Mother and Sally opposite. Then he sat down





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beside me, leaving Pepper no choice but to sit next to Mother. He was nearest the carriage down on my right and so directly opposite me. I had placed the carpet bag down at my feet between us for ease of access.

‘What a charming family you have,’ Orlando said to Mother. ‘And two lovely daughters ...’ at which Sally blushed redder than I had ever seen her. ‘But I don’t understand who ...?’

‘Oh, Pepper? He is my friend,’ I said.

Orlando’s eyes scrutinised us both as Mother looked away embarrassed. She would of course find Pepper very difficult to explain this week. Unlike if we were betrothed. But I’d had too many arguments with her, trying to explain that this was unlikely to ever happen.

‘So you two are ...?’ Orlando said.

‘Good heavens no!’ I said. ‘We are *just* friends. Pepper is practically family though ...’

‘Why, that’s mighty interesting to hear ...’ Orlando said and his smile implied that he was very pleased indeed.

It was now my turn to blush. I looked away, straight into the eyes of Pepper. He appeared pale compared to the darker, sun-seared skin of Orlando. His blue eyes were confused, hurt. It made me feel strange inside. There was a dull ache in my stomach at the thought that I had somehow upset him. Pepper was my dearest friend. He had saved my life on more occasions than I could recall. I mulled over what had been said, and couldn’t figure out what might have upset him. Maybe it was just this close proximity to the nephilim? It certainly confused and disturbed me.





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At that moment the carriage went over a bump and I was jostled, and almost thrown off my seat. Orlando caught me around the waist and held me way longer than was appropriate. I pulled away and sat back more securely in the seat. When I was resettled I looked across at Mother and noticed she was smiling very broadly at Orlando. There was an interesting expression on her face that I couldn't read. She liked him. He *was* charming. And I could feel a strange tingling warmth around my waist where his hands had been.

'Miss Katherine,' Orlando said. 'If you just look over this way you can see my family's plantation. It's a few miles away yet, but we are now on Pollitt land.'

He leaned closer, pointing towards a huge white building on the horizon. I could smell his masculine cologne.

'Stunning!' I said.

'Yes,' Orlando breathed, and I felt that same blush blooming once more on my cheeks as I glanced back and found he was looking at me, and not the house on the horizon. Orlando made me feel peculiar. His interest both flattered and embarrassed me. It made me feel somewhat like an ordinary girl, and not the demon-slayer that I knew I was.

A short way up we came across a row of huts, each fronted by a short porch. There were several black men busily working around the huts. One was up a ladder and was hammering a wooden fascia back in place, while another man was painting the front walls with a dark wood stain.

'What's this?' asked Mother.

'These are the workers' homes,' said Orlando. 'Big





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Daddy has given them leave to make some improvements.’

‘They aren’t slaves are they?’ blurted Sally.

‘Miss Sally,’ said Orlando. ‘Everyone on Pollitt land is a free man or woman. We were already making changes here, long before the war. Isn’t that right Isaac?’

Isaac was sat in the front of the carriage, next to the driver and he turned in his seat to look back at us.

‘Yes Sir, Mister Orlando. That’s why there’s so many people still here working. Pollitt Plantation has housed freed-slaves for many years. We work here for a living, like white folks do.’

‘That’s really admirable ...’ Pepper said, breaking the silence he had maintained so far.

‘Why thank you Mr Pepper,’ said Orlando. ‘Fortunately our radical thinking made things easier for us on Pollitt Plantation than most folks in these parts. Which is why my Momma and Daddy are so happy to welcome y’all and to have such a kind man marry into the family.’

‘Henry is kind,’ I said. ‘I’m looking forward to seeing him. We haven’t seen him now for several years, even though he has always maintained contact by letter.’

The carriage continued on, but inside I was wondering what this visit might bring.

