

# Darkness Fell and the Demon's Sceptre

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Two-Chapter Sample

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To Paul, for all his invaluable help and support, as always; you're the best. Also, of course, to mum, for her help, words and great feedback; and to all my friends, particularly Simon, Sue, Jed and John, whose encouragement was much needed and gratefully received.

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## Chapter One – The Coven

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South London, Evening, December 2020

Dee dashed quickly along the abandoned road, searching the windows of each house for the tell-tale candlelight that would betray the coven's location. There was something evil in the air, the scent of a rising demon. Something long gone from the Earth. A creature best left forgotten. She had less than five minutes to save the coven.

The rain was getting heavier by the moment. The wind blasted against her. Her heavy coat was soaked and she was freezing cold. Her hood was pulled protectively tight around her face, but the rain still stung her eyes like pinpricks of cold, blurring her vision as she tried to blink them away. Worst of all, her jeans were completely sodden and she knew they would be caked in mud. She dreaded what they would look like. The skirt that she wore over her jeans was hidden inside the coat, but she could feel that it was soaking wet, drawing up the water from her jeans. It clung to her legs and made it that much more of an effort to run. It was her own fault for wearing the skirt, but then she hadn't had time to change.

The search for the coven had taken the best part of an hour and now, as she felt the magical pressure of the summoning spell building ahead of her, she feared she would be too late to prevent the massacre that was about to happen.

The road was dark. Most of the street lamps had burnt out long ago. All of the houses in this little estate were awaiting an ecologically sound refurbishment; the tenants had moved out months before. Had it not been for the pale orange glow of the city's lights reflecting off the storm clouds, the road would have been completely black and she would not have stood a chance. Progress was dangerous, but still she managed a hard run, even against the gale that fought to push her backwards.

The pavement was almost flooded, the storm drains blocked by litter and two autumns' worth of decaying leaves. Litter and builders' rubble were piled high behind each garden wall, spilling into the street to lurk under the flood water, waiting to trap her pounding feet and send her sprawling into the muddy water. Vital seconds would be lost or, even

worse, she would be injured and unable to move. Then the demon would rise and devour her. The coven and countless others would be killed.

Dee was following the magical currents that only those versed in the ways of magic could feel. These felt more powerful than the gale force wind, far hotter than the winter's chill. Their energies were building by the second, rushing at her, attracted by her magical affinity; violent, chaotic streamers lashing at her mind, carrying an imprint of the demon's anger and hatred that assaulted her senses. She couldn't even shield herself against the rising onslaught, for if she did then she would lose the scent and the coven would be killed. She had to endure it.

Banished by an unknown sect some seven hundred years ago, the demon's name was carried from the void between worlds by the gathering portal energies. Its name was Thiaroth and it was hungry for revenge.

The coven wouldn't stand a chance. She could almost see the streams of magic as their intensity flared, spurred on by the coven's incantations, fiery oranges and shadowy reds that snaked out from a thickening magical haze ahead of her. Time was running out.

As she hurtled past the tenth house, Dee felt the power from the coven's spell spike for a second time, a wash of magical heat that made her sweat inside her coat. Knowing that Thiaroth would rise from the opening portal in less than three minutes, Dee's face creased in concentration. Her narrowed eyes flaring with silver light, she fought against the gathering unsympathetic magic and for a moment her figure blurred. Then she vanished mid-stride, reappearing instantly fifty yards further along the street. Teleportation spells were at the limit of her capability, and it took every ounce of effort she could muster. She picked up the pace, her legs burning from the long run that had brought her there. She was fit and had trained for events like this, but the elements were against her and time was not on her side.

Teleporting herself for a second time, she materialised near the end of the cul-de-sac, vaulting over a pile of toppled wheelie bins and a sodden mountain of pamphlets advertising cheap energy. She could see the candlelight now, flickering behind the tattered curtains of an upstairs window. The house wasn't far away and, with a grunt of effort, she became a blur once more and reappeared on the house's front door step. Her velocity carried her forward and she smashed through the unlocked front door, tucking herself into a neat forward roll that brought her to the foot of the stairs.

She paused, just for a moment, listening to the uninterrupted chanting that echoed from above her. The coven was in a deep trance and her noisy entrance had not disturbed

them. She thanked the universe that the front door's lock had been broken, or she would have been heard and the summoning invocation would have instantly ceased.

Her intention was not to stop the coven's ceremony. It was to save their lives. Her one healing potion was for them.

Tilting her head to one side, she listened to the pattern of the magical currents, sniffing the air with distaste. Thiaroth carried a vile smell, the stench of seven hundred years of decay that was noticeable even through a wavering, unopened portal and the heavy smell of burning incense. The demon was, she could tell, eager to feast upon the coven that was summoning him. She had only two minutes before the creature would be free.

Dee took off her coat and shook the excess rain from its heavy fabric, tied back her long dark hair. She checked her appearance in a dust shrouded mirror that she had noticed mid-roll behind the now open front door. The wind howled inside the hallway, carrying the rain with it, but she ignored it. Satisfied with her appearance and feeling the magical pressure building to its critical level, she took a small, heavy purse from inside her coat and climbed the stairs.

It was hard to move against the waves of magical energy that rushed against her, but the only outwards sign of her effort was a raised eyebrow. She had quickly researched the demon when she had first heard its name back at her shop, carried through the ether as the summoning had begun. Thiaroth was stronger than she had expected. Thinking that the sect that had banished him must have been a rare, strong group of people to have contained his power, she reached the top of the stairs.

The chanting was much louder now and she could see inside the bedroom. Thirteen people, a mixture of inexperienced male and female witches, walked slowly around a pentagram that they had painted on the bare floorboards in chicken blood. Each wore a robe that hid their face, but she could tell from their body shapes that each was only young; teenagers eager to call on the demon for wealth and success. Their voices were eager and full of thrill and fear; but one, no doubt the leader of the coven, had a voice that was confident. He was the most dangerous person inside the bedroom, for his steady belief, she knew, carried the belief of the rest of the coven.

This had been his idea. He had magical knowledge, albeit misdirected and foolish. She had would have to pay him special attention if tonight's actions were not to be repeated.

Dee watched as the coven raised their covered faces to the ceiling, crying out the demon's name over and over.

"Thyoroht! Thyoroht! Thyoroht!"

With only a minute to go before the portal opened, Dee heard someone shriek, caught up in the gathering energies and the rising belief of the whole coven. Dee could feel the vile demon's approach, and she was sure that the energies were strong enough for the coven to feel the demon's coming too. They were blind to the dangers it would bring, and their fear was verging on ecstasy. That would only blind them further.

Dee rolled her eyes and muttered, "Bloody amateurs can't even pronounce his name right. That's really going to piss him off."

Then, subtly at first, Dee could see the air inside the pentagram starting to shift and swirl, distorting the candlelight that bounced off the coven on the far side of the pentagram as the fabric of space-time starting to bulge. The portal was opening.

Dee reached down and lifted the hem of her skirt, tying it in a knot so that the fabric wouldn't flap around her legs. Then, batting at the mud on the 501s that she wore underneath, she gasped. She shook her head. The jeans were new. Not only had she run all the way from Clapham through the storm to clear up someone else's mess, but she'd just rubbed the wet mud into her jeans. It would take a lot to get them clean, even with stain remover and magic. She was feeling more than a little angry.

"Why is it always up to me to sort these messes out?"

She waited for a moment, unseen in the bedroom doorway, watching the coven and noticing the large, dusty tome that the coven's leader carried with him. The air inside the pentagram was rippling violently, red pinpricks of light flaring as the coven struggled to make the portal form.

Then, as Dee opened the small purse and emptied a pile of fine silver sand into her hand, the red lights suddenly whirled around the pentagram. A wind picked up, pulling air inside the bedroom, setting the coven's robes flapping. The fabric of space-time inside the pentagram seemed to fold in upon itself and, with a roar of air and a bright flash of blue-white light, the portal blossomed open.

Dee merely blinked as the coven shielded their eyes against the light. The light strobed for a moment as the floorboards beneath the portal were vaporised, turned to energy which then caused the portal to pulse outwards, catching at the robes of one of the coven and yanking her towards the swirling abyss as she continued to chant, unaware of her own peril.

Dee tightened her fist to contain the silver powder and darted into the room and, ignoring the portal's glare, she snatched at the witch's arm to stop her from plummeting into the whirling void. She yanked the woman out of the maelstrom and thrust her to safety, back towards the doorway where she hit the wall with a thud, unharmed but suddenly aware of her

surroundings and quite shaken. The coven stopped chanting, their trance broken. The large candle that was hovering at the centre of the pentagram blew itself out and fell, its form stretching and twisting for a moment before it shot into the dark void on the other side of the portal.

A witch on the far side of the portal raised a shaking hand to point. Thiaroth was rising from his prison. He was a twelve foot high horned beast with great blood-red eyes, thick arms tipped with spines instead of fingers and a large body that was supported by four heavily muscled legs. His torso, though, was thin and emaciated, the yellowing skin hanging from decaying muscle and crumbling bone.

"Thyoroath!" shouted a witch.

"I hunger!" the demon roared.

Thiaroth opened his wide mouth, flicking out one of two forked tongues to lick at the face of the nearest witch. The witch howled in fear and stumbled backwards, tripping on the edge of the torn grey carpet and catching his head against the window sill. His body went limp, blood dripping from the fresh wound on his scalp.

Another witch shouted, "God no!" and hurried to her friend's aid. The other members of the coven started to panic, staring wide-mouthed at the creature they had summoned. Its eyes stared hungrily back at them, saliva dripping from its serrated teeth. Half of the coven made a run for it then, stampeding for the door and knocking Dee away from the portal.

"This isn't what was supposed to happen!" cried the leader, leafing quickly through his spell book to find the incantations that would hold the demon, or send it back.

"Who the hell is that?" yelled someone, pointing at Dee, who was watching this happen with a look of stern determination and disapproval.

"Get out of my way!" Dee snapped impatiently, shoving the fleeing coven members to safety as the demon whirled around to face her, his body still floating above the open portal. She almost dropped the silver and clenched her hand even more tightly around it. Thiaroth's head was bent low towards Dee, showering the remaining members of the coven in plaster as his horns gouged long gashes in the ceiling.

Thiaroth blinked once, sniffing the air and sensing her power. The demon snarled and laughed at Dee, a horrible, wet laugh that jetted thick globs of saliva on the robes of a nearby witch. The witch looked at the mess on her robes, glanced fearfully at Thiaroth and then fainted.

Dee caught her as she fell, passing her body to a trembling nearby witch. "Take her from me."

"You!" bellowed Thiaroth at Dee, his powerful voice silencing the whimpers of those remained in the house. "You shall be the first human that I feed upon! I have ached for sustenance for so long. My body has weakened, trapped in the void between the worlds with no escape. The incantations that summon me were lost for so long, hidden by the monks that banished me... Until now. I shall devour you and these other *Urdinashak*, then the whole world shall know my wrath!"

"You know me?" asked Dee, angrily eyeing a glob of spit that the demon had spat on her dress. It clung to the fabric, turning the white cotton brown. "Oh, thank you very much! Now I really understand why people think that all demons are evil."

She half-turned her head towards the coven's leader and said, "*Urdinashak* is High Demon. It's a compound word. Its etymology is the words for human, dirt and cattle."

The man pulled back his cowl and dropped the leather-bound spell book, his mouth wide open, unable to reply.

Dee sighed. He couldn't have been more than nineteen. "You're not a linguist, then. Suit yourself. I'm only trying to be informative -"

"- You are a witch!" the demon interrupted. "You are more powerful than these weak creatures. I can smell the magic flowing within you! You have travelled here to stop my coming, to send me back into the void which held me prisoner for seven hundred years... but you can do nothing. You *are* nothing! I will feed upon you and savour every morsel of your flesh!"

"-So you don't know me," interrupted Dee. "A simple 'no' would have sufficed. I didn't ask you to start a monologue. Blood thirsty demons are all the same. Always ranting on about something or other. Why can't you just get on with it?"

Thiaroth bellowed, swatting two of the coven aside like flies as he moved over the edge of the portal and close to Dee.

Spreading his arms wide around Dee's body, he shouted, "I am Thiaroth, demon of the *Arlok H'Kurr*, destroyer, betrayer and dark knight of the third circle of the Order of Chaos." He moved even closer to Dee, sliding through the air as he extended a tongue to taste the air around her. Raising a spine-tipped hand, he pointed at the remains of the pentagram that lay around the portal and snarled, "You will bow to me before I feast upon your entrails!"

"Oh, yadda-yadda! Do shut up!" snapped Dee, "This doesn't impress me, you know, and I'm not scared of you."

She looked at the spiny claws that were moving closer to her head and looked back up at Thiaroth with disapproval. "A monster always tries to use its teeth and claws to frighten us

human beings. You're evil and big and hulking, yes, but you're certainly not all-powerful. I'd be more frightened by an angry Morris Dancer. Whilst they, however, would get some valued fashion tips, you're going back to the black hell that you rose from, where you might at least learn to start your killing before someone can do something like this."

She opened her hand and blew the silver dust into the Thiaroth's face. He screamed loudly, clutching at his skin where the silver particles struck and then sparked as they seared the demon's flesh. Great welts steamed into his muscle, spreading to the demon's hands where he batted at the silver in panic.

"*Alkan, Aru, Simta-ne, Gok!*" roared Dee, chunks of ice the size of footballs rapidly forming in the palm of each of her hands. "I cast you back to the void! *Alkan, Mishan, Marku, Gok!* You will be no more!"

Then she flung her arms upwards, shooting the balls of ice into the demon's chest with such force that it pushed Thiaroth back into the centre of the portal. The portal's light flared once, its blue-white colour shifting quickly to a red that matched the demon's eyes. The portal wavered, then its shape rapidly bent up to surround the beast as his legs struggled to prevent his retreat.

Then the portal surrounded Thiaroth completely, a sphere of glowing, distorted light through which Dee could see the terrified remains of the coven on the other side. The sphere hung there for a moment, pulsating slightly and burning fiercely where it pushed into the ceiling, before Dee reached out and tapped it lightly with one finger.

The portal collapsed in a roar of energy and a bright flash of light, temporarily blinding everyone that remained, except for Dee, who watched the portal's collapse with curiosity. She reached out and held her hand against the remaining red aura of the collapsing portal, laughing as she felt her skin tingle, feeling the residual energy course through her body and mingle with her chi.

Then there was silence for a moment, the remaining members of the coven staring first at the large hole in the floor and then at Dee. She stepped forwards, looking down into the empty living room below, then inclined her head to one side, listening to the ebbing currents of unsympathetic magic as they faded away.

Finally, she sniffed the air and bit her lip in thought.

"Hmmm... Smells like roast chicken."

She turned to the window, catching sight of a chicken carcass out of the corner of her eye. The coven had sacrificed it so that they could use its blood to draw out the pentagram.

"A waste," she muttered quietly to herself.

Kneeling by the witch who had been injured, she checked his pulse and breathing before gently prodding at the wound on his scalp. She said, "Thiaroth is a demon of plenty and I imagine that you summoned him so that you could gain wealth and success, to increase your chances in a world where everyone seems to be getting what they want."

She looked up at the cult and continued, "You chose the wrong demon. He was banished for eternity by humans. The last thing he would do is help you, and one dead chicken and an inability to correctly pronounce his name wasn't going to sway his intentions in your favour."

The leader of the cult coughed and tried to regain his earlier confidence in the presence of the powerful witch who had saved their lives. He said, "How is he?"

Dee reached into her jeans and removed a small phial of liquid that sparkled softly in the darkened bedroom. She opened the phial and emptied its contents into the wounded witch's mouth, making sure that he swallowed before looking up to reply.

"It's little more than a graze. This is a healing potion, and please don't try to make one; not if you value your life. Your friend will wake up in an hour or so with a sore head, but the wound will be gone. He'll be fine, but he will be terrified. The potion won't heal his mind. He'll need care."

The coven's leader breathed a heavy sigh of relief and moved towards the fallen witch as the others gathered around. She watched him carefully as he pulled his friend to his feet and lifted him easily over one shoulder.

He said, "I'll take him home. We'll look after him."

"Good," said Dee, reaching for the body of the chicken that she had noticed. Picking it up, she then moved to the other side of the room and retrieved the spell book that had been used to summon Thiaroth.

Turning to the leader of the coven, she asked, "What's your name?"

"J-Jules," he replied, a little wary but in awe of her demonstrated abilities. "Who are you? How did you do that?"

She sighed. "Take these, Jules. Bury the chicken after your friend is safe. Anywhere will do, but pour salt on its body before you cover it in earth. That will protect you should Thiaroth rise again and try to find you."

Jules took the book and chicken carcass from her. "What about the book?"

"All in good time," she replied. "Magic is dangerous, summoning magic even more so. Mistakes can be common, as are unforeseen consequences, yet none of you have the

ability to defend yourselves, or the focus that spells truly require. You were opening a portal in the fabric of the universe, and yours wavered so much that it nearly destroyed you."

She gestured at the devastation around them and at the injured witches that groaned in pain as they picked themselves up.

"For the gods' sake, look at what your meddling has caused! You could have died tonight, and hundreds more with you had I not been here to banish Thiaroth. Take this advice with you: don't ever mess around with magic again."

"O-ok," stuttered a small witch.

Dee tried to smile at the girl, but she simply couldn't. It wasn't her style to take her anger out on the coven, especially not when they'd just had the life scared out of them by a slathering, horned monster, but she was still very angry at their foolishness and arrogance.

"I'm E-Erica," said the girl, trying to get Dee to do anything but glare at her. The girl's lips were trembling and it looked as though she was about to burst into tears.

"Now that, Erica, is the reaction that I'd hoped for. You have meddled in things that you do not understand, and for that you have all paid a price.

"I didn't come here to stop you summoning Thiaroth, I came here to save you from him. You needed to see the demon with your own eyes, to know it takes years of training to handle something like him, to be able to adequately defend yourselves. I can't always be around to save you..."

Dee trailed off. She felt a subtle wave of energy pass over herself and for a moment she thought that the effort of banishing Thiaroth had taken an unexpectedly heavy toll, or that maybe her earlier teleportation through unsympathetic magic had drained her. The strange feeling lingered though, and she quickly realised that something was wrong. Magical currents couldn't always be detected, but when she could sense them it was usually possible to discover whether they were of light or chaos. This had the scent of both, and it felt very familiar.

Before she could try and analyse it, the sound of rapid, tiny footsteps drew her attention towards the bedroom door. She turned, as did the coven, to see a small fox stood in the doorway. It watched Dee with urgent eyes.

Dee frowned. "Milly?"

She crouched and held out her hand, which the fox licked affectionately for a moment before squeaking with concern.

Dee said, "You must have followed me all the way from Clapham in the rain. My, this must be important..." but she didn't complete her sentence. An alarm went off inside her

head, a blaring sound that seemed to flick between each ear, demanding that she take notice of nothing else, and it was a sound that no one else apart from Milly seemed to hear. She swayed slightly, gripping her temples in an attempt to restore order and focus to her mind, and trying to detect what the alarm was for.

"I should have recognised the scent of magic. It's my own spell and... there is the scent of someone or something else."

As the coven began to mutter at Dee's strange behaviour, she realised what the source of the alarm was and a look of horror crossed her face.

She stood abruptly and pulled a sodden business card from her pocket. Thrusting it into Jules' hand, she said, "Take the book to this address and tell her that I sent you. You're the only one here stupid enough to ignore my wishes and carry on meddling in magic. This woman will send you to someone who will train you and ensure you don't end up killing yourself, and that book's too dangerous to be left lying around."

Then, as Dee hurried to the door, Jules read the card and said, "Casimira Carter? You know the *Green Fuel Queen*?"

He quickly ran to the stairs and called out, "Wait! I need to know who sent me!"

Dee hesitated just inside the front door, her long hair whirling around her in the wind and rain. "Casimira will know."

Jules continued, "Please, you saved our lives. Tell us who you are and how you defeated that demon?"

Turning back to Jules, she replied, "My name is Lady Darkness Fell and I'm the one who has to clean up the magical messes that other people create. I am a witch, a scholar and an occult specialist... and I am the one person who stands between you and death. There are few people in this world that know about magic, and I aim to keep it that way. There are others, here and there, that help. Casimira Carter is one such person. Tell her that I sent you and do anything and everything that she asks."

Milly squeaked urgently at Dee, and she frowned.

"I know, Milly. Someone seems to have found dad's journal... What fresh, howling hell is this?" She bit her lip in concern. Milly squeaked and gave a little bark. Dee raised an eyebrow. "Of course. He's the only choice."

"We need Nathan Boyes."

####

## Chapter Two – The Burglary at Carrozza Towers

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Nathan looked up and down the alleyway as the basement door finally clicked open. The thief clung to a drain pipe high above him and, after a moment of smooth, practised activity, the thief disappeared inside a window. Urgency was needed now, but so was caution. Nathan's presence had to remain undetected, at least until the thief was caught.

The howling wind carried torrential rain horizontally along the alleyway, constantly whipping his body. Wiping the water from his eyes, he wondered for a moment why he wasn't sitting comfortably in his warm and spacious Clapham apartment, enjoying the 50-year-old single malt he'd bought that morning.

The things he did for a story.

Nathan looked around to make sure that he wasn't being watched. He couldn't risk being caught. He held his breath as a young couple stopped at the end of the alley to hail one of the new yellow autocabs that were steadily replacing the old black Hackneys. As soon as they were gone he quickly entered the building, closing the door silently behind him, thankful to be out of the storm.

He'd never been inside Carrozza Towers and the basement was gloomy. He double-checked his route in his mind's eye as he felt the thrill of the chase, his hands clenching and unclenching with excitement.

He hurried down the perilously steep aluminium stairs and into the underbelly of Carrozza Towers. There he stopped and waited under a security camera as it turned along the dark tunnel that led to the security office. He counted off the seconds it took for the camera to complete its sweep, doing a dummy run inside his head and knowing that there was barely enough time. Choosing his moment, he sprinted down the long corridor and hid behind an aircon duct just as the camera swept back towards him. He grinned, heart pounding, and took a deep breath as he felt a surge of adrenalin.

He held position and continued to count the seconds of the camera's sweep, listening intently for any sound of human activity. For Nathan to get caught before he caught the

criminal would mean trouble. The police would haul him in like a trophy. He had once been a copper.

It would be very embarrassing.

The 2020's were known as the New Golden Era. Global access to cheap energy had brought political stability and ended poverty. The Internet dominated news media, with a multitude of blogs replacing traditional papers. Only five were left, championing themselves as the only source of the 'real' news rather than opinion. The London Evening News was the most popular in Europe and, as its leading journalist, Nathan was a very famous man.

In a world of high living standards, crime was rare, and the LEN liked to make it sensational. Nathan had given them a string of political scandals, commercial intrigues and high profile robberies like tonight. Police and readers alike were willing to overlook his infractions of the law thanks to his success, but it would only take one failure to take him from ace reporter to common criminal. In the Golden Era world, reputation was everything, and Nathan was once again risking it all to get his name in the headlines.

He heard a noise from the security station and used the reflective fob of his Ford Retro Turbo Sport (the brand new Turbo Sport, he reminded himself with a smile) to check around the edge of the door. He glimpsed a security guard moving about and pressed himself back against the wall, knowing that that every second he waited gave the thief a better chance of escape.

His phone vibrated in his pocket and he pulled it out in frustration, sure that he'd turned it off. The screen told him that it was Dee. Switching his phone into flight-mode he thrust it back into his pocket, making a mental note to call her back once he'd caught his thief.

The guard had moved away from the door and Nathan chanced a better look inside. The huge office evidently doubled as a storeroom for building maintenance. There were racks of equipment a line of staff lockers, and beyond them Nathan saw the night guard silhouetted against a huge bank of security monitors. The man looked agile and alert as his eyes carefully scanned each of the displays in turn. He was in good shape and neither bored nor tired. Nathan had no doubt that the guard would be able to overpower him, and he didn't have time for trouble. Besides, there would be more fun in eluding the guard completely.

He crept into the security office and stood right behind the guard, his heart racing like it was about to burst from his chest. He couldn't resist waving at the back of the guard's head as he quickly scanned the security feeds, enjoying the thrill of being so close to being seen.

He looked around the room and quickly spotted the key cabinet he needed behind the staff lockers. He stepped quickly across the room and froze as his left shoe gave a loud, wet squelch. The guard spun around and Nathan leapt the few remaining feet into the shadow of the lockers, pressing himself into the cold metal and holding his breath as the guard scanned the room.

Nathan wondered what Dee would do. No doubt she would have some sort of concealing spell. Nathan's one and only attempt at magic had ended in failure – he had cast a levitation spell and ended up being hit by every item of furniture in his living room. The words 'stellar' and 'implosion' had been at the forefront of his mind. The bruises were bad, but it had been Dee's disapproval which had quenched his desire to experiment further. He didn't like the thought of being on the receiving end of her anger. Power lurked behind those beautiful eyes.

Satisfied that there was nothing amiss, the guard went back to his monitors. Nathan started breathing again and took a small, rubberised fob from his pocket. He opened the cabinet and located the large key that would grant him access to the upper building, where the building's treasures were stored and where the thief was aiming for.

Nathan moved quickly, smirking at the large "DO NOT COPY" etched into the back of the security key as he slotted it into the fob and watched the faint glow as the fob scanned it. Nathan replaced it with a blank and returned it to the cabinet as the fob laser-etched the blank into the shape of the original.

Nathan used his phone to take a photograph of the monitors. Having a record of where the cameras were meant he could avoid them. It did no harm that he could sell the photo to a blogger and generate more hits for his story. And he might get a nice little commission helping Nikolas Carrozza to improve his security.

Nathan removed the new key from the fob and cursed inwardly as a shower of metallic particles showered his rain-sodden jeans. He was looking forward to a night on the town after this was over, and while a few cuts and bruises might help him get a little action, dirty jeans wouldn't.

Nathan pocketed the key and the fob and pulled out a balaclava. He pulled it over his head and quickly kicked off his squeaky shoes before quietly opening the door and slipping out.

He found himself in a large, dimly lit maze of high stacks of wooden packing crates. Each crate was emblazoned with the symbols of different ports, documenting its origin and transit. Nathan took in several as he walked past, following the route that he'd memorised

from a glance at the building's inventory and blueprints. He owed somebody dinner for that, but couldn't remember who. It had been a busy week.

Nathan turned a corner and found himself disoriented as he entered a dead-end room that he didn't remember from the plans. A Carter Catalyser hummed quietly as it busily converted waste water to hydrogen to power the fuel cell that was sat beside it. Nathan stepped towards the catalyser, impressed as always at the device that had saved the world when the oil had run dry – and nearly tripped over the rim of a large, circular disc of metal that protruded from the centre of the floor.

He crouched down to examine it. Looking more closely, he could see that there were hundreds of deep scratches running across the surface of what was undoubtedly a hatch. Each cut was long and slender, and they came in sets of four. They looked like claw marks, but he knew that there was no animal that could scratch through steel like this.

Nothing anyone knew about, at any rate.

It was puzzling that the hatch wasn't in the blueprints either. But there was no time to investigate now. Toying with the idea of "The Mystery of the Hatch" as a follow-on story, he darted from the room. His heart was pounding again by the time he reached the maintenance stairs and hurried up to the ground floor.

Emerging from the drab confines of the stairwell into the elegance of the building's main reception, Nathan halted, taken aback by the opulence around him. The building was still new, built in the neo-deco style that reflected the abundance of the age. It was the last building designed by the renowned French architect Albert Martinique, who had specialised in green, self-sustaining environments, before he had died in a car crash. That was lucky for Carrozza International, not so lucky for Albert Martinique.

In the New Golden Era, luxury was commonplace, but Carrozza Towers was still exceptional. The outside, with its tall, imposing curves and battlements of metal and glass was the height of London's take on the neo-deco trend, but the inside was something else again.

Carrozza Towers had been furnished as if it were a palace, with gold and crystal and deep, expensive carpets of scarlet spreading out from where Nathan stood. There were long, sweeping curves of metal and glass lining the boundaries of meeting areas and the main reception point, and all of it managed to sparkle and shine even in the subdued light.

Baroque paintings were hung here and there. Classical statues of Grecian heroes and gods were arranged around a bubbling water feature. Ornate sculptures had been carved into

the sides of the eight mock-Corinth columns that were placed in a wide semicircle around reception.

Nathan was pretty confident that the statues and paintings were the real deal. Whatever the thief was after, it must be really something.

He crossed the lobby and, ducking under the sweep of a security camera, checked the image on his phone for the locations of the other cameras nearby. He stopped at the main desk and crouched low, activating a computer and turning on a small hack-and-scan fob that he'd earned from the same dinner date as the key cutter. The memory of the evening sparked a sly smile on his face as the hack-and-scan went to work and tore straight through the network's security, closing all traces of the intrusion behind it. The fob merely automated the tasks and routines that Nathan could easily do himself, but it ran through them with blistering speed.

He swore as his phone vibrated for a second time. It was Dee, and he wondered if she had reactivated its antenna with a spell, or whether he just needed a new phone. It did feel unsettlingly wet in his hand and the prospect of the phone dying on him in the middle of a case where he very much needed it was annoying. He sent her a preset text message saying he'd call back, and returned his attention to the computer.

A selection of staff IDs were waiting on screen. Nathan chose the login for a mid-level sales manager, resisting the temptation to login as Nikolas Carrozza himself. It was probably better not to draw Carrozza and his personal security team down on his position: a good fight was one thing, an avoidable beating was another.

He opened up the building's inventory and scanned through it, but nothing leapt out at him. Then he saw that on the twentieth floor there was a collection of items listed only as 'Classified - Consult Mr Wayne Sotos'.

Secret, unlisted items under the personal charge of Carrozza International's Chief Executive. Just what the thief would be after.

Nathan brought up the CCTV feeds from the twentieth floor. There were five of them, all concentrated on the area outside the main lifts and the large pair of doors opposite them. These cameras were equipped with infrared to pierce the darkness, highlighting the five dusty IR beams in front of the double doors. The twentieth floor was obviously quite special. Nathan called a lift and returned to the computer.

On the monitor, he saw the door to the main stairs open and briefly glimpsed a dark figure emerging onto the twentieth floor before the image feeds jumped for a moment, all at the same time, and the figure vanished. Evidently the thief had been doing more than a little

hacking of their own; and now Nathan was closing in on his prize. He didn't have much time left.

It took him fifteen seconds of rapid work to track twenty three video glitches to their origin in the server room on the first floor. He tagged each of the glitches to aid a security review once this was over, and to reinforce the fact that he was only there to investigate a crime, not commit one. He closed the computer down as the nearby elevator door opened with a loud, crystalline chime. It was time to find out what the thief was after.

Stepping into the lift, Nathan inserted his freshly cut security key into the control panel and the elevator started sedately up the front of the building. It rose out of the wide arch that spanned the building's façade in a tube of twisting steel and glass, affording Nathan a bird's eye view of first Waterloo Station and then south London as lightning lit up the cloud-wreathed sky. Nathan edged under the watchful camera that was secured by the window to gaze out into the night, careful not to be spotted.

The storm had grown more violent and the rain would have made it impossible to see had the lightning not been so bright, every flash reflecting off the huge puddles in the streets below and casting the city into stark clarity.

Through the distorting veil of water that poured down the building, he could see electric and hydrogen powered cars, cabs and autocabs zooming along the roads below, and a few pedestrians hurrying along the pavements between distant islands of shelter. Beyond them the lightning flashed here and there, reflected in a myriad of steel, glass and bronze towers. London had become a city of tall curves and gleaming surfaces that extended even into the sprawling suburbia south of the Thames. It was a new London and, lit as it was now by a night-time storm, it looked quite spectacular.

His phone vibrated for a third time and he stabbed at the decline button several times, but it wouldn't respond to his touch. Realising that he wasn't going to be allowed any peace, he answered the call in a low voice.

"Dee, please, I'm right in the middle of a job and I'm very pressed for time. Can I call you back?"

"No. I realise that you're busy, Nathan," she replied, "It's late in the evening and you're whispering into your phone. What else would you be doing but breaking into somewhere on the trail of a story? Sorry, but this is more urgent. I... I need your help."

If Dee thought something was urgent, then there was a story in it and one that he couldn't ignore. And one that no-one else would get a shot at: she didn't trust anyone else.

He asked, "What's the scoop?"

"A robbery," she replied. "Ford, Latham & Hewitt Bank, about five minutes ago."

"Phew!" he whistled. "That's the most secure bank this side of the Atlantic. Why are you interested?"

"It's my father's journal. I think it's been stolen," she replied. "If it has, then the thief could cause untold havoc. I need to get it back before something bad happens. I need help from someone with your... particular skills."

He thought quickly, excited at the prospect of selling the story. Investigating a major robbery was a great scoop, especially if he had to risk his life and managed to get some photos to prove it. Add to that the possibility of a mystical cult, secret ceremonies and ancient artefacts and he had a real gem.

Of course, he would have to omit any mention of actual magic. He knew that Dee would prefer it that way too.

The lift slowed to a halt and the doors slid open. Nathan peered out into the darkened corridor to check for the thief as he listened to Dee with rising interest.

Dee continued, "There's been some sort of explosion so I won't be able to get access to the bank until they decide it's safe. I'm going home to change and check what's happened, before I head to the bank for a closer look." She sighed. "I'm not a detective, Nate, but you are."

"Are you in any danger right now?" he asked.

"I don't think so," she replied, "but without knowing who broke into the bank, whether or not they stole the journal and what their intentions are, I can't be sure."

He said, "OK. I'll help. In return for the story, naturally. Stay safe and I'll meet you at your shop as soon as I can, right?"

"I'll see you there," she replied. "And Nathan?"

"Yeah?"

"Make sure you bring a gun."

Pocketing his phone he stepped quickly out onto the landing, eyes scanning for anywhere that the thief might be hidden. He pulled out a pair of night vision shades and checked around, immediately spotting the optic cables that the thief had fixed over the infrared emitters guarding the entrance to this floor's only room, skilfully bypassing security.

Nathan eased one of the large doors open and peered into the gloom that lay beyond before slipping silently inside. He found himself at the back of a large, square room stacked high with wooden packing crates covered in dust sheets, the ceiling supported by tall, ornate columns. Again Nathan had to resist the urge to look inside the crates - even though they

might yield a clue as to what the thief was here to steal, the thief was already ahead of him and the balcony on the building's south side provided him with an easy escape. He hoped that he wasn't already too late.

Nathan set off into the darkness between the packing crates. He moved as quickly as he dared, occasionally glancing up at the balcony that ran around the perimeter of the room to make sure that the thief hadn't climbed over the boxes to some hidden treasure above. As he passed the fourth column he saw that its dust sheet had been roughly pulled away and it hung limply from a securing hook. Nathan stepped forwards to examine the intricate carvings on the column itself - and saw the thief walking across the floor a few short feet away.

Lightning flashed brightly. Only Nathan's dark clothing saved him from being seen by the thief. His heart beginning to race once more, he pulled himself back into cover and quickly took in his surroundings.

The lightning flashed again through the huge bay window, illuminating a wide stone plinth. Behind it, a tall chair was shrouded by a dust sheet, looming over the plinth like a throne. It looked almost like an altar, Nathan thought.

Suddenly he was uneasy. There was something in the air, an odd energy that suffused the room as if enforcing the silence, covering up something deep and old with a veil of calm. Nathan heard the quiet, familiar chink-chink-click of a lock pick at work and put his unease down to the storm and the darkness. He pressed himself into the packing crate and peered around its side.

The thief was standing at one of the more distant columns, working quickly on one of two locks of a wide silver band that had been fixed around it at head height. Nathan would be unable to approach him without being seen, and considered working around the room to get a better angle of attack. Then, he heard a loud click and saw the figure move around the column to work on a second clasp, hiding Nathan from his view.

Nathan wasted no time at all, darting across the huge room as he pulled a highly modified P229R DAK handgun from a holster that was strapped over his left arm. The sleek, black metal gleamed in the lightning, its compact body modified with a small, second side barrel and taser-dart magazine.

"Don't move!"

###

Message from the Author:

Hey! Thanks for reading the sample chapters of Darkness Fell and the Demon's Sceptre. If you liked what you read, and I hope that you did, then you can connect with me by [email](#) or through the [book-blog](#). The book-blog also contains details of how to [buy the full eBook](#); The eBook is available in a wide variety of formats, including Kindle, iOS and the common ePub format.

Thanks again!

Jim St Ruth, November 2012