

THE GREYFRIAR

Vampire Empire Book 1

Excerpt

By Clay and Susan Griffith

CHAPTER ONE

"Your Highness would be safer below. It's getting dark. Vampires are very unpredictable."

"Thank you, Colonel. I believe I'll stay on deck a bit yet. It's quite warm. That should keep the beasties quiet. Yes?"

Princess Adele noticed a slight smile on the dark, chiseled face of Colonel Mehmet Anhalt, who stood close to her, as was his habit. Under her gaze, the

short but powerfully built Gurkha officer covered his bemusement by clearing his throat and offering his brass telescope. "In that case, Your Highness, would you care to have a look?"

"Yes, I should. Thank you, Colonel Anhalt." Adele crossed the quarterdeck of HMS *Ptolemy* and leapt with girlish pleasure down three steps to the ship's waist. A crowd of redjackets from her household guard parted to make a path to the port rail. A stiff breeze rolled the heavy skirt around her calves and whipped the ends of the scarf that struggled to restrain her long auburn curls.

Adele snapped open the telescope and steadied her booted feet expertly against the airship's sway. The distant clouds were turning brilliant orange and bruise purple in the darkening eastern sky. Five miles off the port beam Adele spotted two figures floating silhouetted in midair.

Vampires.

The young princess felt a delicious thrill spread through her. Vampire cadavers were displayed occasionally in the streets of her home, Alexandria, and she had even viewed the purported preserved head of the clan chief of Vienna, but she had seen only a few living specimens in her days. These two lay spread-eagle on the air, vibrating in the drafts that buffeted their nearly weightless frames.

Adele felt a tingle of horror when one turned its head and, she thought, stared at her, looking in her eye with its cold glare. She closed the glass with a sharp breath, going pale. Frustration swept through her that the creature should startle her so. It was not as if the beast had truly been looking at her. It merely

had looked toward the ship. Struggling to regain her composure in front of her guardsmen, she resumed strolling the quarterdeck.

A young boy suddenly exploded up out of the main hatch. His face was red from the exertion of racing up the companionways, as indeed he raced everywhere he went. He was barely twelve years old and still round-faced as a baby, with darker hair than Adele's, cropped short. A flowing striped cotton Bedouin robe over breeches and sandals made him look like a ragamuffin from the alleys of Cairo.

He scampered to Adele's side, shouting, "I heard there are two of them out there!"

Princess Adele cut a very different figure from her wild younger brother, Simon. She was the heir, the future empress, and her very proper traveling garb was chosen for reasons of state. Today she wore a heavy cotton shirt, a leather jacket with a Persian sash, and a long velveteen skirt covering high leather boots. In the sash, she had her prized weapon, a jewel-hilted khukri, a broad-bladed dagger that had been a gift from her mother. More, it was a Fahrenheit blade, with chemical additives in the scabbard that gave the steel an intense chemical heat when exposed to air, making it more destructive than a normal blade.

The blade was not all Adele had received from her Persian mother. A light veil wrapped her head and shoulders to protect her against the sun and wind. Unlike her brother's red-cheeked visage that he got from their father, Emperor Constantine II, Adele had olive skin and the distinctive nose of the late empress.

Her appearance was a subject of murmured derision among the northern-featured courtiers who dominated the imperial court in Alexandria.

"They're very far away, Simon." Adele put an arm around her brother's shoulders. While two lone vampires posed little threat to a heavily armed *Ptolemy*, she still would have preferred her brother locked safely below.

Prince Simon looked disappointed. "Can I look at the vampires, Colonel Anhalt?"

"*May* I look at the vampires," Princess Adele corrected with a light cuff to the boy's shoulder.

Anhalt was perspiring in his tightly buttoned uniform. "Unfortunately it's grown too dark for observation, Prince Simon. And *Khartoum* has blocked our view." He bowed stiffly to the eager prince, indicating a thirty-two-gun frigate maneuvering through the gathering clouds four miles off the port quarter. HMS *Cape Town*, *Mandalay*, and *Giza* were putting on or taking off sail, struggling to answer the signals to form the nightly cordon around the flagship.

"And you've seen vampires before," Adele argued to Simon.

"So?" The boy craned his neck, straining to peer into the east through the billowing sails of *Khartoum*. "It's probably the most interesting thing that will happen on this trip."

Adele noticed a stony glare on Colonel Anhalt's face as he looked in the direction of the vampires. It was unusually harsh and uncharacteristic of the man.

"Something, Colonel?" she asked, handing the spyglass back to him.

The Gurkha blinked in surprise, then flushed with embarrassment. He studied his polished boots. "No, Highness. Nothing."

"Your expression said otherwise." She stepped closer to him. "Feel free. Have I done something wrong?"

The colonel looked up suddenly, mouth agape. "No! I would never— never—"

"Easy, Colonel." Adele smiled warmly and laid a hand on his forearm. "You merely looked angry. Is there something wrong?"

He wrestled with his thoughts for a moment, and then said, "Forgive my bluntness, Your Highness, but I think it unwise to send you so far north on tour."

Adele nodded in consideration.

Anhalt continued. "And to send both heirs. I don't know what the court was thinking. It's irrational."

"Politics aren't always a matter of the most rational path. I am happy to be here, forging goodwill." Adele, in fact, was thrilled to be away from Alexandria, on board this tossing ship. The alternative was to be at home, immersed in court tedium. When Lord Kelvin, the prime minister, had suggested the tour, Adele had leapt at the opportunity. But she couldn't just make the argument that she enjoyed the adventure. There was a purpose, and it was one that was important to her aside from escape. "It's imperative that the independent city-states on the frontier, such as Marseille, see the future empress of Ekuatoria. The connections I can make on this tour could be very helpful. There is a war coming."

This was a fact both Adele and Colonel Anhalt knew well. Within a year, conflict would begin that would reshape the world in blood. Adele was no warmonger, but she knew the fight was necessary.

It had been 150 years since the vampires rose. The monsters had lurked quietly among humanity from the beginning of time, but one dark winter night in 1870 they came en masse intent on subjugating human society. It was not known why they chose that moment to attack. Perhaps a great leader had inspired them. Perhaps they sensed a particular weakness in human culture as it teetered between faith and science. And clearly, humans were not prepared; they were taken totally by surprise. Most people had even given up their beliefs in the existence of such creatures as vampires.

The vampires struck at the hearts of the Great Powers of Europe, America, and Asia. They decapitated governments and armies as well as destroying communication and transportation. Order was replaced by horror, panic, and collapse. Within two years, the great industrial societies of the north were cadavers and the vampire clans divided the old world between themselves.

At that time, no one had understood the true nature of the vampires. Few enough did, even today. Adele, however, had the benefit of the dons of the Imperial Academy of Sciences in Alexandria to teach her what was known, or thought was known, of the biology and culture of humanity's greatest enemy. Myths about these creatures had grown up over the centuries—myths that were based on truths, but not the truth. Vampires were far more dangerous than the old legends could have imagined.

Most respected men of science stated with certainty that vampires were not the resurrected corpses of humans. The creatures were now classed as a parasitic species that thrived on human blood, and they had been categorized *Homo nosferatii*. Vampires and humans had disturbingly similar anatomies and physiologies, except that vampires had sharper teeth, retractable clawlike fingernails, and eyes acutely adapted to nocturnal hunting. Four of their five senses were magnificent; sight, smell, hearing, and taste were well beyond the level of a dog or cat. However, vampires had a stunted sense of touch, making it difficult for them to manipulate objects or use simple tools. Anatomy lessons conducted in the gaslit chambers beneath the Imperial Academy of Sciences in Alexandria had demonstrated that vampires seemed to feel no pain and rapidly healed from even the most horrific wounds.

It had never been demonstrated convincingly that vampires created new vampires by infecting humans. Scholars debated with great vigor how, or even if, vampires propagated. There were many theories, but the current dominant belief among the learned was that the creatures lived forever and that there were as many now as there had ever been or would ever be.

Vampires had never been seen to transform into bats or wolves, but they could travel on the wind by amazing control over their density, which was not yet fully understood. Specimens rarely lived long enough in captivity for satisfying experimentation. Sunlight did not turn them to dust, but they were pathologically susceptible to heat, which made them weak and lethargic. Hence, their tendency to come out at night and haunt northern climes.

Certainly none of this latest scientific knowledge had been available to the terrified victims of the Great Killing in 1870. After those attacks, hundreds of thousands of humans had fled south toward the equator, where they sought refuge in colonial possessions and fought savagely for land in a great frenzy of cultural collapse and coalition. Eventually the shell-shocked remnants of northern humanity blended with local people and set about trying to re-create new versions of their beloved societies based on steam and iron in the wilting tropical heat where vampires rarely trod.

Prince Simon scrambled to the rail again. "I think I see them!" He looked back at Colonel Anhalt with a pleading gaze.

The Gurkha offered the young prince his spyglass before turning his attention back to the princess, his hand resting on the hilt of his Fahrenheit saber, an officer's weapon. "I still think it's foolish to waste your time currying favor with the border states. There are only two sides to this war: human and vampire. What's the purpose of diplomacy with those who will need us once the fighting starts?"

Adele sighed cheerfully. "You're just argumentative. You know it isn't that simple. We will need the independent states on the frontier as much as they need us. We will want their ports and facilities to move our armies into Europe. Isn't it better to have an understanding beforehand? No one expects a human state to side with the vampires, but the border states have self-interests too. And there will be opportunities for the Empire to expand as we roll back the vampires. Our world is about to change forever."

Adele's world was very different from the one her great-grandfather would've known, and which she had read about in history books. There were new Great Powers that were like the resurrected corpses of the world powers at the time of the Great Killing. Her own Equatorian Empire was built on the ruins of the British Empire. It stretched from India to South Africa, with its great capital set amid the dusty mosques of Alexandria. The American Republic was a republic in name only. It was ruled by an oligarchy of wealthy families from its center in the torrid quietude of Panama with firm control over most of Central America and the West Indies, and growing hegemony over the southern region of the old United States. When the vampires attacked Japan, that emperor removed himself to Singapore and spread his power over the green temples of Malaya and much of Southeast Asia. The world over, a dizzying array of semi-independent city-states struggled along the vampire frontiers, where warm summers made it difficult for the monsters to extend their power on a permanent basis.

Those who traced their heritage to the north remained galled by the vampire clans' continuing domination of the old lands. They always talked of returning "home" and driving the vampires back into the darkness.

Now that moment was at hand.

The human states believed they were sufficiently reorganized to strike and had the proper technology to counter the swift, savage hordes of the vampire clans. A brutal War of Reconquest would begin with the coming of spring in the north.

And Princess Adele, standing windswept on the deck of *Ptolemy*, was a lynchpin in the strategy. It was her birthright to be part of the bloody struggle for the future of the world. She was the matrimonial prize that would unite the two greatest human states into an allied war machine.

Adele regarded the imposing figure of Colonel Anhalt and laughed at his worried scowl. "Thank you for your concern, but surely nothing will happen. We are far south of clan territory. Marseilles hasn't been attacked in—what—fifteen years?"

"Seven, Highness."

"Seven then. And the weather is quite warm. As our meteorologists predicted."

Anhalt grunted in tepid acceptance of her logic.

"And I have my White Guard around me." Adele smiled at the furrowed brow on the dark face before her. "You'll keep me safe, won't you, Colonel Anhalt?"

There was a sudden and surprising glisten of moisture in Anhalt's hard eyes. "With my life, Your Highness."

Adele replied, "Dear Anhalt. Where would I be without you?"

"I pray you never have to find out."

"I as well."

A nervous young naval officer stopped and bowed. "The admiral's compliments, Your Highness. He says we will have chemical lights momentarily, and perhaps you should consider moving belowdecks."

The princess replied with proper formality, "Thank you, Lieutenant Sayid." And she noticed his surprise and pride that the imperial heir recalled his name. "I think that two vampires would hardly dare attack an imperial capital ship of one hundred guns."

"One hundred and fifteen guns, Your Highness," the boy responded stiffly.

"Indeed?" Adele smiled. "Impressive. But in any case, since vampiric vision is reputed to exceed a cat's, surely they could easily perceive the better part of a regiment on deck."

Lieutenant Sayid raised a knuckle to his brow in salute and immediately turned to pass orders to the bosun's mates with a less nervous voice. Then he pulled appropriate signal flags and stuffed them into hardened gutta-percha cylinders. The foot-long cylinders went into shining copper pneumatic tubes and were shot to the platforms high in the ship's rigging.

Princess Adele watched as gangs of sailors clambered up the shrouds and ratlines toward the gigantic, gas-filled dirigible overhead. The dirigible was encased in a tightly crosshatched metal eggshell designed to protect it from enemy cannon fire. A row of three wooden masts extended laterally from each side and also along the top spine of the steel frame. Sails were set in concert with filling and evacuating parts of the multichambered dirigible, to propel and steer the massive airship. It was an intricate ballet; a wonder to watch.

Simon glanced at his big sister. "You want to be up there with them, don't you?"

A startled Adele began, "Don't be silly. . . ." Then she stopped and responded honestly, "Yes. And so do you."

The boy laughed and nodded his head vigorously, craning his neck to get a glimpse of the fearless sailors. Adele dropped her arm around her brother's shoulders and followed his gaze upward, feeling a powerful desire to climb the quivering lines alongside the sailors and scale the dizzying main topmast swaying high above the airship to feel the clouds on her face. She envied those simple men who shouted, laughed, and even sang in the wind-ripped tops with only the sureness of their grip separating them from a long but certain death.

On the blustery quarterdeck, Lieutenant Sayid interrupted her thoughts by touching the brim of his cap politely. "Your Highness, if you would please step to this spot between the carronades. I would be loath for you or the prince to be struck by an inconsiderate falling airman."

Simon immediately planted himself and stared up at the swelling sails, forcing Adele to tow his rigid form against the rail. She began to say something to the young officer, but he was already engaged in another duty. With a heavy sigh, she leaned against the hard mahogany gunwale, content to monitor her restless brother in the gathering darkness.

A maid appeared from below with Adele's heavy cape and a coat for Simon. The weather was too warm for a cloak, and Adele would have refused, but the maid was only following orders. If the poor girl returned below with the cloak still in her possession it would create a crisis that would envelop Adele's entire staff. The maid confidently informed Adele that dinner was in exactly

twenty minutes. Then, on her way below, the servant exchanged light, bubbling words with the handsome Mr. Sayid. Adele watched them, fascinated by the mix of hesitance and boldness; a young woman, a handsome officer. Such charming simplicity.

A sudden flash of moonlight reflected in the ostentatious diamond ring on Adele's left hand and forced her to remember her wedding was barely a month away. It wasn't so much a wedding as the starting gun for the war, the signal that Equatoria and the American Republic were one. All the linen, china, and warships would be bound to the same household. Adele thought of the beautiful gold locket that held a picture of her Intended. Senator Clark. War hero. Vampire killer. Scion of a great American house. Undeniably handsome. He had the open brashness of an American, which in another situation she might have found attractive.

Still, the young woman had generally refused to think about the Impending Event because the thought of a stranger's weight on the other side of her bed caused many sleepless nights bathed in a frightened sweat and with a shortness of breath. She couldn't conceive of how her Intended's war-roughened hands would feel on her skin, nor did she want to. Her spy inside the Office of Court Protocol had confided to her that the issue of sexual commerce was still under negotiation and, although it probably could not be eliminated completely, it would at least be kept to the minimum necessary to conceive an heir. The marriage was a political necessity and, therefore, Adele's duty, but she doubted it would ever be more than that.

Adele reached up absently and through her heavy blouse damp with perspiration she felt the small stone talisman hanging around her neck. She wore it instead of the beautiful gold locket with a photo of her Intended which was buried deep in her luggage. Her revered mentor, Mamoru, had given her the religious stone talisman for protection, and it gave her a sense of solemnity and calm. But Adele kept it hidden; no one could know that their princess wore such a superstitious item. Members of court already suspected that her youthful exuberance was a dreadful portent of her failure as empress. Surely they didn't need to know that she had a penchant for the occult and miraculous. The "better" class of people in Equatoria put religion and magic in the same category. Churches and mosques and temples still existed, and services were still held, but those who attended were viewed as quaint at best and deranged at worst. Mamoru was a very spiritual man, and Adele found that part of him fascinating. He claimed that spirituality and naturalism, as much as steel and steam, would destroy the vampires. It was only a matter of firm belief and correct practice.

Ptolemy began to glow with the quavering blurs of chemical bulbs. The other ships in the fleet appeared as vague yellow smudges in the night sky. Far beneath the ship the earth was hidden in a swallowing blackness that had fascinated and terrified Adele since they had left the civilizing lights of the Empire for the vampire frontier of southern France.

Prince Simon's urgent voice interrupted Adele's thoughts. "Do you think we'll meet the Greyfriar out here?"

Adele shook her head with confusion. "What? The Greyfriar? What in the world are you talking about now?"

"The Greyfriar! He's a hero who fights the vampires in the north."

"Oh, yes. No, of course not. He's not even real, Simon. Just a story to make people feel better."

Simon narrowed his eyes at his sister's ignorance. "He's not a story. He's real. I saw pictures in a book. He carries swords and guns and wears a mask. People say he killed a hundred vampires in Brussels. A hundred!" The young prince began to wave his arm around as if he had a sword, striking and slashing. "He's a master fencer with all blades! His swords move so fast vampires can't see it! Whoosh whoosh whoosh! Their heads are rolling before they even know the Greyfriar is there! Hah! Colonel Anhalt, you believe in the Greyfriar, don't you?"

The soldier said over his shoulder with mock solemnity, "Indeed I do, Your Highness. I heard he killed a hundred vampires in Brussels too."

"You see, Adele! I told you!"

Adele replied, "Simon, be still."

"Why can't we meet him? I'll bet if we told him we were coming, he'd meet us. We're the royal family of Equatoria."

"We can't see him because he's not real! Now stand still and mind me!"

Simon huffed. "Well, then, will they let me command the ship?"

"No, of course not," Adele snapped irritably. Then she blinked and said more softly, "Not now. Perhaps tomorrow when it's light."

Adele wanted to nurture Simon's youthful curiosity and excitement, not stifle it. His enthusiasm was important. The Empire needed men like Simon, brazen and curious. Currently at court, to her dismay, there already were far too many of the venal type of man he would become if the palace drudges got their talons on him.

"Why not?" Simon wandered from her side, intent on exploring the ship's wheel, where blazingly bright copper pneumatic tubes gathered to form something like a Baroque organ. Prince Simon was due to become an officer in the Imperial Navy, and this idea excited him.

Colonel Anhalt coughed commandingly at the young prince as small hands played over the pneumo tubes.

Adele darted from the rail and grabbed her brother's arm. "Simon, don't get in the way!"

"I'm not going to hurt anything!" the boy retorted.

They were interrupted by the clack of a pneumo arriving from the tops.

With his back straight, Colonel Anhalt said to Simon, "Would Your Highness care to retrieve that signal from the chief of the top mizzenmast?"

With a yelp of joy, Simon lifted a round copper flap, and a rubber cylinder dropped out into his hand along with a splash of dark liquid. "Ew. What's this?" He lifted his stained fingers into the yellow light.

Oil or grease, Adele thought with mild exasperation, automatically reaching into her pocket for a handkerchief. Anhalt stared at Simon's hand with

furrowed brows. He pulled the pneumo cylinder from the boy's grasp and sniffed it.

"Blood," the rough soldier murmured. Abruptly his stern visage turned on a horrified Princess Adele. His voice was firm and demanding. "Your Highness, take your brother below, if you please."

Adele put one hand instinctively on the hilt of her dagger and with the other tugged Simon toward the main hatch as Colonel Anhalt gazed up at the vast dirigible one hundred feet over his head as if trying to see through it to the invisible topmasts above. Several naval officers on the quarterdeck stopped chatting among themselves and watched with growing interest.

Suddenly the airship lurched. Adele grabbed a pneumatic tube for support and pulled her brother back to his feet. In the rigging high above, she saw a figure tumble sickeningly, flipping this way and that, unable to grasp a safe hold until he shot past the deck into the black atmosphere below the ship. Before Adele could understand that sudden tragedy, another man fell and then another. Then she saw strange shadowy things moving with unnatural agility down through the lines, pulling hand over hand towards the deck.

Two dark cadaverous figures settled to the deck amidships with no sound and lifted their bloodstained faces into the light. Adele saw true savagery for the first time. These vampires were not stories or frightening figures in the distance; they were real, covered in blood that glistened in the lamplight. She clutched her brother close.

Sailors stared at the horrific intruders. A squad of redjackets raised their rifles and opened an erratic fire. One vampire was blown off his feet. The other streaked forward, a blur in the half-light, and two soldiers screamed. The wounded vampire then bounded to his feet and also rushed into the fight. It was a short, bloody affair.

Two other vampires dropped onto the quarterdeck, hissing like cats, only yards from Adele and Simon. One leapt at Simon, too fast for Adele to scream or react.

The vampire's head exploded and the body tumbled.

Anhalt appeared at Adele's side with a smoking revolver extended and Fahrenheit saber in hand. "Get below! Quickly!" He fired twice, hitting the second vampire in the head, and it dropped palsied to the deck.

"Form square!" Anhalt bellowed over the staccato gunfire erupting across the deck. "Fix bayonets! Up and out! Up and out!" Soldiers scrambled for the quarterdeck and gathered into a ragged square around the main hatch. The men fumbled with bayonets and tried to work their rifles as they'd been drilled, each trooper alternating their aim out or up to cover both ground and air. Some young faces were blank, others stained with horror and blood.

Adele sent her brother down into the companionway. She saw the rigging over her head was full of vampires, perhaps a hundred of them squirming and crawling, like a dead tree full of caterpillars. Then the two royals were below, where soldiers and sailors raced frantically through the corridors. Officers shouted orders and counterorders that were lost in the din of tramping feet.

Anhalt dropped quickly through the hatchway and detailed five soldiers to accompany Adele and Simon into the bowels of the ship.

They went down and down, past the acrid-smelling chemical room, into the reeking orlop deck. They were taken to a small dark chamber, fore or aft Adele could no longer say, inhabited by goats, pigs, and crates of chickens.

"You'll be safe here, Your Highness." A soldier shoved the royal siblings into the manger, then slammed the door shut.

For a long time, neither Adele nor Simon spoke in the blackness. She hugged her brother, noticing that he was shivering, his unblinking eyes staring at a small goat that stood in the straw nearby. They strained to hear traces of the battle, hoping for hints of victory. Surely, the finest troops of the Equatorian Empire could defeat vampire raiders. The vampires would flee like vermin once they realized that this was not a lazy merchant vessel that had strayed too far north.

The room shuddered and made a heart-sickening lurch to starboard. Simon screeched and squeezed Adele as they tumbled across the manger. Trying to cushion Simon's body, she hit the bulkhead amidst a pile of chicken crates. Adele lifted a crate off her brother and brought him closer.

After several frightening minutes in the dark, the door flew open and Colonel Anhalt appeared with a horrid gash marring his dark face, his tunic torn and drenched in blood. He carried a trooper's carbine and his saber, smoking with boiling blood. "Highness, quickly if you please. The ship is going down."

Adele climbed to her feet. "Lifeboats?"

"No." Anhalt shepherded the royal pair from the room. "Too unsafe." Airship lifeboats were small gondolas attached to chemically inflated balloons; easy prey to vampires. Three soldiers moved ahead and four fell in behind. As the group climbed to the gun deck the chemical lighting went out, plunging the ship into pitch black. The hallway was listing at a rough angle, and footing was treacherous. Ahead, sailors were filling a room with mattresses and rolled hammocks. Anhalt indicated for Adele and Simon to go inside. "Stay here, Your Highness. And don't worry."

Adele pushed Simon to the floor, where he stayed compliantly. Sliding her hand off her brother's stiff shoulder, she moved back to her trusted Gurkha colonel and whispered, "What's our situation?"

Anhalt hesitated, but after staring into the steady eyes of the young woman he admired, and again realizing why he admired her, he said, "The vampires have destroyed most of the sails and damaged the dirigible. And we can no longer stay aloft. The White Guard is losing the deck."

"How is this possible?" she asked, incredulous. "Raiders don't—"

"These aren't raiders, Your Highness. This is a full-scale attack by clan packs. They mean to destroy this ship. Perhaps the entire convoy."

"That's incredible! Surely we have the firepower to stop them."

"I hope so. Vampires are desperately hard to kill. The monsters do not know they are injured until they are in pieces. Even with a Fahrenheit blade, you have to destroy a vital organ or sever their head."

"How many are there?"

He shook his head and hefted his red saber without outward emotion.

"Fewer now."

"How many men have we lost?"

"Many," Anhalt answered, and turned to leave.

Adele noticed the bloody footprints left by the colonel and his four White Guardsmen, and anger raced through her. The door closed and she knelt beside Simon, dragging a mattress over them. She sang softly to her brother, a lullaby she used to sing to him when he was a baby. They waited.

Adele heard a strange sound mixed with her own voice.

But there was so much noise enveloping the ship that at first Adele dismissed the sound as just part of the battle. Then it came again from just by her ear. It was coming from the other side of the bulkhead. She strained to hear. Men running? The creaking of stressed timber? Rats scurrying for safety? There was something about it that didn't seem to fit any of those.

"What is that noise?" asked Simon in a small voice.

"Nothing," Adele responded. "It's nothing." But the anxiety inside her wouldn't go away. She shifted and eased Simon away from the wall. From within her cape emerged her Fahrenheit khukri dagger. The glow from the blade gave her some small comfort, but couldn't stop the wild pounding of her heart.

Then the wall started to break apart.