

THE DARKFERN LEXICON

BOOK 1

WEBWAY

BENJAMIN FERAL

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BOOK 1

WEBWAY

FROM THE MIND OF

BENJAMIN FERAL

DEDICATION

For my niece, Elie, who fell asleep before the story finished.

THE DARKFERN LEXICON

BOOK 1

WEBWAY

The clouds above listened well,
To a tale of a girl,
Two wands,
And a spell.
Through The Webway,
A world awaits,
For the young witch who dreams,
Of clockwork gates.
Cloaked in red,
She'll run from her past,
But with the wolves at her back,
Each breath is her last.
Now, let it be said,
Yes, let it be known,
The last Ryder has come,
To take back her throne.

CHAPTER 1

PERCIVAL'S OBLIGATION

Huge, grey clouds loomed ominously over London. They had been gathering all morning; lazily blotting the blue with their grey-bulk as they clumped-up over the capital city. As was often the case their coming was not by chance. This meeting was for one, singular reason. In this place a rarity was about to occur; an event which no cloud living could claim to have witnessed. Whispers of a tale untold...

The clouds pushed and shoved as they shouted greetings to one another in booming, thunderous voices. The noisome-gaggle created quite the racket as they took their seats and began to settle down. The eldest of the clouds, ancient, gnarled and hard of hearing, cleared her gullet grumpily. Her throaty-rasp signalled the commencement of the story.

And so it began...

A roll of thunder informed a squadron of rain drops, patiently waiting at the cloud's edge, that the time had come. They reacted immediately, eager to fulfil their orders. The small group of comrades had served together before, but never on a mission of such importance. None had ever dreamed of instigating destiny, of being the catalyst that would change everything.

A message from the drops scouting ahead informed the squadron their target had been sighted. They moved into the attack formation, saluting each other and glinting with pride, as they accelerated towards the ground.

The squadron plummeted, their descent a well-practiced manoeuvre. The droplets moved like a shoal of silvery fish, turning and twisting as one; not a word uttered amongst them.

They didn't speak because each could see their target. As a unit they fixed their gaze on the well-dressed man; he was the first of many cogs... The gentleman was standing, shiftily one might add, on the corner of Baker Street. On his head he wore a wide-brimmed hat. This choice of attire narrowed their available *landing spots* considerably. They couldn't very well start a story off without full-contact; a splash was called-for. With little other option they aimed for his left shoulder and increased their momentum. The man's narrow shoulder was clothed in a perfectly-ironed raincoat and it shrugged irritably as he looked the length of the road.

The formation of droplets was less than thirty feet away from contact when, with sudden and inexplicable ferocity, disaster struck. Half the right flank became embroiled on a cable which

connected one building to another. So close to completion they hung from the length of metallic-sinew as their comrades flew on.

The remaining drops could not falter now not when they were so close. Neither could they return to help their fallen friends. The mission, above all else, must succeed. Down they flew growing ever closer until, with an almighty thunderous-cheer from the clouds, they touched down on the left sleeve.

Splash!

Percival Montague tutted as the first few drops of rain landed on his new jacket. Even though it *was* a raincoat, a garment quite suited to getting wet, he did not like the dark patch of beige that now marred and disrupted his otherwise pristine appearance.

He tucked his perfectly folded newspaper under one arm and removed an ironed handkerchief from his consistently lint-free pocket. He dabbed gently in an effort to dry the blemish. However, as a second clash of thunder rolled overhead he rapidly abandoned his quest for another. He hastily opened his black leather briefcase and removed an umbrella from the interior; even when fair-weather was forecast he carried one with him. In Percival's opinion the key to success was preparation.

It was not like Percival to be loitering idly on a street corner. Unfortunately for him today was the type of occurrence that was wholly unavoidable; no matter how much he objected or complained. Much like the arduous task of attending a birthday party, no doubt held in the honour of some disliked relation, he too had a family obligation to deal with.

His task however did not involve a neatly-wrapped gift adorned with frivolous ribbons. His reason for standing on the street corner was considerably more mundane. He was to deliver an envelope. Actually, to be more specific it was the letter within the sealed, paper folds that he was to hand over. The envelope had been passed down from father to son, treated as an heirloom more valuable than gold, for generations of Montague men. It was to be delivered at the designated place and time by whoever had it in their possession. As Percival had no son (a decision he made given his intense dislike for all children) it fell to him to deliver the damnable thing.

Percival placed his hand into his pocket. His fingertips touched the smooth paper and at once his mind became washed with the calmness of familiarity. Throughout his life his relationship with the papery concealment had shifted and changed as often as the weather. As a child he had struggled with the temptation to open it. As a young man he had done his best to forget it. Now, as he approached the end of his life, he loathed it.

This letter had been a *millstone* around his neck; a burden that was his simply because he bore a particular surname. He had spent his entire life waiting for this day, this hour, this moment, to arrive. His was a life half-wasted on waiting. He had spent so many years tarrying the delivery

that he hadn't given any thought to what happens next. Percival was not the kind of man who could exist without focus. He was not the kind of man who relished the idea of freedom. He was the kind of man who liked organisation and rules...but there would be no more rules after this day.

Percival lifted the ancient letter closer to his old, bespectacled eyes. Despite being slightly yellowed with age the envelope was otherwise pristine; it was the *one* thing he liked about it. Not a crease, scuff or blemish marked the immaculate, paper surface. Nevertheless, much to Percival's disgust no length of time had faded the garish and, in his considerable opinion, unnecessarily flamboyant, purple ink.

His greatest concern was the *ink*. As one would expect the purple scribble of words had always read the same; ***To be confirmed***. Those three words had remained constant throughout his entire life. Until a few months prior that is, when without rhyme or reason the writing inexplicably changed...

How this occurred flummoxed Percival. Try as he might, even with all his intellect, he failed to find a reasonable explanation. The envelope had been locked away in his wall safe and no one but he had a key. Even his wife, Mavis, didn't have access. Of course this didn't stop him from accusing her. It was Mavis, in an effort to clear her name of any wrong-doing, who suggested the use of invisible ink. He decided to accept her idea as it was both logical and sensible one...and he couldn't think of a better one.

Percival momentarily pondered the likelihood of this letter being a long-running family joke. He discounted the notion almost instantly; no one in Percival's family, himself included, had a sense of humour to speak of. He carefully folded up his doubts and neatly packaged them away in a dark corner of his mind. This would all be over soon and then he could go home and pack for his holiday.

Mavis Montague, Percival's long suffering wife of forty years, was addicted to competitions. She entered every one she found from crossword puzzles and adverts on TV, to game show phone in contests and cereal packets. Not only did she enter them but she also had the fortuitous-habit of winning.

Mavis had received quite a lot of prizes over the years. The rewards ranged from boxes of chocolates and a lifetime's supply of washing up liquid, to dinners in restaurants and even a brand new car.

So, a few mornings prior as Percival had been eating his usual, unexciting breakfast of porridge, he was not at all surprised when Mavis excitedly waved a letter under his nose and announced that she had won them a two-week break in the Lake District.

Percival did not like the countryside. Given the choice he preferred to holiday by the sea. The ocean's fresh, bracing salt-air was considerably more appealing than a breeze soiled by the rampant-trumpeting of a cow's back end. If the pong wasn't bad enough the countryside had a slow, dawdling pace to life that made his blood boil. He was a man of rapidity and action. By far

the worst thing about the countryside, in his opinion that is, was the people who inhabited the winding lanes. Most didn't know how to dress appropriately or speak clearly for that matter. He shuddered at the thought of interacting with...*locals*.

Abundant misgivings aside, even Percival wasn't about to pass up the offer of a *free* holiday. He quashed his doubts with his desire for a bargain and convinced himself that it was his choice to go; though, if truth be known, he knew that Mavis wouldn't have taken 'no' for an answer anyway.

Percival cleared his mind. His eyes settled back on the envelope and traced the address. So many times over the last few months he had looked at it and every time he winced in disgust at the purple ink:

*Miss Harmony Ryder,
The Purple Ambulance,
Traffic Lights,
Baker Street
April 21st 10:34am*

"Ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous," Percival said, accidentally speaking aloud. This indiscretion was quite against his own nature; *he* normally made a point of avoiding people who talked to themselves in the street.

He placed the envelope back in his pocket, careful not to get the letter wet in the now pouring rain; his umbrella doing its best to protect him. Percival extended his arm and looked at the watch securely fastened around his wrist. He had been given it as a birthday gift from his wife; no doubt she had won it. Her ability to acquire such gifts was something that he was pleased about. The watch was well made and expensive looking and would have cost far too much money had she purchased it. However, the undeniable fact that it kept such excellent time superseded any internal quibbles he had regarding cost and worth.

The slender, silver hands were indicating that the time was 10:31am. He raised his head and looked along the road. There was no purple ambulance, in fact there was little traffic at all which was surprising given it was late morning in the centre of London.

A strange feeling was rising inside Percival and he did not like it one bit. He had never felt indecisive before. He had never questioned any thought that had occurred or any order given. Nevertheless the urge to abandon his quest and ignore his lifelong duty, to not deliver the letter was almost overwhelming.

He quivered at the thought of not completing the task. His turbulent mind flipped between *stay* and *flee*. How was he supposed to take this task seriously? There was no ambulance anywhere in sight and the, now heavy, rain had managed to bypass his umbrella and soak the bottom half of his new raincoat. His feet squelched uncomfortably in his shoes as he checked his watch again.

The reassuringly precise and ordered mechanics seemed to calm him for a moment, a fleeting fragment of time that passed all too quickly. The time was 10:33am. A sickening wave of panic flooded his stomach. An image suddenly invaded his head. What if the ambulance did, by some miracle, arrive on time? Everyone would see him handing over the letter and, worst of all, they would think *he* knew the kind of reprobates that would drive a purple ambulance. Would that not be worse than just throwing the letter away? Or maybe he could just keep it and open it for himself.

At that very moment several things happened at once. Their happening was ordained, fated to occur. Little did he know that this sequence of happenings would bring about the end of a life he so desperately clung to.

Firstly, Percival panicked. He turned around and made to walk swiftly away from the clearly stated delivery point. In an instant his mind was made up, deposit the letter in the nearest bin and forget this ever happened. His foot had yet to claim that first step before a thunderous (badly in need of a mechanic) engine demanded his attention. His head slowly turned to the side as his worried eyes looked for the source of the horrendous noise.

Horrified, he caught sight of an old, dangerously-rickety and disgustingly-purple ambulance. The visually-offensive vehicle was travelling along the road at an alarming speed. Foreseeing the impending accident Percival glanced from the speeding motor to the red traffic lights. Clearly the driver had not done the same.

Whilst his mind attempted to divine the future Percival's body continued to walk forwards. His attention was so captivated by the ambulance that he failed entirely to see another, looming collision.

Unbeknownst to Percival a large group of Japanese tourists, all dressed in matching yellow-ponchos, emerged from the Tube-station entrance. Similarly to him the excitable throng of visitors were likewise enthralled by the purple vehicle skidding to a halt at the traffic lights. They surged toward him and collectively whipped out their cameras to capture the moment for posterity.

As if fate had expected him to leave without handing the letter over Percival was swept up by the huddle of tourists and dragged back towards the ambulance.

Caught in the surge Percival felt his feet falter; the ground beneath them was suddenly no longer solid. He reached out a hand, attempting to steady himself by grabbing the slippery, wet shoulder of a Japanese woman. She screamed as she hit his hand away and began shouting angrily at him. He barely had time to mouth an apology before he felt himself begin to sink. Instinct took over and his mind gave the order for his hand to brace for impact.

For some inexplicable reason his hand decided to play the traitor and defy his command. Instead of helping, the hand thrust itself into his pocket. His fingers gripped the letter and raised it above his ever-sinking head.

The excited crowd chose that precise moment to start taking pictures of the ambulance. The furious clicking of buttons commenced as a young, red-haired girl wound down the window. A hundred camera flashes blinded poor Percival and he unwittingly let go of the letter. He fell painfully to the ground and lay amongst the forest of shuffling feet.

Having escaped the confines of the pocket, the letter flew into the air. Dancing in a sudden gust of wind the envelope teased the tourists' snatching hands. Like crocodiles trying to seize a fleeing bird they scrambled to catch it. For a few more seconds it hovered in the rain, just out of reach. Then, having had its fill of flirting with the desperate hands, it slipped effortlessly in through the open window of the ambulance. With a heavy plop it landed on the lap of the red-haired girl.

The lights shifted to green and the ambulance lurched away. Through a haze of yellow-plastic Percival made eye-contact with a small, pale face watching him through the wing-mirror. The young girl, gave a concerned smile then disappeared from view as the garish vehicle dangerously rounded a corner and vanished from sight.

The throng of tourists moved on without any offer of help to Percival. He sat for a moment, still slightly dazed. The rain, it seemed, fell mainly on him.

He breathed a sigh of relief. The burden he had carried all his life had been lifted; if ever he had a reason to celebrate this was it.

Percival picked himself up off the pavement; a little embarrassed but unhurt. He quickly collected his scattered belongings together. His briefcase, other than a few minor scratches, was relatively undamaged and it lay abandoned a few feet away. His umbrella, however, was beyond repair. Its spider-like legs had been mangled by the stampeding crowd and it could no longer offer any respite from the rain. He folded it as best he could, which wasn't very well at all. Then, deciding that perhaps it was time for a new one, he stuffed it unceremoniously into the nearest bin.

Percival was on his way home feeling happy. In the end he was happy that he *had* delivered the letter. He was happy that the delivery had not been a joke. Happy that he had completed the task given to him by his father and happy that now he was going on a nice, quiet holiday; safe in the knowledge that nothing as strange as today would ever happen to him again...how wrong he was.

CHAPTER 2

HARMONY'S LETTER

The clouds had yet to gather as a purple ambulance sped along the motorway showing little regard of the speed limit. The fast-moving wagon passed by a sign for London. Without so much as a hint of an indicator the plum-coloured vehicle veered across all three lanes and exited via a slip road. A symphony of car horns followed the dangerous manoeuvre and the unnerving screech of rubber tyres punctuated the morning.

Down amongst the busy streets the ambulance continued at a break-neck speed. It wove through the morning traffic; the roads clogged like the arteries of a person whose diet was unlikely to produce longevity. The angry and frustrated motorists cursed the recklessness of the driver as they swerved to avoid her bullish movements.

A rather infuriated taxi driver threateningly-shook his meaty fist at the vehicle. The angry man hurled several insults and gestured wildly. The unprintable-calumny revolved around the female driver and the hideousness of her *hippie-wagon*.

Luckily these comments went completely unnoticed by the red-haired woman behind the wheel. Her attention, which was clearly not being applied to her driving, was taken up entirely by several decibels of operatic music. The soul-churning arrangement erupted from the speakers as her list of driving offences mounted ever higher.

The young, female passenger gripped her seatbelt for security, her knuckles white, as they ventured into oncoming traffic. Mere inches from a collision the ambulance swerved back onto the correct side. Two seconds later the driver failed to halt for a red light and instead burst through the intersection. More tyres screeched as the ambulance momentarily mounted the busy pavement and then re-joined the road. The lumbering van splashed down into a massive puddle and caused an upsurge of water which showered the screaming pedestrians.

“MUM! Slow down!” Harmony yelled over the deafening composition.

“How many times must I tell you? Don't call me by my *slave* name. I am Rose Ryder, a free woman!”

“Well, you won't be free for long if you keep driving like this. The police will lock you up and with good reason too.”

“Relax, Harmony. I'm in complete control. Besides this is how *one* is supposed to drive an ambulance. I've seen it done hundreds of times,” Rose insisted.

Harmony leant forward and turned the dial on the stereo, lowering the volume to a more respectable level. “They're allowed to drive like that because they're ferrying injured people to a hospital. Whereas the way you drive will end up putting people there.”

Harmony looked over at her mother. Their relationship was a complex one. Harmony found Rose to be both loveable and incredibly irritating. This was a contradiction she blamed mostly on

her teens. Or perhaps it was from being raised in the cramped, old ambulance with only her mother for company.

Rose turned her head and met Harmony's glare. She scrunched up her face in a mockingly-sad expression. In an instant Rose replaced the frown with her trademark, solar-powered smile. Harmony stared back, unmoved with her mother's attempt at humour.

"Watch the road, *Rose*," Harmony ordered irritably.

She knew it was pointless to try and curb her mother's speeding. However, her own moral-compass insisted she at least try. In the past she had made innumerable attempts to curb Rose's erratic driving. Alas, time and time again her concerns were quashed with that winning smile. It didn't help much either that Rose believed it was everyone else who drove badly.

Harmony had seen that smile utilised on countless targets. Their walk of life mattered little; none were spared the dazzling beam when she turned it toward them. Rose had smiled her way out of copious predicaments. These ranged from simple traffic violations to more serious governmental-mandates. Each had been easily overcome. Come to think of it Harmony had witnessed the smile employed on *everyone* who stood in her mother's way. She wondered how many times she had fallen prey to it. The very thought that her mother would or could control her like that was decidedly unnerving.

It was due to that smile that she had never set foot in a traditional school. Instead her education was given within the confines of the ambulance. Harmony's schooling consisted of endless rants regarding '*the ways of the Universe*'. Rose considered this the greatest lesson in life, certainly more so than how to measure a triangle. However, it seemed more like avoiding any form of parental responsibility from Harmony's perspective.

She glanced over her shoulder at her home, school and playground; the tiny metal box that encompassed her entire world. The living area was adorned with bunk beds and folding tables. Space was of such high value that Harmony was only permitted a shoebox in which to keep her most treasured possessions. Hers was a life lived on the move. They never stayed in any place for more than a few weeks.

"You're a bit grumpy today. Is anything the matter?" Rose questioned. She already knew the answer would be short and sulky but she asked it anyway.

"No. I'm fine," Harmony snapped. She folded her arms and sighed deeply, her breath fogging the rain-streaked window.

"It's your birthday soon. Isn't that something to look forward to?"

"Humph."

"Is there anything you'd like to do for it? You're only fourteen once."

"Oh *Mummy*, please can I invite my friends over for a slumber party? Ah! Wait, that's right. I don't have any friends," Harmony retorted, brandishing her overt sarcasm as if it were a blade.

Rose thought it wise to leave her daughter alone. She seemed determined to wallow in her misery. Harmony would express herself soon enough. Speaking their minds was a talent shared by all the women of the Ryder family.

Harmony stared out of the window at the muted, grey-brown city. The buildings blurred along with the countless faces as they sped, like a rat in a maze, through the streets.

Amidst the gloop of gloomy thoughts Harmony came to a realisation. She wasn't happy with her life. Sure it was fun most of the time. Rose had done her best by her and she appreciated all that she had. But the constant moving and never having time to connect with those around her culminated in Harmony feeling like an outsider. It was like she were an alien; a stranger that didn't belong in the world beyond the ambulance.

This feeling was strongest when they did socialise with other people. On those rare occasions she felt unable to make friends with the children she met. She often struggled to follow their conversations. She was baffled by their fascination with celebrities, none of who she had heard of anyway. When it came to discussing films or television she was doubly flummoxed as she had never seen or watched either.

It was unsurprising then that instead of mingling Harmony opted to sit alone in the ambulance. She filled her time with reading books and making clothes on her foot-powered sewing machine.

Conversely Rose, who attracted people to her like bees to a flower, had no such social failings. She loved to have *adult conversations* (usually accompanied by several bottles of wine) that were unsuitable for children. It appeared to Harmony that Rose was totally and blissfully unaware of her daughter's dejection.

An unstoppable-tear escaped from her eye and rolled down her cheek.

"Harmony! Harmony this is the street where Sherlock Homes lived. Yes. Look over there...*Baker Street*," Rose squealed excitedly.

Harmony was only slightly aware that her mother was speaking. Her attention was taken up by a troupe of poncho-clad tourists. The group filed out from the Tube station and swarmed around a man. She glanced forward and caught sight of the traffic lights turning red.

"*Stop!*" Harmony screamed.

Rose slammed on the brakes and skidded to a halt. "Gosh. That was a close one."

"Honestly. You're unbelievable!" Harmony scolded as she wound down the window.

She turned to look out at the street and ignored Rose's overwhelmingly-feeble excuses. Once again she caught sight of the man embroiled in the tourist's huddle. He stumbled and fell, his descent lost in a sea of camera flashes.

As the man vanished both she and the sightseers focused on an oddity. A letter flew out of the fallen-man's hand and sailed into the air. Harmony watched as the cluster of vacationers tried to catch the envelope. Teasingly it danced just above their fingertips. Then, as if by magic, the envelope drifted in through the open window of the ambulance. It landed with a heavy plop on Harmony's lap.

The lights changed again and the ambulance lurched away. Harmony looked into the wing-mirror, instinctively searching for the man's eyes in the haze of yellow plastic. She found him looking somewhat bewildered. Their gaze met for a split second before the purple van rounded a corner.

Harmony looked across to her mother. She was just about to repeat the story when she glanced down and scanned the address. A jolt of shock, disbelief and excitement surged through her. The letter was addressed to her...

"A man dropped a letter. It came in through the window," Harmony stuttered, flabbergasted by what she was seeing. Her mind reeled. This was the first letter she had ever received.

"Well. We should post it for him. These things always happen for a reason my love," Rose responded with a knowledgeable tone. "The Universe has a plan and we are just its willing pawns."

"Yes Mum, I know. Actually, for once, I agree... I think this may have been *fate*," Harmony acknowledged. She gently traced the purple writing with her fingertip.

"Wonderful! At last you're starting to see the bigger picture," Rose announced proudly.

Harmony wasn't listening anymore. Instead she was staring at the envelope. It seemed to be a bit...*odd*. The strangeness was brought about by more than the bizarrely-accurate address. The old, yellow paper appeared to squirm under her fingers, almost as if it were trying to open.

She turned it over and stared at the writing. The purple ink shone. Harmony assumed, with good reason, that the glow was merely a trick of the light. Nevertheless the violet-tinted hue was mesmerising, enticing even. She re-read the address just to make sure that it definitely was for her.

Her mind buzzed with questions: Who was the man? Was he the sender? If not then who was? How did he or they know she would be at those lights at that exact moment? Why would anyone send her a letter in the first place?

Harmony resisted the temptation to sunder the envelope. In all honesty she was quite perturbed with the situation. As such she held fast to the paper rectangle whilst she struggled to make sense of it all. She wasn't ready to open it yet. The feeling that something would change if she did was a heady concoction of excitement and terror.

Not one to rush head first into a situation Harmony mulled over her thoughts; brooding over the letter's meaning.

Several hours later the purple ambulance was well beyond the sprawl of London. Rose sped down a country lane, traversing the tight corners without slowing down as they headed along the Cornish coast. Harmony still held the unopened letter in a tight grip.

“Can we stop please?” Harmony asked. Her voice was quiet and thoughtful.

Rose looked across at her daughter and, sensing a womanly chat in the offing, she pulled over. The key turned and the grumbling, grinding engine coughed into silence at the entrance of a dirt road.

“This is a beautiful place to have a break, love. Well spotted,” Rose said, turning to look at her daughter. “Is everything ok?”

Harmony remained silent as she handed the unopened letter to Rose. She watched as her mother’s expression changed from calm and centred to one of wide-eyed astonishment. Rose’s mouth opened and closed, resembling a startled fish, as she read the address. She looked to Harmony with a modicum of a frown on her brow. With just a hint of reluctance Rose handed the letter back.

“Where did it come from?” she questioned.

“The man who fell dropped it. It can’t actually be for me though...can it?”

“It’s your name of the front,” Rose shrugged.

“But, besides you I don’t know anybody,” Harmony reasoned. “And how did they know we’d be there? It doesn’t make sense.”

Rose smiled and the cabin was filled with her enviable-warmth. “Things rarely make sense from the outset. There is only one way to find out who sent it to you. You’ll just have to open it and see.”

Harmony turned the envelope over and slid her finger along the v-shaped lip. It tickled the tip as if begging to be opened.

“Ok, here goes,” she conceded. She took one final moment to smile at Rose before breaking the seal.

Harmony tore into the envelope and removed the letter from within. As she unfolded the aged paper a small iron key dropped onto her lap. She ignored it for the moment and instead read aloud.

My dearest Harmony,

I hope that this letter finds you happy, safe and in the protective care of your mother. I understand this must be strange for you. I will do my best to explain what I can. You don’t know me and sadly we are never likely to meet. This letter will only come into

your possession if I have failed in my quest. If you are reading this then death found me before I found solace.

My name is Nova Ryder and I am your Great Aunt. All that was mine I give to you. Upon my death the possession of my home - Darkfern Cottage - and all contents therein passed to you. Love my home and treat it well. Do this and I promise you will be protected from the dangers ahead. There is a storm coming...

You may wonder why I chose you. I cannot say here, this letter is not a safe place for such secrets. I simply ask that you trust me. Ask the loyalist amongst them to tell my truth.

Forgive my ramblings, child. You may not know me but I know you. I have watched you from afar. I have seen you grow from a helpless babe into a young woman - one who reminds me so much of myself. I'm confident that you're ready for the ~~burden~~ adventure I bring you.

I am sorry that we never met in person...but it was not meant to be. Nor would it have been safe. I wish you could have been older before I passed this unto you; you are the warden of my regrets. I ask for your forgiveness, child. My mistakes were made so long ago, and now I look to you to put them right.

Be safe. The wolves are ever near....

*Yours in spirit,
Nova Ryder*

P.S. Rose will remember the way. Just remind her of 'Meme the Oak'.

Harmony finished reading the letter and looked up at Rose. Her head was utterly jam-packed with questions and confusion. Despite her bafflement she managed to utter one question. "Who is *Meme the Oak*?"

Her eyebrows were arched in a '*this can't be serious*' manner and she really didn't expect an answer. Nonetheless, and much to her amazement, Rose nodded and started the engine up. Without responding to Harmony's continued questions, she pulled out into the road. Not a word was voiced by Rose as she turned the ambulance and started to drive up the dirt track.

"Where are we going? Mum? Hey, I'm talking to you."

Harmony felt like she was in a dream; albeit a very lucid and entirely surreal dream. Her mother was definitely in a trance of some description. She wasn't answering any of her questions. Instead she slowly trundled along the dirt road; this was the slowest Harmony had ever seen her drive.

The sky outside, which only a moment earlier was blue and sunny, abruptly darkened. A thick fog rolled in from an unseen source to swarm around the ambulance. Harmony stared out of the window desperately trying to see anything beyond the grey miasma.

She reached across and flicked on the head lamps; a vain attempt to shed some light on the road. The beams hit the wall of fog and succumbed to its density without much of a fight. Each failed to penetrate more than a few feet.

Starting to panic at the silence around her, not to mention the disturbingly glazed expression in her mother's eyes, she tried to open the door. The van was moving slowly enough that she could safely exit. The latch clicked open but the door refused to move. Though she discounted the notion as being silly, she got the impression that the fog was pushing against the door.

A sickening fear was growing in her belly and she felt a scream starting to force its way up from her chest. She tightened her throat and halted the fearful cry. Seeing no other option Harmony unclipped her seatbelt and turned to face Rose.

"Mum! Please say something! Say anything!" Harmony shouted. In an attempt to waken Rose she vigorously shook her shoulders. "Please, snap out of it!"

Rose slammed down hard on the brakes. The ambulance stopped immediately. Unprepared for the abrupt halt Harmony was thrown forward. Her head thumped hard against the windscreen. A white, hot flash of pain burned across her skull. Her vision faded, eclipsed by bright light and a high-pitched tone.

CHAPTER 3

THE DREAMER'S KEY

Harmony opened her eyes as the light and noise from the bump subsided. The ambulance, her entranced-mother, the fog and even the pain in her head were all gone. She frowned as she took in her new surroundings.

Alone and puzzled she found herself submerged, up to her neck, in a pool of warm liquid. The secretion was silver in colour and it possessed a consistency similar to treacle. A sweet-scented perfume wafted up to greet her. Like steam rising from a hot bath the aroma formed visible wisps that swirled around her.

Her attention moved beyond the pool and focused on the encompassing forest. The trees were dense, tall and wrapped in golden bark. The metallic-skin glistened and reflected the few adventurous rays of sunlight that speared through the canopy.

As each beam collided with a tree's trunk it fractured into several shafts. Each fractal transformed into a patch of rainbow. The prismatic-lights rippled across the twig-strewn floor in a kaleidoscopic dance.

Between the golden trees the forest air was thick and pungent. The mulched-swelter, a humid blend of damp earth and decayed flora, was punctuated with strange streaks of iridescence. The smears of tangible light disintegrated after a few moments; becoming a glittering powder that vanished on the lethargic breeze.

Harmony narrowed her eyes and located the source of the trails; a tiny, glowing creature zooming around in erratic movements. It was at this point Harmony realised she was dreaming. Nothing this beautiful could possibly exist...

With a grimace she decided her fingers were becoming too pruned by the water. She reached for the pool's edge. The thick liquid was absurdly difficult to move through, akin to swimming in honey. It took all her might to reach the side and grip the moss-covered rim. She looked around to check no one was lurking in the bushes. Her suspicion scoured the foliage looking for spying eyes.

Satisfied that no one was skulking she heaved her naked body from the pool. To her amazement and relief the liquid did not remain in the puddle. As her body elevated, the pool's content clung to her. The liquid formed into drapes of aquatic-fabric that began to weave, meld and contour around her body. In a matter of seconds she was clothed in a beautiful, ethereal gown that billowed around her on the breeze like an enormous, tropical-jellyfish.

The colour of the material changed in a flash of light from silver to a hundred hues of purple. Tiny diamond-like lights flowed endlessly from a cluster around the high collar. Each dash of light followed an erratic path, like bolts of lightning, out to the hem of the dress.

Harmony looked down expecting to see her bare feet sunken into the vibrant green moss. Surprisingly this was not the case; her feet were *not* on the ground...

She was in fact floating several inches above the ground; her feet pointed like that of a ballerina mid-pirouette.

“How weird is this?” she voiced to herself.

The lucidity of this dream was astonishing. Or perhaps this was a concussion? She had hit her head pretty hard after all. It didn't matter really. Either way she was in the dream now, as such she decided to make the most of it. Instinctively her hand raised and caught one of the glowing creatures.

The fly tickled the palm of her hand as she brought it to the level of her eyes. Slowly and carefully she loosened her grip and peeked inside. A gasp of shock and wonder escaped her. Slowly her gaze penetrated the light and saw the being within. In her hand she held a tiny, golden seahorse. Upon its back were four, luminescent, dragonfly-like wings that fluttered as fast as a hummingbird'.

The creature made a very disgruntled whinny and darted out her hand leaving its lustrous trail in the air. The bright-beast raced to join a very large group of its kin. It bounced and buzzed, communicating some unknowable tale. A moment of panic aroused her suspicion as the collective colour of the seahorse-flies shifted from gold to volcanic-red.

The group of creatures advanced on Harmony's position. Panic-stricken she tried to take a step forward. The small movement in her foot propelled her through the forest several feet.

The movement brought a smile to her face. She repeated the action again, with more force and this time, and was catapulted thirty feet. A wide grin spread from ear to ear as she repeated the movement over and over. The rapid propulsion soon resulted in her leaving the infuriated mob of seahorse-creatures far behind.

Speeding and weaving between the trees made the tendrils of her garment billow around her in a haunting, twisting motion. The lengths of cloth reached out and curled round tree trunks and branches. Like the arms of a colossal octopus, the tendrils allowed her to change direction at breakneck speeds. She laughed and screamed out loud at the exhilaration of flying.

After her fill of flying Harmony reduced her speed and slowed down to a gentle drift. She took the time to look around and as she did so she became aware of two details.

Firstly the trees were of a familiar construction in this part of the forest. The golden-bark trunks had been replaced with the usual browns, greys and greens. Moreover there was a distinct lack of iridescence. There was no mistaking it, this was a very ordinary forest.

The second element to be observed, which was probably the most important, was a huge wall of grey stone. The endless boundary separated the forest; splitting the woods in two like an axe through a log.

She came to a stop by a large oak tree. The ancient timber sat at the edge of a clearing. Harmony ran her fingertips across the reassuringly-natural bark as she walked its circumference.

Her fixation on the tree abruptly ended as she glimpsed a woman with flame-red hair. The stranger was dressed in a gunmetal-grey gown. The dull garment appeared to be made of the same aquatic-fabric as her dress. Though, admittedly the woman's frock looked to be stagnant and sickly. Its lifeless tendrils trailed lazily along the ground, apparently unable to rise and perform as Harmony's did with such ease.

The red-haired woman stood next to a large, copper, clockwork gate. The mechanical portal was housed between two huge pillars, each topped by a bizarre gargoyle.

On the right sat a massive, white snail. The sizeable mollusc was carved from a pale wood and decorated with golden coins. It's counterpart to the left was a wolf, hewn from obsidian. The fearsome beast was adorned with silver armour and he watched over the entrance with a ferocious snarl frozen on his face.

Harmony shuddered as she looked away from the wolf. The very sight of him made her blood run cold and she gave thanks that he was only a statue. In an attempt to push him from her mind she focused on the gate and the woman before it.

The design of the portal was decidedly cruel. The keyhole was transient. With a degree of intelligence it shifted from cog to cog, never staying in once place for longer than a blink. The opening appeared to taunt the woman beneath it, teasing and tempting her by passing close before quickly relocating to an awkward and often lofty extreme.

Harmony got the distinct impression that whoever built the wall did not want any visitors. Her eyes flitted onto the woman and she wondered what lay beyond the cogs? What treasure was worth the effort of entry?

The red-haired beauty cried great, heaving sobs of sadness and frustration. Tears streaked her cheeks as she desperately sorted through a burgeoning ring of keys in her hand. Despite the futility of her task she tried each key in the evasive lock. When it failed to turn, instead crumbling into dust in her hand, her sobs began anew.

Harmony watched silently as the woman sank to the floor defeated and exhausted; her eyes too full of tears to carry on. She dropped the keys on the ground and they landed with a clinking-thud.

Harmony was just about to announce her presence when the stranger's head jerked upward. Her steel-grey gaze locked with Harmony's own and the air around them seemed to electrify. The disenable alteration in the atmosphere caused the hair on Harmony's arms stand on end.

The woman's lips moved quickly, mouthing a succession of silent words. Instantly the gap between them filled with golden threads. The gleaming fibres lashed around Harmony and tethered her to the ground.

The filaments slowly ensnared her arms and legs. They felt warm and comforting on her skin and her attempts to struggle were feeble at best. Instead she found herself relenting to their soothing touch; so warm and comforting...

The strange woman stood, wiped her eyes and they began to float. Her grey dress appeared to have acquired some life. The long, squid-like arms reached out to restrain Harmony's own agitated tendrils. The woman cautiously approached, though she still maintained a defensive gap.

“*Oro Axiom!* Now speak your name, child,” she commanded.

Her soft, musical voice was a joy to hear and it was supported by a distinct melody of tinkling bells. Harmony felt elated as she spoke. All she could do was smile.

The woman matched the smile. Her delicate mouth mimicked the expression and she exposed her flawless white teeth. Maintaining the grin she drifted closer to Harmony. Her large, grey eyes held the intense, unrelenting gaze as she waited for an answer.

“My name is Harmony. Harmony Ryder,” she replied at last. As the strings tickled her face she remained blissfully unaware of their grip around her throat.

“It can't be...? Harmony? I had all but given up hope,” the woman began to say. She appeared elated with Harmony's answer. Then she added. “Where is the key?”

“Huh? What key?”

“It came with the letter. Did you bring it?”

“I dropped it,” Harmony revealed nonplussed.

“You dropped it! You must find it, Harmony!” the woman screamed. “You must!”

“Harmony! Harmony!” Rose's voice echoed through the forest. Both Harmony and the red-haired woman looked into the sky.

As Harmony looked upward the dream shattered and she snapped back to reality with a painful bump...felt mostly on her head.

CHAPTER 4

BUNKS, BUMPS AND QUESTIONS

The sweet, pungent aroma of incense sticks and patchouli oil (a favourite combination of Rose's) filled her senses. The smell of the ambulance welcomed her home.

Harmony opened her eyes and found herself wrapped up in several blankets on Rose's bunk. Much like a caterpillar spins a cocoon she was bound from head to toe with just her face exposed.

Rose sat on the edge of the bunk. She was worriedly hovering over Harmony's. A forced-smile painted her mouth, though no amount of pretence could hide the worry she was withholding.

Rose lifted the damp cloth from a small table next to the bed and placed it across Harmony's forehead. The cool, soothing flannel instantly began quenching the fiery pain that galloped like a herd of wild horses across her skull.

"Hello there, my love. I'm glad to have you back in the land of the living. How you feeling?" she asked, removing the cloth and refreshing it in a bowl of water.

"My head hurts! What on earth happened?" Harmony asked. She sat up and instantly regretted the decision. Agony erupted like a volcano in her mind, making her feel sick and more than a little dizzy. She lay down again and Rose placed the cloth back across her brow.

Rose looked at Harmony and adopted her stern-parent face. It was the expression she adopted on the rare occasion Harmony was caught doing something naughty.

"You weren't wearing your seatbelt, young lady. When I saw that rabbit dart out into the road I hit the brakes. You flew forward and bumped your head and it's lucky that's all that happened. It could have been a lot worse if..."

"How did you see a rabbit in all that fog?" Harmony interrupted, choosing to ignore Rose's hypocritical lecture on road safety. Her reasons for removing the safety belt were justifiable.

"Erm...what fog?" Rose replied looking confused. She placed a hand on Harmony's arm and gripped a little too hard, a concerned look in her eyes.

"The last thing I remember was reading the letter and asking you who Meme the Oak was. Then you went all weird and started driving along the dirt road," Harmony paused looking for some spark of recognition in Rose's wide, disbelieving eyes. "Then it got really foggy. You were in a trance and you wouldn't answer me. Then you slammed on the brakes and then...then...well, nothing."

"I don't remember being in a trance, love," Rose replied a little condescendingly.

"Well you wouldn't would you," Harmony retorted, irritated at her mother's tone. "I'm not making it up."

"I think I should take you to hospital. Maybe that bump on the head gave you a concussion," Rose suggested. "I didn't see any fog, just a rabbit. And as for *Meme*. Well...that's the name of a

tree I played in as a child. I'd forgotten all about it. I've not been *here* since I was around your age," Rose continued, disquiet still clearly visible on her face.

"No. I don't need to be in a hospital. I feel fine now. I'm just a bit sore I... Hang on, what do you mean *here*?" Harmony said, breaking free of the blanket-cocoon. She peered through the window into the black of night. Alas she couldn't see anything beyond the reflection of her eyes.

"We arrived just after you bumped your head, but you had already climbed into my bed and were fast asleep. I thought you must have been having a good dream because you kept laughing so I didn't want wake you. It's close to midnight now. Are you hungry?" she said, standing up and turning to face their kitchen.

The word *kitchen* may have been stretching the truth a bit. In all honesty it was little more than a few shelves above a tiny counter top that housed a small electric oven and a two-cup kettle. Each shelf was crammed with packets and boxes; thin strips of elastic preventing them from crashing to the floor as Rose inevitably rounded a corner too fast.

"Don't avoid the question, mother," Harmony began. "Where are we?"

"I'm not avoiding anything, Harmony. Stop being so rude. We are in the Lake District. Near to the town of Bellflower," Rose replied abruptly.

"The Lake District!" Harmony exclaimed. "How can we be? It's so far from Cornwall. How long was I asleep for?"

"Oh. I really should take you to see a doctor. You seem very confused," Rose fretted. Her worry was mounting again.

"No. I don't need to see a doctor. I'm fine," Harmony reassured. "Actually, I'm starving. How about tea and toast?" she continued. She snuggled back down into Rose's bed hoping that her mother would forget about seeing a physician.

"Coming right up," Rose replied. She flicked the switch on the kettle and retrieved some slices of bread from the misshapen loaf that had been stuffed onto one of the crowded shelves.

"Who is this great aunt Nova? And why have you never mentioned her before? And how did she know *me* if I've never met her? And why would she leave her house to me?" Harmony reeled off the questions as Rose removed a blowtorch from a drawer and lit it with a flaming matchstick.

She remained silent. This was a normal response for her when bombarded with questions. Rose contemplated her response as she stabbed the slice of bread with a large fork and held it up to the blue flame of the torch.

"Well. Nova was really old when I was a child and, ashamed as I am to admit it, I thought she'd have died a long time ago," Rose confessed guiltily. "It's hard to believe she kept going for so long on her own, out here I mean. There's no electricity or phone line, and the house is in a pretty bad way. That must have been the '*burden*' she mentioned. As for how she knew you or why she left the house to you, I have absolutely no idea."

Rose finished speaking just in time to rescue the burning bread from the torch's flame. She quickly proceeded to smear butter on the cremated slice and finish brewing the cups tea. Harmony silently pondered over all the information buzzing around her throbbing head.

First there was the non-existent fog and the trance-like state that her mother had no memory of. That was weird enough but the feeble story of a rabbit darting out made the entire explanation implausible. That being said it wasn't as odd as the distance they had travelled in such a short space of time.

Secondly there was the dream that had seemed so real, difficult though it was to recall now. Memories of the weeping woman and the clockwork gate were fading with each moment that passed.

Her mind became bogged down with questions. She pondered the unknowable riddle of her ancient hermit-relative. It was creepy that she'd been watching her from afar. If this was *The Universe's* attempt to communicate with her then she wished it would just mind its own business and leave her alone.

Harmony took a bite of the warm, buttery toast and tried hard to believe that everything happens for a reason. Following her mother's advice she attempted to look at the bigger picture. She could understand, though perhaps not accept, fate's plan was unclear to her. She swallowed her toast and focused on one belief. This all had to mean something...

CHAPTER 5

THE BURDEN

Beams of sunlight shone through moth-eaten holes in a pair of purple curtains. The golden lances illuminated the dim interior of the ambulance. Their touch was warm and their shine bright. The combination nudged Harmony awake like an over-friendly dog.

She opened her heavy eyelids with reluctance and a loud yawn forced its way out of her mouth as she stretched her stiff muscles. She sat up and looked around for Rose. Her mother's bunk was empty.

Despite the ambulance being full to the brim with clutter (an ideal environment for beasties of all descriptions to take up residence) it was devoid of life. Somewhat flummoxed she climbed down from her bunk and pulled on her favourite pair of jeans and an old, red sweater.

She slipped on her trainers when, with the speed and power of a lightning bolt, a memory exploded into her mind. They were at the cottage! She had forgotten all about it. She raced to the door and reached for the latch.

Nervous wasn't an accurate description of how she felt. The next few moments of her life had the potential to be the most significant yet. A place to call home, to settle down in, had been at the top of her wish list for as long as she could remember.

The letter's arrival was undeniably mysterious and it had the potential to have been written by a senile, old lady. Yet amidst the intrigue a beacon of hope emerged; a glimmer of possibility, brighter than the sun's rays. Harmony crossed her fingers and pled to any gods listening that this cottage would be the answer to her dreams.

She opened the door. The intensity of the light, accompanied by sweltering heat caught her off guard. She had not expected to be greeted by what appeared to be a summer's day in *April*.

Harmony ignored her seasonal-misgivings and instead focused her attention on the cottage. This was it; the moment of truth was upon her...

Her gaze latched onto the inherited-dwelling and in that moment she knew the dream's outcome. Her hopes of a place to call home looked to remain unfulfilled. The cottage was a wreck...

She couldn't hide her disappointment; it was bitter and heart-felt. The heavy, knotted-tug of discontent twisted in her stomach as she faced *reality* and found it lacking. A warm summer breeze, imbued with the earthen-scents of the forest, enveloped her as she walked toward the ramshackle cottage.

Her eyes drifted across the faded thatched roof. The once golden straw had paled to a mottled-slant of silver and black decay.

She followed the line of the roof and saw a strange, copper funnel poking out at an odd angle. The apparatus was beyond anything she had seen before. The design looked to have purpose, though what that was remained a mystery.

The few windows the cottage possessed were all broken. One frame, devoid of glass, had half a table protruding through it. The front door was also missing. In the empty frame Rose stood waving frantically in an attempt to draw her attention.

“Good morning, my darling. I've got the kettle on,” Rose called to her. She smiled and disappeared into the darkness of the house.

Harmony approached the garden gate and pushed it aside as she stepped through. At first glance the garden looked like a wild meadow. The fenced area was filled with a garbled patchwork of flowers; bluebells, lavender, poppies, roses, chrysanthemums and sunflowers to name but a few.

The staggering variety grew in scattered colonies; fighting for dominance. As she walked she discovered a plethora of strange objects lay discarded in the undergrowth; most of which looked broken or damaged beyond any real use.

An overturned cauldron had rusted away to allow a yellow-flowered shrub to grow from its demise. Just beyond the stricken pot she located half a cart wheel. The wooden spokes were home to a rose bush, toe-sized thorns glistening in the sun.

Harmony shook her head. Why would anyone collect so much junk? She was still pondering the answer as she spotted a large oak tree in the corner of the garden.

“Ah ha, *Meme* I presume?” she noted.

The tree was host to a rather spectacular honeysuckle plant, each flower head in full bloom. The great oak loaned another of its gigantic bows to an ancient and rather dangerous looking swing.

With a knot at the bottom, the top wrapped several times around the branch, the swing had pretence of security. Harmony knew better than to trust *appearance*. The rope itself was green and black with mould. Even from across the garden it looked rotten and decidedly treacherous. This air of danger was added to by the patch of brambles covering the ground beneath it.

Harmony questioned the sanity of anyone wishing to swing on such an obvious death trap. However, she trusted that it had been a lot safer when Rose played on it as a girl.

She quickly traversed the rest of the path, unavoidably stepping on the pieces of smashed crockery that were violently strewn across the threshold. The variability of colour and pattern reminded her of flower petals scattered before a bride.

Harmony reached the empty doorway and tentatively entered the darkness of the cottage. Perhaps she wouldn't have done so if she'd know what lay within

The dim light of the interior did little to hide the devastation she found. A floral-patterned sofa and accompanying armchairs lay ruined. Their frames had been smashed beyond repair. The once plump cushions were ravaged by mould and animals. The stuffing they once contained was strewn around the room to produce a nightmarish scene.

Torn books and smashed plates were spread across the filthy, shredded rugs. Harmony, gifted with a keen sense of observation, noted one thing; for a single person living alone in the woods Nova certainly had a lot of crockery.

Using her detective skills Harmony surmised that an intruder had been searching for something. The seeker had foraged through every cupboard, shelf, hidey hole, nook and cranny. Their search had been so thorough that no stone was left unturned.

It was clear to her that the house had been open to the elements for some time. She acutely discerned this due to the rampant ivy which had grown up from beneath the floor boards. The invasive foliage, its nimble stems clinging onto the mould-sullied walls, had already instigated a claim on the unoccupied house.

All of these things were bad enough but the most horrific thing that caught Harmony's attention was the graffiti painted on the walls. Huge runic-symbols and bizarre words, scrawled in child-like handwriting, covered any patches that the ivy hadn't monopolised. Worst of all the words were painted in what looked like *blood*.

It was then that Harmony wished her great aunt had left the cottage to someone else. "*Love my home and treat it well. Do this and I promise you will be protected from the dangers ahead,*" she recalled from the letter. "Not very well by the looks of things," Harmony muttered as misery took hold of her.

"Bit of a mess isn't it? Never mind, though. It's nothing we can't clean up," Rose encouraged. Her head appeared in the doorway that led into the kitchen. She smiled and beckoned for Harmony to follow her.

Harmony carefully picked her way through the debris and entered the heart of the home. The sun, bright and revealing, streamed in through the glassless window frames that dominated one long wall.

Rose had already begun to tidy the mess. What remained of the large dining table stood in the centre of the flagstone floor. The two surviving chairs accompanied it. Next to the cracked sink Rose had swept up a pile of broken glass, spilt spices and several other ingredients that looked suspiciously like dried frogs. Amidst the detritus torn books peppered the bulk.

"What's going on with the weather?" Harmony asked.

"Oh it's a gorgeous day, don't you think?"

"Yes," Harmony agreed. "It's a beautiful summer's day. But this is *spring*, not summer."

"Are you really complaining that the weather is too nice?" Rose commented shaking her head.

“Not complaining, just observing,” Harmony countered. “I suppose the heatwave may explain why all the flowers are in bloom. Though, it is exceedingly odd all the same.”

“Honestly, you’re never happy. Maybe I should start calling you Goldilocks.”

Harmony didn’t respond. Her eyes drawn to another symbol, etched in blood, on the wall. The peculiar shape was formed of three, woven bands which encircled a large paw-print.

“This is unbelievable. Who did all these scribblings? Who would come all the way out here to graffiti an old woman's house?” Harmony wondered aloud while she took a seat and sipped from the steaming-hot cup of Earl Grey tea Rose handed to her.

“I don't know love, but I hope they found what they were looking for. I don’t know what I’d do if they came back,” she worried, shuddering at the thought of defending the cottage from burglars.

Harmony looked around and made a mental note that nothing seemed to be of worth. In her opinion the intruders were welcome to take anything they fancied. She wouldn’t stop them. With more thought she decided it might actually be helpful if they *did* come back and take some of the junk away.

“Any ideas what these words and symbols mean?” Harmony said, pointing a finger at one of the offending artworks.

‘*WER IZIT*’ was scrawled in huge letters on what remained of the chimney breast.

Rose scanned the area Harmony was pointing to, shrugging her shoulders and tilting her head in a thoughtful manner.

“No idea love. They don't seem to make much sense though do they? Then again when does *gibberish* ever make sense?”

Harmony sipped her tea again, trying to glean some logic from the chaos. All of a sudden a disturbing thought crossed her mind. The very idea made her skin crawl with unease.

“You don't think she *died* here do you? I mean this place looks like a murder scene.”

At this suggestion Rose froze, the tea cup pressed to her lips mid-sip, with only her eyes visible above the rim. Her gaze slowly moved from side to side checking for a potential killer, still lurking in the corner, waiting to pounce.

Rose shook her head. “No. Well. I hope not anyway. Besides, I’m very sensitive to those kinds of energies. I would have picked up on a negative vibe the instant I arrived. Also I’m sure the police would have sealed the house had she snuffed-it here.”

Rose said this in her reassuringly-omniscient way. Harmony heard the doubt in her tone. Clearly she was trying to convince herself more than anything else.

“Oh I just wondered if that axe-wielding man had anything to do with it,” Harmony joked.

Her words instantly shattered her mother’s calm demeanour and caused her to spit tea across the table. Rose quickly span round in her chair to see where Harmony was indicating.

“That's not funny, Harmony! My poor nerves,” Rose scolded. She stood up and snatched a rag to mop up the spillage.

Sodden, she threw the rag onto the heap of junk and put her hands on her hips. This was never a good sign. Rose turned around and scowled at Harmony's continued amusement. Her brow creased in frustration.

"Sorry Mum, but you should see the look on your face," she said, apologetically. Her remorse was difficult to convey. Try as she might she just couldn't force the smile from her lips.

"Apology accepted. Now, on that note, I'm going to try and find a shop, or something like one, in Bellflower. So why don't you stay here and start clearing the rubbish out," Rose replied with a smile. "Now you should see the look on *your* face," she continued with a laugh as she winked at Harmony and picked up the keys for the ambulance.

"You're not serious. You want me to stay here...alone? What if I have an accident? Or...or I get crushed by something? Or...or the burglars come back? Or what if something happened to you? No-one would know I was here. You can't leave me all alone. What if I have to defend the house from intruders? You'd never forgive yourself if I were savaged to death by wild animals. Do you really want that on your conscience?" Harmony warned in a panicked voice. She was desperately searching for valid reasons to go with Rose.

The thought of being here alone filled her with fear. She wished for the second time that Nova had left the cottage to some other unsuspecting, long-lost relative.

"I'm quite confident that you'll handle any interloper or ferocious beasts that come by. You are obviously very mature now and that should be rewarded with some extra responsibility," Rose stated, though her tone implied she was being sarcastic.

"If I get mauled to death you're gonna feel so guilty."

Rose adopted her '*this is happening so don't even try*' manner. Harmony decided to not argue. Staying in the cottage was preferable to having another '*go with the flow*' lecture.

Rose smiled and kissed her lovingly on the forehead. Then she turned and in seconds had swept out of the kitchen door.

Harmony heard her tutting and chattering to herself as she headed down the path. The swift exit, another of her mother's characteristics, left her feeling annoyed. Rose really couldn't take a joke.

Harmony sat alone in the dishevelled and tattered remnants of her unwanted inheritance.

CHAPTER 6

THE DEATH TRAP AND THE DOOR

The picturesque hamlet of Bellflower resided at the mouth of a long, narrow valley. The village was dwarfed on both sides by the huge, forest covered mountains.

Bellflower was perched on the edge of a vast lake; the endless shimmer stretched off into the muted distance and the water's calm mirror-like surface reflected the cornflower blue sky and verdant valley walls.

A little over forty houses made up Bellflower. A handful of the dwellings were sat along the lake edge and formed a petite dock where a few boats were moored. The rest of the village occupied a single street; aptly named Lone Road.

The houses along Lone Road were painted in co-ordinated colours. At the top, the buildings were white. These were followed by purple, blue, green, yellow, orange and finally red, at the lake's edge.

The purple ambulance, which had never looked more at home, made its way down the street and parked outside one of the green buildings. Rose climbed out of the driver's seat and locked the door before heading down the street to find a shop.

The lane was empty except for a man and woman who were dressed in matching raincoats. The couple were stooped over a map and loudly discussing which way they should go. Rose considered offering to help, though she quickly decided that her incredibly-sparse knowledge of the surrounding area may prove to be more of a hindrance. Besides, it was never a good idea to get involved in a lover's quarrel.

Rose smiled and nodded at the lost couple as she passed by. The man stared at her in return with barely concealed distain. He did not rescind his glowering until she had ventured at least twenty feet away. Then he turned to the woman once again and continued their impassioned conversation.

The only shop in Bellflower was located at the harbour end of the street. After a short sweep round its cluttered shelves Rose emerged with heavy bags full of food and cleaning essentials. The thin, plastic carries hung from her arms threatening to burst.

As she made her way back to the ambulance she crossed the road to avoid the couple who were now talking to a rather rotund woman. The newcomer was dressed in a green waxed-jacket and tweed skirt. She had grey hair gathered into an immaculate bun on the top of her head. She did not look pleased as the man in the raincoat shook his head and disagreed with where she was pointing on the map.

Rose was so engrossed with the increasingly heated argument, which was rapidly escalating to the point of shouting, that she didn't see the man getting out of the little, green van. His door

swung open and collided with Rose knocking her backwards. Her arms flailed in the air as she recoiled from the impact and she accidentally let go of the bags.

As the carrier bags sailed upwards they burst under the pressure of flight. Like highly domesticated fireworks each bag erupted into an explosion of sponges and milk, flour and eggs, toilet rolls and jam. Having reached the apex of their potential, gravity took over and the groceries began racing towards the ground.

Rose watched in horror as the contents of her bags descended toward her. She covered her face and curled into the foetal position, trying to protect herself as best she could, as she waited for the barrage of groceries to hit.

Something very heavy landed on Rose, covering her, as the first sounds of glass hitting the ground and shattering echoed down the street with a deafening crack. She let out a squeal of terror and curled up tighter under the heavy shelter.

After a few more crashes and bangs the noises subsided, but Rose stayed still.

“Are you OK?” a voice whispered softly into her ear.

“I think so,” she replied.

The weight lifted and revealed itself to be a handsome man. His strong, masculine face was youthful and line-free. Despite his youthful appearance it was his eyes, dark and framed with black lashes, which showed his true age and maturity. He was roughly the same age as her. His warm smile, easily as beautiful as Rose's, spread across his face.

“I'm so sorry for knocking you over. I just didn't see you...though I'm not sure how I could have missed *such* a beautiful woman. You sure you're OK?” he asked.

“You're bleeding!” Rose gasped breathlessly, sounding not at all unlike a Jane Austen character.

She thrust her hand into a pocket and removed a clean tissue. With a delicate touch she wiped the blood from his forehead and stared into his eyes; once again mesmerized by their depth.

Rose mumbled. “Actually, I think it might be ketchup.”

Harmony listened to the sound of the ambulance driving away. She looked around tentatively as the fear of being alone in the house mounted to an almost overwhelming degree. She wanted to run after her mother and beg to be taken along with her but pride would not allow her to behave like that. In truth it would be nice to have a break from Rose; she just wished it could have happened in more comfortable surroundings.

She decided to use a lesson her mother had taught her when she was scared at night: “Feel the *fear* for ten seconds...then do something about it,” was Rose's advice when she had woken from a bad dream.

With that in mind she sat and allowed herself to be scared for ten seconds. Then she summoned up her courage and shrugged off the bad feelings. Sitting here wasn't going to make her feel any better. No, she needed a distraction from the icky and all-encompassing shroud that fear draped around her shoulders. She got to her feet and looked around for something to do.

"Well. I may as well start somewhere," she said aloud, as she surveyed the devastated kitchen. She walked over to the big stone sink and, with some difficulty, wrenched open the little door beneath.

Inside she found a large shovel and an old rubber plunger. The plunger would be of little use until the sink was replaced but the shovel could at least help to gather some of the debris up. As she removed the shovel something glinted in the shadowed corner of the cupboard and caught her eye. She reached into the back corner feeling around for the object. Her hand touched something cold, round and hard. She gripped the ball shape and pulled it out.

In her hand was a small, golden doorknob. She turned it over and found two words delicately carved into the shining, metal surface; *Latro Gradus*.

Harmony stared at the words and shook her head. Nothing that had happened in the last two days had made any sense. The letter, the fog, the ruined cottage, the dream, the illiterate vandals...all of it was farcical.

So she was not at all surprised that there was a golden doorknob, with bizarre words scratched into it, hidden at the back of a cupboard in a derelict cottage.

"I guess that finding the door this opens will be a far better distraction than cleaning," she said, to the empty room. Little did she know, the room wholeheartedly agreed.

Rose got to her feet and gave a coy smile to her saviour. She delicately extended her hand to meet his out-stretched one; a rush of excitement shared between them as their skin connected. Rose silently thanked The Universe for delivering her into this moment. She redoubled her thanks as she glanced at his free hand and noticed that he wasn't wearing a wedding band.

"Joseph King. Nice to meet you," he said.

"Rose Ryder. Nice to meet you too," she replied, not wanting to let go of his hand but relinquishing it with a dazzling smile and a bashful flutter of her lashes.

Joseph smiled back and then bent down. He began to collect the salvageable groceries from the pavement. Rose, who practically floated down to the pavement, joined him and they soon had all the mess in one bag and the items that could be saved bundled into Rose's arms.

"I really am very sorry, for knocking you over I mean," Joseph apologised again.

"It's fine. Don't worry about it. It's my fault really. I wasn't paying attention to where I was walking," she admitted, flipping her hair in a flirtatious manner. Despite her best efforts the hair-toss resulted in most of her hair covering her face.

“If there's anything I can do to make it up to you...”

“You don't know if there's a builder around here do you?” she inquired, whilst attempting to blow some hair out of her eyes.

“Funny you should mention it but yeah, I'm a builder,” he laughed as he reached out a hand and fixed her hair. They shared another moment as he tucked a stray lock behind her ear and his finger brushed her cheek.

“Well. Then, perhaps, there is something you could do for me...besides taking me for a drink? Only if you'd want to that is?”

“I'd love to take you out,” he replied. His reaction filled with a kind of strong and confident eagerness that weakened Rose's already wobbly legs. “Are you free now?” he added.

“Absolutely,” Rose responded, at once regretting how quickly she had accepted. She hoped that it didn't seem desperate. “I suppose we could discuss the cottage,” she continued in an effort ‘cover her tracks’.

“The cottage?”

“Oh. I forgot to say. I need a builder to come and do some repairs to my chalet. It's a little run down,” Rose informed. She engaged her winning smile.

“Sure. Where is it?” Joe enquired; matching her smile in intensity and making her knees wobble once again.

“It's just a few miles up the road. It's called Darkfern Cottage,” Rose answered, trying to regain some of her composure. Joe's beauty was disarming and she could feel her cheeks flushing red whenever he looked at her.

Joseph's smile faded. His expression became mixture of disbelief and shock. He seemed to hesitate for a moment, like he expected her to say she was joking.

“Up at Old Nova's place? Are you being serious?” he said, doubt and worry collided in his tone.

“Yes. Nova was a relative of mine.”

“Why on earth would you want to stay there after what happened?” he blurted, his manner implying that the very idea was ludicrous.

“Why? What happened?” Rose asked. A deep foreboding swirled in her stomach as Joe's face paled from recollection.

Harmony stood at the bottom of a very rickety staircase. She found the stairs behind a cleverly disguised door in the remains of the living room. The façade of the door had been constructed to appear as if it were a book case; the reason for which was beyond Harmony though she did think it was a crafty and practical use of space.

Harmony knew she would never have found the opening mechanism had it not been so obvious; the only book left on the bookcase was entitled *Open Sesame* after all.

One hand tentatively gripped the rotten banister which protruded from the wall. The aged rail was the only provision of support should she choose to ascend. What strength the banister did have was afforded by a few rusty nails crookedly hammered into the plaster.

She applied a little pressure, testing to see if it would give any kind of support should the stairs carry out their threat of collapsing. Harmony decided that the odds were *not* good. Nevertheless she advanced, intrigue urging her to investigate further.

The climb was slow. She placed her feet into the corner of each step; terrifying creeks issuing on every footfall as if the stairs were in pain.

Halfway up the potential death trap she began to regret her curiosity-driven decision. The stairs beneath her feet gave a shudder and she paused, fear gluing her trainers to the spot. Holding her breath she waited for a few agonising moments, anticipating the stairs to snap and close on her like a crocodile's jaws. When this ultimately fatal event did not transpire she continued up with far more haste.

She reached the landing without further incident. Her sigh of relief was cut short as a shudder ran up her spine. The feeling that she had just been graced with a lucky escape flashed across her mind. Images of her body lying undiscovered under the collapsed stairs invaded her thoughts. Given the intensity of her imaginings she decided to remain upstairs until Rose returned lest her thoughts become her reality.

The upper level of the cottage, which had not been visible from the outside, consisted of a single, windowless corridor lit by a small oil lamp.

Harmony queried who had set fire to the wick? Given that the cottage had been empty for so long it seemed like an impossible thing. She thought that perhaps one of the miscreant vandals *had* ventured upstairs and, like her, was too afraid to go back down. She imagined the life of the trapped thief, doomed to live some kind of lonesome existence until a rescuer happened to pass.

Though, with a moment of reflection, she decided the likelihood of this was quite fanciful. She thought it far more probable to be a motion-activated trick lamp that gave off the appearance of a flame.

The light from the lamp barely illuminated the dark, wood-panelled walls that were littered with hundreds of dusty photo frames. The occupants of the photos were hardly visible through the gloom and grime.

Along the corridor three doors also shared wall space with the collection of snapshot memories. All of which, to Harmony's disappointment, had handles already. She started to walk slowly down the corridor checking the floorboards with her feet as she went; reason insisting she should expect them to be as dilapidated as the stairs. However, they appeared to be strong and sturdy, easily capable of handling her meagre weight. Regardless of how solid they acted she was careful all the same.

The damage, which had devoured the ground floor so entirely, did not extend to the upstairs. Perhaps the vandals *hadn't* noticed the book's blatant message that something lurked behind. There was no graffiti on the walls up here, just the dusty old pictures.

Harmony stopped to look at a large black and white photo that had become mottled and yellowed with age. It was of an old woman standing next to the oak tree in the garden. A small girl with long, blonde hair was smiling and waving from the swing.

Harmony looked at the old woman. She was smiling too, but there was sadness in her eyes and a strange look of familiarity in her face...

She turned away from the picture. The visage of an apparently happy time felt oddly painful to look at. An overwhelming sense of loss filled her insides as she moved away. Her mind felt foggy, like she was forgetting something important.

Harmony thought that it was pointless to try to remember something you have forgotten. To her it felt futile to try and force a mind to do anything other than what it wanted. Instead, she fixed her attention on the first of the three doors.

The door was painted with an elaborate mural of a beautiful, red-haired young woman and a handsome man. The couple were lovingly holding hands in a meadow filled with purple flowers. The woman was obviously meant to be Nova but the man was a mystery to her and he didn't appear to be in any of the photos; although admittedly she *had* only glanced at a few of them.

Harmony tried the handle and the door willingly creaked open. Inside was a small, undamaged, dusty (and positively medieval in design) bathroom. She quickly scanned the room then closed the door again. She felt disappointed that she still hadn't found a likely place for the golden handle. She turned the doorknob in her hand as she moved onto the middle door.

The painting covering the second door differed only slightly from the first. The woman was grey-haired and she stood alone, weeping next to a grave. Harmony felt uncomfortable, like she was intruding on someone else's memories. She wondered why her great aunt would want a constant reminder of such a macabre and horrible thing.

She tried this door also but it was locked, stuck or perhaps swollen-shut with the damp she mused. Or maybe the key she had dropped in the ambulance would fit the lock? She made a mental note to try out her theory when Rose returned.

Her frustration grew as the door refused to budge. She resisted the temptation to *kick in* the bottom panel and be done with it. Instead she sensibly moved to the third and final door and examined the painting this one held.

This mural was the strangest of all three. The woman was again crowned in flame-red hair. She was kneeling on the ground behind a huge, clockwork gate. In her hand she held a ring of keys. In the very distant edge of the painting behind a patch of trees, barely visible unless you knew where to look, was a pale-faced girl in a purple dress.

Harmony stared at the picture. Shock electrified her skin and twisted at her stomach. How was this possible? How could her dream be painted on this door? Was it even her dream in the first place? Or, had she been in someone else's? Was this a dream now? Was she still passed out in the back of the ambulance? Her mind raced but, in reality, her eyes remained fixed on the painting.

The woman by the clockwork gate, dressed in her sickly, grey gown, stared back at Harmony from the door's surface. Harmony felt like Nova was willing her to enter, urging her to venture further. Her hand moved slowly to the cold metal handle and turned. The lock clicked open.

CHAPTER 7

THE SETTING OF NOVA

Dark clouds, aided by a howling wind, speedily rolled over the obsidian-black sky. The looming giants of vapour blocked out the moon and stars. From their shadowy underside they occasionally released a deluge of cold, wet rain.

As was to be expected the clouds had been nosily-watching the events of a disturbance unfold. The fracas had begun in a quaint, thatched cottage miles below their lofty vantage.

The tiny residence was tucked away in a dark, swaying forest that looked not unlike a sea of ferociously-turbulent waves.

The sky dwellers had been drifting overhead when the first signs of a story were spotted. They listened to the crashes and raised voices from within the tiny dwelling. Unsurprisingly the ruckus quickly apprehended their interest and they were soon chatting amongst themselves (as clouds do when enticed by a gripping tale) about the possible repercussions of what had been said.

Then, all of a sudden, the screaming started...

Blood curdling cries ripped through the darkness and alerted all who could hear that something terrible was taking place. The argument had escalated into something far more deadly than first appeared. The screams were the kind of soul-churning wails that they had heard before, and did not wish to hear again. This type of cry always foreshadowed wicked events. Murder had stained the night *sanguine*.

The clouds were now making a quick getaway; hastily retreating to the nearby settlement of Bellflower. Though their actions appeared to be seasoned with cowardice, their true intentions were honourable. By hook or by crook they would get help for the screaming woman; though how this would be accomplished was, for the moment, beyond them.

To their relief, as they approached the village, a small wisp of wind whistled past them. He was carrying one of the terrifying-screams in his arms.

They waved and cheered him on as he dove toward the lamp-lit street. The mountains of moisture congratulated each other on a job well done (not that they actually did anything) and with the panic over they slowed down to see the next part of the story unfold.

The wisp paid no heed to the clouds; he made a habit of avoiding beings with an over-inflated *ego* (clouds definitely fell into this category).

Wisps are made of wind; as such they are free to gale across the world. Their existence takes many forms; from a gentle breeze in a sun-drenched valley to a sail-ripping storm. Every gust, gale or draft was a listening wisp.

A wisp has only one duty to fulfil on his free-flowing pilgrimage; a cherished and sacred task undertaken by all. They carry the calls of The Universe and transport them to wherever that sound

must be heard. This night was no exception and the cry he carried was important...it had purpose beyond the norm.

He was transfixed with his mission to find a soul who would listen to what he had heard. The scream struggled in his grip but he held fast. He was almost there...

Below him he spied a man emerging from a green van. He dove toward the gent's unprotected ear and dropped the cry, like a plane unleashes a bomb. The wisp released the scream and flew on. As he cleared the scene he glanced back over his shoulder to see the payload land.

Joseph King had just locked his van door when a cold gust of wind hit him in the side of his head. He was about to curse the weather they were having when he heard a woman's scream echo down the street.

He looked around for the source of the noise and panic filled his chest. It wasn't a nice scream, the kind you hear when someone is having fun. This was the scared kind. It was one of those blood-curdling sounds, the kind that rooted you to the spot and made your blood run cold.

Joseph walked quickly towards the top of the street. His mounting panic, now felt as a lump in his throat, increased as the shrieks continued. The tear-jerking cries ripped through the night, like nails down a chalkboard. He looked in the direction they were coming from trying to see into the blackness of the forest.

He felt someone beside him, a hand touched his shoulder. He turned to see Martha Trotter, a large lady who ran the local pub, standing next to him. She wore her waxed-jacket over a pink dressing gown.

"What's going on Joe? What's out there?" she asked, fear causing her voice to quake.

"I not certain what it is, but I think it's coming from Nova's place," he replied with a similar tremble.

They looked into each other's eyes and an unspoken conversation took place. The exchange was short and urgent. Joe looked at Martha and then at the forest. Martha looked at Joe and nodded towards her car which was already pointing in the right direction. Joe nodded and the decision was made.

"You got a gun?" she questioned.

"No! Of course I don't have a gun! I'm a builder, Martha," Joe replied. He was more than a little shocked. "What would I need a gun for?" he continued as another scream filled the air.

"Well...for a situation like this," Martha retorted. She turned toward her house and shouted at the dishevelled boy in the doorway. "Marshal! Go and tell Sergeant Cooper we need him at Nova's house!"

He ran off barefooted down the street without saying anything in reply. Martha quickly moved to her car.

"Come on, Joe. I'm not going *there* on my own."

Her words urged him to pick up the pace and join her. He ran to the car and jumped in the passenger seat. Moments later the car sped off towards Darkfern Cottage.

Rose sat in Joe's kitchen listening, transfixed in horror, as he recalled the story. She was shaking from head to toe. She didn't cope well with scary stories as it was, especially when they involved *blood-curdling* screams.

"Then what happened?" she gasped. She trembled and her teacup rattled in its saucer.

"Are you sure you want me to continue? It's not very nice. I mean... The next bit is pretty *strange*. I don't want to upset you."

He looked concerned as he said this, his eyes giving away that he didn't really want to remember what had happened.

"Please, I need to know what happened at the cottage," Rose said. She took his hand to offer support and looked him in the eye. "Please, Joe. Tell me what happened next."

Harmony opened the door and entered the room. Though quite small and dusty the bedroom had a nice, comfortable feel. Old, faded rugs covered most of the floor and a pair of threadbare curtains framed a filthy window. The view looked out over the back garden and into the forest beyond.

She calculated that she was over the kitchen. Though, admittedly, the layout of the cottage was confusing to say the least. The fact that there was an entire second floor, concealed from view, was enough to make her head hurt when she thought about it.

The sun's shine was muted by the grimy glass; the glare dispersed into a warm, cosy glow that illuminated the chamber just enough to see. Against the far wall was an ancient, wrought iron bed which looked like it belonged in a museum.

A long mirror, mounted to the wall in a wooden frame, sat next to the bed. Its silvery surface reflected a mottled version of Harmony. Her clothes looked filthy and her hair was a mess. She made a mental note to clean the bathroom first when Rose got back with supplies.

Harmony allowed her gaze to drift around, taking in the atmosphere and decor. Apart from the severe lack of dusting the room looked to be in good order.

A wooden wardrobe, oversized and ornately carved, stood next to the doorway. Harmony stood in front of it and opened the two doors.

Inside she found a few old dresses, hanging like sad remnants from a time gone by. Fragile and decayed with age they looked more like rags than the once quite elegant garments that they claimed to be. She moved them aside carefully and examined the back panel.

She pushed gently in the hopes it too would reveal a secret compartment. In an ideal world the closet would have contained answers about the mysterious house, or better yet it could have led to another world (lamp-posts and fawns optional).

When the wardrobe proved to be nothing special she giggled softly to herself. The laughter was tinged with disappointment. This room was just another dead end.

Harmony closed the closet doors and walked over to the bed. She sat down heavily, the springs moaned. She sighed sulkily; her frustration disturbing the clouds of dust revealed by the sunlight.

She looked at the doorknob in her hand and then scanned the rest of the room. There was nothing in the house that lacked a handle. It felt like she had searched everywhere. All that effort and no reward was most unsatisfactory. It didn't seem fair.

"Nothing...nothing at all," she grumbled out loud to the assembled furniture. She turned the object of her defeat over in her palm. Harmony threw the handle into the air and readied her hands to catch.

Her eyes followed the golden doorknob as it sailed upwards and turned, hanging for an oddly-long moment at the summit. The words written on it caught her eye and she whispered, "*Latro Gradus.*"

It dropped quickly. The shiny, metal surface passed through a sunbeam on its descent. A resultant flash of light blinded her for a moment. The handle made contact with her outstretched hand and then immediately bounced out.

CRASH!!!

The doorknob crashed against the mirror. Harmony instinctively covered her ears and scrunched up her eyes as the sound of shattering glass filled the room.

"Well. That's seven years bad luck," she noted, turning to assess the damage.

The faded, silver surface lay shattered on the rug-covered floor. Tiny shards sparkled in the dim light. Spilt diamonds cut through a sky of dust to glint like stars. As Harmony traversed the strewn shards she picked out constellations in their splay.

All of a sudden she looked into one reflective sliver and saw something she had not expected. She looked up at the mirror's frame still mounted to the plaster. Nestled within the wooden edging was a small door.

The pint-sized portal stood no more two feet high. Its façade was made of a dark wood inlaid with a pattern of golden leaves. The leaves spiralled from the outer edge in toward the centre. The

middle of the design was simply a hole, a notch in the wood that looked to be lacking some element.

Harmony didn't want to take her eyes away from the door, fearful that it might disappear if she did. Her hand felt about on the floor for the doorknob. Her fingers gingerly, tentatively danced between the mirrored shards like a skater on a frozen lake. All the while Harmony stared at the little door unable to look away. Time seemed to be slowing. The air became thick and heavy. She could not take her eyes off the door nor could she blink...or even breathe.

Everything around her was diminishing. Blackness crept in from the corners of her eyes until nothing was left but the door. Then, just as she was fading, just as her last bit of strength was fleeting, her fingers twitched against the doorknob.

CHAPTER 8

THE IMPERFECT GETAWAY...

Percival Montague checked his list once again. He added a third row of perfectly-straight ticks down the margin. He had packed the car with every essential he could think of. Adventuring into the wilds beyond the city was an unknowable and unquantifiable excursion. As such, he had ensured they possessed every possible item a *holiday* of this type may require.

He had never been to the countryside before, afraid of its distance from civilisation and its total lack of discipline. He preferred to watch *nature* on the television. He felt much safer when nature was kept neatly behind the screen.

Mavis, on the other hand, had lived in the country as a child. Thankfully she came to her senses and moved to the city as soon as she was old enough. Despite her youthful desire to escape she had always talked about returning someday. Winning the holiday meant her wish was being granted; free was something not even Percival could refuse.

She sat in the passenger side of the car holding the letter and instructions on finding the prize. Mavis had neglected to tell her husband the name of the cottage, guessing correctly that it would have been a deal breaker. She looked down and read the letter again.

Dear Mrs M Montague,

Congratulations! You are a winner!

You have been hand-selected by our organisation to receive a free, luxury two-week holiday. You will be staying in one of our five star cottages located in the beautiful Lake District.

Please find enclosed a map and instructions on how to find 'Kilts Cove Cottage' just a few miles from the village of Bellflower. The dates of your holiday are from April 22nd, staying 14 nights and departing on May 6th.

There is no need to respond to this letter as all the arrangements have been made on your behalf. All you need do is arrive and relax.

A representative of our company will be there to meet you upon arrival.

Congratulations once again.

Yours sincerely,

Mr F. Outen.

Director of Customer Services

Mavis folded the letter carefully and placed it in her handbag. The name of the cottage would have indeed been a reason for Percival to complain.

He would have said, "Kilt's Cove? In the Lake District? That's a ridiculous name for a cottage in England. It must be owned by morons. I will not stay in a place owned by morons, Mavis."

She rolled her eyes at the very thought of it. Mavis was excited to be going on holiday. Getting Percival away from the stresses of his job and out into the countryside would do them both the world of good.

"Yes. A nice quiet break," she said, to herself. "This is exactly what we need."

* * *

Several hours later Percival pulled off the motorway. This was much to the relief of the morning commuters who had been stuck behind him. The irate drivers had become tired of honking their horns and shouting at him to get out of the fast lane.

He had been driving at the perfectly acceptable speed of fifty miles per hour, which he now slowed to twenty on the winding, country lane.

They had just passed a dirt road with a signpost pointing up the track that read: 'Darkfern Cottage - NO VISITORS!' Percival frowned at the rudeness of the message. The car turned a corner and the track disappeared from view.

A second, more acceptable, sign declared that they were now approaching the rural community of Bellflower. Mavis pulled out the instructions once more and checked the name of the village that was mentioned in the letter.

The information told them to drive through the village and continue along the road until they found the large, gated entrance to Kilt's Cove Cottage. Nevertheless as they entered Bellflower Mavis insisted that they stop and get some postcards for the ladies in her knitting club.

Percival reluctantly turned into the horrendously painted street. The bright colours of the houses actually offended him. He sneered as they parked the car and he thought to himself that one wouldn't find such a ridiculous place in the civility of London.

"Look at this place, Mavis. It's a disgrace. Have you ever seen *such* an abomination?" Percival ranted, gesturing to the colourful houses. "It's outrageous...isn't it, dear?"

Percival didn't wait to hear the response from his wife, who was about to tell him that she thought it was actually quite pretty. Instead he walked briskly down towards the open shop, its alarmingly red exterior only adding fuel to Percival's exclamations of abject disgust which echoed up the quiet street.

The sound of an agitatedly tinkling bell woke Marshal Trotter from a rather good dream. He stretched his stiff limbs and yawned as he reluctantly surfaced from his usual mid-morning nap. He slowly opened his eyes. It took him a moment or two before he realised that there was a customer in his shop which, Marshal knew only too well, was a rare occurrence.

The male customer looked very angry. He stared at Marshal with unbridled fury in his gaze. The blatantly annoyed man had a moustached lip that was curled up into a sneer, aggressively exposing his clenched teeth.

“What do you think *you're* doing?!” Percival practically shouted.

“What? Who are you?” Marshal said, scratching his head. “Is this a joke?”

“I could have robbed you while you slept on the job,” the man retorted. A woman dressed in a matching raincoat embarrassedly shuffled up behind him with a packet of rubber gloves and half a dozen postcards. She gingerly put them down with a map Percival had picked up.

“Did you?” Marshal asked with interest, switching his attention to the women and saying, “Two pounds and thirty pence please, love.”

“Did I what?”

“Rob me while I was asleep,” Marshal replied. He smiled at the woman.

“No. Of course I didn't!” Percival blustered in frustration at the boy. The boy's lack of interest incensed him. “Who do you think I am?!”

“I have no idea know who you are, sir,” Marshal replied truthfully. He took the money from Mavis. “That's why I asked.”

“You, *boy*, have a bad attitude. You lack respect and discipline,” Percival chastised. He pointed a finger in the clerk's face. “But I should expect little else from a child being dragged up in this excuse of a village.”

“Oh Percy, *please* don't,” Mavis pleaded to her husband.

“Well. Thanks for stopping by *Percy*, and welcome to Bellflower,” Marshal said, smiling and pointing to the door.

Percival snatched up the map and shoved it into his bag. Then he stormed towards the door, wrenched it open, and left. Mavis quickly followed him out onto the street as she mouthed an apology to the young boy behind the counter.

“Come back any time,” Marshal called out, reclining in his chair and smiling. He yawned, picked up a newspaper and began reading.

“What was that about?” Mavis asked, instantly regretting her question.

“What was it about?! That delinquent was rude and obnoxious,” Percival seethed. “I have a good mind to find his parents and...”

“Oh. *Percy*. No! We are on holiday,” Mavis reminded him, sounding weary. “I will not have you ruin it for me by offending the locals.”

“Well, I guess you're right,” he agreed, calming down a little. “They would probably come after us with burning torches and pitchforks anyway.”

“Enough!” Mavis scolded. “Let's just go back to the car and find the cottage. Then we can have a nice relaxing time. Got it?”

“Yes dear,” Percival replied stiffly.

As they reached the car and took out their map, Percival wanting to check where they were going just to be on the safe side, a familiar and terrible noise filled the air.

To Percival's horror, at the top end of the road, a purple ambulance came into view. He was sure it was the same one he had delivered the letter to. In fact he was positive...

Not only was it making the same horrendous noises but a red-haired woman, who had parked badly and climbed out, was now walking towards them. She even had the cheek to smile at them.

Percival stared, mostly from shock, at the woman. When the letter had finally left his possession he thought he was free of it. Yet here he was faced with one of the people he had delivered it to. What were they doing here? What were the chances of them arriving in the same tiny village?

As the woman passed them he continued to stare, much to the disapproval of Mavis who cleared her throat loudly and ordered Percival to close his mouth. He flushed red and began to mutter some explanation but Mavis wasn't listening. She had already turned her attention back to the map. She was having some difficulty in locating the exact position of Kilt's Cove Cottage.

“Percy. I can't find the cottage. It's not on the map.”

“What do you mean ‘not on the map’? Of course it is. Let me see it,” he said, pushing her out of the way and peering down his long nose at where she had been pointing. “What's the place called?”

“*Kilt's Cove Cottage*,” Mavis replied, without thinking.

“Well. That's ridiculous! We are in..” Percival stopped himself from continuing when he saw the look of exasperation on his wife's face. “Never mind,” he finished.

He located Bellflower with little effort and the road they had come in on. His finger traced the wiggly line following the route that the instructions quite clearly told them to take. His mind made mental notes of the potentially dangerous bends in the road.

His eyes drifted along, following his finger, scanning for the absurdly named cottage but he too found no sign of it.

“I told you it isn't there,” Mavis chirped.

As Percival scoured the map again a large lady in a waxed jacket and tweed outfit emerged from a doorway and began bounding down the pavement towards them.

“Morning,” she bellowed at them. “Are you lost?”

“No. I am not *lost*,” Percival replied, trying to remain civil. “This map is faulty.”

“Oh dear. Well, the shop down there sells them,” she said, helpfully. “It’s my son that runs the place so just tell him *Martha* sent you. He’ll sort you out.”

“I bought this map from there,” Percival snapped. Though he stopped short of telling her what he thought of her son. Mavis shook her head and warned him to be civil.

“Perhaps you could help us?” Mavis asked, politely. “We are looking for a place called Kilt’s Cove Cottage.”

“Are you sure that’s what it’s called?” Martha quizzed. “It doesn’t sound familiar and I have lived all my life around here.”

“Yes we are sure!” Percival barked. He could not hold his temper in any longer. “Do you think we would have come all the way from London...?”

“Don’t you shout at me,” Martha retaliated. She puffed out her considerable chest and matched Percival’s stance.

Mavis shook her head. She was used to him and his short fuse after so many years of marriage but she still found him to be frightfully embarrassing. This was just another incident in a long, long list where her beloved had lost his temper at a perfectly nice and helpful stranger.

Mavis caught sight of the red-haired woman that Percival hadn’t been able to take his eyes off. She crossed the road to avoid the escalating conflict but, very rudely thought Mavis, was avidly watching.

Mavis watched as the red-haired woman walked straight into a van door. The impact knocked her over and caused her to drop her bags. The smashing noise of braking glass echoed down the street and created a perfect escape from the arguing.

“Percy. Get in the car. We will find it on our own,” Mavis snapped at her husband. “Sorry about him,” she said, once he had sulkily slammed his door shut.

“You should get a muzzle for him,” the woman replied, as she watched what was happening across the road with interest.

“Not a word,” Mavis said threateningly to Percival as she got into the car. She was in no mood to hear any of his usual excuses.

They drove in silence, Percival fuming in anger and Mavis determined to ignore his sulk. His mood did seem to lift quite significantly when, after driving for no more than ten minutes, they rounded a corner and their destination came into view.

“See. I knew that woman was a *moron*,” Percival declared. He smiled smugly.

As they neared the clearly marked entrance to the cottage their way was blocked by a large, iron gate. Faint trails of mist crept from beneath it and the inappropriate name of the cottage was emblazoned across the surface of the gates in large, golden letters. How that woman had never seen this place was beyond Percival; there really was no accounting for some people’s stupidity.

“Well? Now what are we supposed to do?” Percival asked Mavis. She was staring through the passenger window attempting to ignore him. “I said what are...” He began to continue then he stopped suddenly.

Mavis was not ignoring him at all. She was in fact staring at a man who had just emerged from the edge of the woods and was now approaching the car. There was something about the way he moved that seemed strange to Percival, almost as if he didn't quite fit into his skin.

The man was very tall and thin. His long, bony hands were clasped together in front of his chest. His head was completely bald and his eyes large. There was no mistaking his resemblance to a praying mantis. His skin was sickly-pale and it contrasted against the black of his suit and long coat.

In just a few of his elongated, but uncomfortable, strides the man cleared the distance from the woods to the car. He bent over and tapped on the window. His gaunt face had sunken, unblinking, bloodshot eyes that peered in the open window. His smile was wrong, off somehow. It looked more like a pained grimace than a welcome. His lips retracted and exposed long, twisted, yellow teeth.

Mavis slid down in her seat, she squealed as he suddenly reached inside the car. She immediately began winding up the window and cursed herself for not insisting that they paid for electric ones. The strange man did not remove his arm nor did his expression change. He just kept smiling and looking at her.

“Good god! Mavis, stop that!” Percival shouted at his terrified wife. “The man is just handing over the key,” he added with a mocking tone.

Mavis looked and in the man's outstretched fingers, hanging from a silver chain, was a large, black key. A flood of relief washed over her and suddenly she felt rather silly. She laughed nervously as she wound down the window and freed the gentleman's trapped arm.

“I am ever so sorry,” she apologised. “I don't know what came over me.”

The man did not respond, other than to remove his arm and nod slightly before he stood up. He moved to the gates and with no effort at all pushed them open. He bowed deeply and gestured for them to proceed.

Percival drove slowly through the stone gateposts, careful not to scratch his car, all the while never taking his eyes off the manically-grinning man. The *stranger-than-most* man waved goodbye as they continued up the gravel drive and moments later he closed the gates again and disappeared.

“Something not quite right about that one. You mark my words, Mavis,” Percival commented, still watching the mirror to check the man had indeed left.

Mavis nodded weakly in agreement, still a little shaken from her reaction to him.

All thoughts about the grinning man were quickly expelled as they rounded a sharp corner and the house came into view.

“Oh Percy! Look,” Mavis gasped, pointing out the window.

Percival looked ahead at the cottage and he was pleased to see it was up to his exactingly-high standards.

A pitched, black slate roof sat atop white, stone walls. It looked more like a large country lodge than a cottage and Percival hoped that it wasn't a mistake. They parked the car and got out. Mavis smiled at her husband and it made him smile too. This was better than perfect, never before had anything *ever* been perfect.

The grand entrance resided at the end of a flagstone path. The footpath was flanked on each side with the most immaculate rose bushes that they had ever seen. The perfume from them was intoxicating. Both sweet and thick it filled the air and welcomed them as they approached the large, wooden door with their suitcases in hand.

Percival took the key from Mavis and placed it in the lock. It turned with a precise and satisfying click. It was almost as if the lock had been designed to operate in a manner that suited his idea of perfection...it was truly flawless. Perhaps the countryside wasn't all bad. He may even allow himself to enjoy this quiet and much needed rest.

CHAPTER 9

ALONE NO MORE

Air gasped into her lungs as her mind resurfaced. The consuming blackness had retreated, freeing her senses once more. Harmony was lying on the floor in front of the little door. Fragments of mirror were stuck to her face and hair. She brushed them away absentmindedly and picked herself up.

She felt scared and alone. A sickening sense of mortality created a heavy pit of woe in her stomach. Where was Rose? What was taking her so long? She had warned her mother not to leave her. She had pleaded to be taken along for fear that some injury may befall her.

Now something *had* happened. This was proof that she needed to be protected. Harmony knew that thought was useless. Rose was not the maternal type. She was more the *encouraging* brand of parent; the kind that would push the offspring from the nest when teaching them to fly.

Harmony snapped out of her dark beliefs. There was no point wallowing in gloom. Negative thinking was never a productive pastime. No, Harmony planned on saving those thoughts for her therapist – when she was able to afford one.

Harmony lifted her head and glanced at the little door. She was understandably fearful that the blackness may return; that she may be plunged back into unconsciousness if she spied the hole in the door's centre.

Thankfully her worry was for nothing. The door no long possessed a hole. The gap now plugged with the golden doorknob.

“How did it get in there?” she mused.

This game of *find the door* had been a bit of fun to start with, something to do instead of cleaning. However, now it had taken a more serious turn and Harmony was not at all sure she wanted to keep playing. First she had climbed the dangerously dilapidated stairs and now she had almost been *suffocated* by a door!

From the moment she opened the letter everything had begun to change. The list of strangeness was ever growing, not that Rose had noticed. Regardless of her mother's ignorance Harmony was aware. She knew there was something peculiar going on and she was sure that this door would be no exception.

This long lost relative, with her letter full of riddles and half answers, had invaded Harmony's quiet life and left her this *death-trap* of a gift. Normally Harmony was not one to be ungrateful but this was all a bit much for her to take in. She didn't like it here anymore. She wanted the safety and familiarity of the ambulance to come back and whisk her away.

Was whatever lay beyond that portal really worth so much trouble? Whoever had hidden it, most likely *Nova*, had gone to so much effort to conceal the door that perhaps it was never meant

to be found. Who was *she* to go looking? Just because the house belonged to her now didn't mean she had the right to snoop... Or did it?

Harmony looked at the golden handle again and moved a little closer. She told herself that this was to get more comfortable and not because she wanted to open it. However, even as this thought occurred and was accepted she moved a little closer still.

An image of Alice entering the rabbit hole came to mind. The understanding that if she opened the door things might never go back did not stop her hand, driven by curiosity, from reaching out.

"Here goes," she said aloud, as she turned the handle.

A loud crashing noise tore through the intense stillness and a jolt of shock made her jump. It had come from downstairs. She sat silently for a moment, listening, still gripping the doorknob.

She was sure that if Rose was back she would have heard the ambulance struggling up the drive. Moreover her mother would be complaining loudly about the lack of cleaning. Perhaps it was just the kind of noises that an old house makes? This was entirely possible she supposed.

Harmony had no real experience of being in an old house and as such she decided *architectural-creaking* was the most likely explanation. She turned her attention back to the door.

Another crash from downstairs, followed by an erratic scratching sound, made all the hairs on her neck stand up. Someone was down there and it sounded like they were searching for something. Maybe it was the vandals back to finish the job? Or perhaps it was looters? Though, as there was nothing of any real value, she doubted the latter's likelihood.

Harmony made the very wise decision to hide. The room beyond the little door seemed like the only real option for this plan to work. It did not feel like cowardice to run and hide. On the contrary it felt like a really good idea to stow herself away and wait for Rose's return.

The door issued a loud creak as it opened. She winced, hoping that it hadn't alerted the intruders to her location. She was sure the noise had been loud enough to hear downstairs.

Spurred on with adrenaline she pushed the door open as far as it would swing. Her heart thumped in her chest, a concoction of fear and excitement impelled her heart into a gallop. What was being guarded in the deep, eclipsing blackness? What would she find beyond the threshold?

A sour draft of musty, old air crept from the darkness. Like the breath of an ancient mummy, waking from a thousand years of sleep, the rankness called out to her. It slipped into her nose and mouth; invading her throat. She wanted to cough and exclaim her displeasure at the foul odour but she could not. To do so would have surely meant discovery and that was not an option.

She glanced over her shoulder and listened again to check she hadn't been discovered. Then, when she was satisfied that she was safe (well, relatively safe at least) she began to crawl through the tiny doorway and into the dark beyond.

Downstairs, something large moved. It crept with quiet purpose, carefully placing each footfall so as not to make any more noise.

The creature *had* heard the creaking of the door. Now it was searching for a way upstairs...

CHAPTER 10

HIDE AND SEEK

Joseph gripped his seatbelt as Martha Trotter rounded the corner at breakneck speed. The wheels of the car slid and screeched on the dark ribbon of road. He felt sure they were going to have an accident before they reached Nova's house. However the urgency of the situation and the screams still audible, even over the mechanical roar of the engine, dimmed any impulse to caution her.

The journey had thus far taken a matter of minutes but to both of them it felt like an eternity. Neither spoke. What words could offer comfort in a situation like this? Neither he nor Martha knew what they were speeding towards. Instead they shared occasional glances of encouragement as the minutes slowly ticked by.

The car slid around the last corner and the dirt-track leading to Darkfern Cottage came into view. At last the waiting would be over. Joe just hoped that they had arrived in time.

Martha did not slow as they left the asphalt road and hurtled up the dirt road. She knew the bumps and turns as well as any other who lived in Bellflower. None were a strange to Nova's house.

It was at that moment, as the cottage finally came into view, that they noticed the mist. The hoary shroud hung so thickly in the air that all but a few trees were lost to its drifting-asylum.

The source of the vapour appeared to be the cottage's threshold. Gushes of the mist poured out, drowning the garden as a tide swallows the shore.

Joe looked at Martha. Both sat with their mouths open, their throats dry and unable to speak. Their earlier courage had abandoned them, valour lost to the oddity all around them.

"Maybe we should wait for Sergeant Cooper?" Martha said. Her face was a pallid, milky hue. Eyes wide and scared like that of a startled animal. She trembled all over.

Joseph placed a hand on Martha's. She had been a pillar of strength for the entire village for as long as he could remember; a leader of the community that protected them both. Always there to help, no matter who needed it.

He smiled warmly; his best attempt to reassure her. "You wait here, Martha. Stay and wait for Sergeant Cooper. I'll go in..."

Martha shook her head vigorously and tried her best to convince him to stay. She insisted they both wait for the police to arrive. Joe ignored her advice and opened the car door. He stepped out, losing his foot to the obscuring grey. The car door closed with a loud clunk.

This wasn't about him being afraid. He didn't have enough time or nerve to go inside if he let himself feel *fear*. No, he had to help Nova. He had to go inside and he had to do it now.

The fog swirled around his feet. An eerie stillness had descended around the cottage. No sounds of the forest filled the night. No owls hooted. No animals scurried. There was no sound at all. The silence was complete, save for the rampant thud of his quickening heartbeat.

He walked forward as quickly as his feet would allow. The murkiness made it difficult to see the undulations in the ground and he fell more than once as he made his way up the path. As he approached the open door the crunching of shattered plates scraped violently against the overwhelming stillness.

He paused at the threshold and stared into the darkness, trying to see any shapes or movement. Another scream burst forth and he recoiled. He caught himself, stowing his fear. The pitiful sound invaded his head and his adrenaline kicked in. He rushed forward. He looked back over his shoulder at the headlights of the car.

Joe nodded to the woman watching and then stepped into the darkness.

Harmony crawled very cautiously into the dark space beyond the tiny door. She tentatively reached out with her hands. Nimble fingers danced in a thick layer of dust covering the floor. She felt certain that traps lay hidden in the gloom and she wanted to be ready for them.

Quite by chance she stumbled upon an object lurking beneath the dust layer. Fumbling in the dark she cleared the filth and picked up her discovery. Shifting into the light she learned the object was a short candle-stub; a nubbin of wax with a blackened wick.

Harmony frowned. What use was a candle with no way of lighting it? She was just about to voice this when she spotted a matchbox resting by the small door.

“Well, that’s oddly-convenient,” she whispered, reaching for the matchbox.

The box contained just a single match. It felt damp and old. As she prepared to strike she questioned the intelligence of lighting a candle in a room filled with dust. It was a terrible idea, a looming and very real fire-hazard. That being said the darkness was too great to see properly. She had little option.

Harmony dragged the matchstick across the rough side of the box. A loud, scratchy, popping noise filled the quiet air and a second later the flame suddenly burst from the tip. She touched the match to the wick then blew out the rapidly dwindling taper.

The candle immediately began to cast light around the room. Orange light illuminated the shadowed corners with a cheerful glow. Harmony held the flickering wick away from her hair as the little flame danced on the end of his waxy pillar. She pushed the little door over with her foot and turned to inspect the room.

Her initial scan was a disappointment. The mysteries of this cottage had promised so much yet so little reward was delivered. The tiny, hidden chamber was full of *junk*. This was not the kind of bric-a-brac which concealed wondrous rarities.

Most of the space was occupied by an ancient contraption. Though bizarre in design and amateur in construction Harmony concluded it to be a loom. Accompanying the weaving-device was an old captain's chest. The container looked to have seen better days. It was old, tarnished and dented. Harmony found these details only enhanced its appeal.

Along one wall, and indeed spilling across the floor, was a rather sizeable collection of damaged books. Many were torn, coverless or burned to a point beyond use. Harmony glanced over the few titles with covers. She frowned as she spied a collection of silly names; *Physica - The way of Will*, *Symbolism and Sacrifice - The step by step guide*, *The Rift - An eyewitness account*, *The seven steps; becoming a better witch*.

Looking over the remaining volumes Harmony began to feel a little unnerved. Why would her Great Aunt have such bizarre tomes? Was this her big secret? Did Nova really think she was a witch?

Harmony laughed at the absurdity of her thought. Nova must have been senile to believe in magic. She dismissed the madness, blaming the isolation, and turned her attention to the dilapidated loom.

A thick layer of dust besmirched every inch of the ancient machine. Harmony quickly deduced it hadn't been used in living memory. She swept the cobwebs away from the row of warp-threads; still taut despite their age. Her fingers plucked the lines like the strings of a harp. A decidedly unmelodic-*twang* punctuated the stillness as the aged line snapped. She backed away hoping whoever was down stairs hadn't heard the noise.

On the brink of turning away she suddenly noticed a strange detail. Descending from the thatch above was the end of a strange, copper device. The telescopic-apparatus, like the narrow end of a funnel, reached out over the loom. From the tapered opening innumerable, practically invisible, threads hung down.

Harmony followed the strands' path through the loom's workings. She cleared dust and web alike until she found their end. Hidden in a shroud of gloom the fibres convened at the edge of a bundle.

Her hand reached out and lifted a parcel of fabric. The candlelight brushed the dust-covered cloth and Harmony could see a gleam of red shine through. Despite the apparent age of the material the colour had not diminished any.

Holding onto one edge she allowed the bundle to unravel. This was no ordinary scrap of cloth. This was something far more interesting than that. In her hands she held a beautiful patchwork cloak. Each section, fascinating in its own intricacy, was delicately stitched to the next with sparkling thread. The combination formed a garment of significant opulence.

She twirled the cloak through the air, spinning it behind her back in a hurry to see it draped around her. The dust covering the floorboards, undisturbed for many years, was sent swirling into the air with the draft from the cloak.

Like a twisted vision of Christmas the room filled with the restless grime; large, fluffy flakes of decay danced in the air. Thick clumps clung to her hair and face. Some even drifted into her mouth, choking her as she gasped at the splendour of the perfectly-fitting cape. Quickly she closed the clasp, shaped like a lion's head, around her neck and at once the cloak started to feel warm.

Harmony paced the room. She was attempting to achieve the perfect amount of theatrical flourish when she turned. The cloak seemed to move instinctively; almost as if the garment had a mind of its own.

The old chest waited patiently for the girl to notice him again. He had been in this room far longer than the cloak or the loom or the dust. To be precise he had waited in the dark for so long he had forgotten what he was waiting for. The only detail he was certain of was that he had something important to share with the girl in the cloak. The chest would have shrugged his shoulders in bemusement if he had any to shrug. Alas he didn't. He would just have to wait until she stopped dancing around like a ninny and got on with the story.

A little out of breath from spinning and twirling Harmony sat down for a rest on the old chest. Rose had been gone for quite a while now. Harmony was just wishing she would come back when a creaking noise from downstairs reminded her she needed to be quiet.

She would have checked the time on her watch if Rose had allowed her to own one. Rose had declared all watches (and devices on which time could be measured) to be "an unnecessary and vulgar constraint on the flow of life." This statement had been quickly followed by the ejection of Harmony's watch through an open window as they sped along a nameless country road in France.

The secret room was beginning to lose some of its initial appeal. The game of hide and seek was becoming as stale as the air she inhaled.

Harmony stood up and took a few steps back towards the pile of books. Perhaps her first dismissal had been too hasty. The tomes deserved a closer inspection and it doubled as a great waste of time. Suddenly the clasp around her neck tightened and her movement was chokingly-halted. She muffled her complaints as she turned to locate what had snagged the cloak.

The tail of the cape had intentionally hooked its self onto a protruding nail. It could not let the girl, who wore it so proudly, leave the room. She had not yet checked the chest. She had not yet seen the wonders inside. How did she expect to survive the coming ordeal without the gifts? It was the cloak's responsibility to protect her and he knew from experience that if the wearer was unprepared, then he wasn't worn for long.

Harmony freed the caught edge, careful not to tear the cloak any further. She had quite forgotten about the chest lurking in the gloom. She found this surprising given how her mind was now positively buzzing with curiosity.

Visions of gold and treasure filled her head. Though, the likelihood that a crazy old woman would have such things was, as far as Harmony could tell, doubtful in the extreme.

Harmony sank to her knees as she looked at the large rusty padlock. The impeding bulk of metal halted her discovery from coming to fruition.

The lock itself was fairly average and quite unremarkable. It was big and heavy with a very definite 'no further without a key' kind of vibe. However, it was the attached brown label which most intrigued her or rather it was the inscription...

Speak your name and then we'll see if you're the one who'll open me.

Harmony stared at the words. It was Nova's handwriting; she immediately recognised the same swirly style from the letter. She paused for a moment trying to shrug off the feeling that someone was watching her, waiting for her to speak into the lock, waiting to jump out and tell her it has all been a practical joke and what a fool she had been. A furtive glance over her shoulder at the door and quickly around the room lulled her suspicion.

Harmony was beginning to question her own sanity now. Did she really believe this was happening? She caught herself; this was the most amusing, exciting and absurd occasion of her life, why spoil the fun by trying to make it real?

"This is all just *make-believe*," she laughed to herself before she leant forward and whispered into the keyhole.

"My name is, Harmony."

The lock did nothing but stare back, unaffected by her whisper. Harmony frowned in annoyance. She felt more than a little disappointed. She really thought it would work, that by some act of magic the lock would have clicked open.

A flash of memory, armed with a fragment of her dream, charged in to her mind. She recalled the red-haired woman asking her name; the very same woman who was in the paintings. If Nova had painted the door then perhaps she had experienced the same dream?

Harmony considered for a moment whether she was starting to crack up. She dismissed the notion flippantly and leant forward once more.

Her lips hovered just above the keyhole. "My name is, Harmony Ryder."

The lock clicked open...

CHAPTER 11

RETURN TO DUST...

Joseph ran through the living room. With the moonlight behind him he could just make out the devastation in Nova's cottage. The treacle thick fog, which had made his approach to the house so difficult, was as dense inside as it was out. His boots crunched down on broken crockery.

As he entered the kitchen a foul odour invaded his senses. The rancid stench of decay stung his nose and made his eyes water. The revolting pong reminded him of an incident when, as a child, he found a dead badger in the woods.

A whimpering sound broke his recollection and his eyes searched the moonlit room for the source. His gaze fell on a heap of filthy rags. The shape lay against the wall. He moved a little closer and saw, through the wisps of mist, a foot poking out from beneath the soiled cloth.

The whimpering continued and the pile of rags shuddered. Joseph knelt down and laid a hand on the quaking cloth.

"Nova? Nova, it's me, Joseph King," he said, his voice sounding both soft and concerned.

"Little Joe?" Her voice was frail and distant.

"It's ok, Nova. I'm here, everything will be ok now."

He was doing his best to remain calm, at least on the outside. Inside he feared his stomach was going to abandon him.

"Is *it* still here?"

Her breathing was laboured and her hands clung to Joe's jacket sleeves as he helped her to sit up.

Joseph gasped as the moonlight touched her face. Several deep scratches marked her wrinkled cheek and she was bleeding from her mouth and nose.

"Is what here? Nova, what are you talking abo..."

He was cut off by a low, threatening growl from the darkest corner of the kitchen. Whatever had made the noise began to move toward him.

Joseph could hear a creature as it crushed the debris under its feet, inching closer through the shadows. It growled again and Joseph stood up. He turned to face the animal.

The beast moved slowly and deliberately, staying in the dark as much as possible. He could see that it walked on four legs and was the size of a very, very large dog. Despite the canine-features the creature possessed a pair of huge, bright-red eyes. The eyes shone in the dark as they watched him pick up a large baton of wood. Joe positioned himself between Nova and the monster.

“Joe...run. Just run you stupid boy,” Nova begged, her voice was weak and fading by the syllable.

Joe shook his head at her order and he braced himself. The stench grew stronger as the animal approached. Its growl was fierce now and it gave a last warning to the man.

He did not move. The creature launched at him, spreading its great mouth to expose row upon row of razor sharp teeth. The creature sunk its fangs into his arm and Joe let out a cry of pain.

Suddenly something hard and heavy smashed against the beast’s head. The animal released its hold on of Joe and turned in an instant to face a second attacker.

Martha stood in the doorway. She held a torch in one hand which she pointed at the monster again. It yelped and scurried backward as if the light inflicted pain. Desperately scrabbling to its feet the beast burst out of the kitchen windows and disappeared into the dark.

Joseph stared at Martha. She stood motionless in the doorway still pointing the torch at the window. “What was that?” she mumbled. Her voice squeaked as her question broke the silence.

“A wolf... I think?” Joe answered.

“Not a wolf,” Nova spluttered. “It was a Howler.”

Martha quickly moved to Nova's side. She thrust the torch into Joseph’s hand and instructed him to shine the light on Nova. Martha knelt down and began checking the wounds. With the skilful hands of a mother she did her best to stem the bleeding.

“Now you just hang in there, Nova,” she reassured as she cleaned the blood from the old woman’s face.

“I didn't have enough time,” Nova whispered.

“Hush dear. Try to save your energy.”

“No. It's too late.” Nova abruptly grabbed Martha's arm in a tight grip. “You, you must warn her. Keep *her* safe until she's ready.”

“Keep who safe?” Martha asked, staring into the old lady's terrified eyes.

“Tell her not to open...” Nova's voice was growing faint, life leaving her damaged body. “She mustn’t open the...”

Martha cried as the light slipped away from Nova's bright, grey eyes. Her last words entrusted to people who were overcome with grief and unlikely to grasp their true meaning.

Joseph crouched next to Martha. Her heaving sobs filling the roaring silence as she rocked Nova in her arms. His own gaze blurred with hot, salty tears.

He lifted one of her frail hands in his own. He had known her his whole life. *Old-Nova* had been like a grandmother to the entire village. Everyone only had good to say about her. How could something like this happen to someone so loving and kind?

“Oh my goodness,” Martha gasped. Her exclamation snapped Joe out of his sorrowful thoughts.

Joseph pointed the torch, still clasped in his hand, at Nova. What he saw both confused and astounded him. A brief glimmer of hope that she was still alive was instantly thwarted by the vision before him. Nova was crumbling... Her body was disintegrating. She was turning into dust!

Martha recoiled in abject horror as Nova disappeared leaving her arms holding the filthy rags she had worn. The dust vanished into the mist covered floor.

Rose's face was deathly white as the story came to a close. Joe's tale was, as he had warned, definitely strange and not very nice. It would have also been hard to believe if his arm didn't have the savage bite mark to prove his encounter with the creature had occurred.

"How can that be?" Rose questioned further. "How can she have crumbled like that? People don't just dissolve into dust!"

"I don't know what happened," he replied honestly. "I'm as confused as you, but it happened just like I said. We searched the woods for the dog or wolf...or whatever it was. But we found nothing, not even any tracks."

Rose touched his hand and she smiled at him warmly through the tears in her eyes. She didn't have an explanation for what happened. It was a bizarre story and needed further investigation. All the same she was grateful for what Joe had done. It was brave of him to race to Nova's rescue. In her eyes he was a knight in shining armour.

"Thank you. From both of us," she said, her words tinged with sadness and admiration.

"I'm sorry. What do you mean *both of us*? Who is *us*?" he asked.

"Oh. How silly of me. By us I meant Harmony and I. She's my daughter, though most people think we're sisters. Oh my god!" she suddenly exclaimed. Her eyes became wide. "Harmony's at the house alone and that dog is still on the loose!"

CHAPTER 12

PROWL AND HOWL

Harmony removed the lock and placed her hands on the lid. Excitement surged through her. She felt as though fate had conspired to bring her to this very moment. Now here she was, before the chest and whatever destiny it contained.

Seizing the chance to seek adventure she pushed on the heavy lid. The hinged-cover opened with a loud creak. Harmony winced as the noise sounded throughout the house. She held her breath and crossed her fingers, hoping the prowler hadn't heard her. The silence pressed against her as she waited. When no response from the intruder was heard she exhaled and relaxed a little. Perhaps they had already fled? It didn't matter really. The trespasser would never find her in the secret room. Besides, she had better things to entertain herself with. Harmony returned her attention to the chest.

Upon opening the box, much to her disappointment, she found no gold, jewels or treasures of any kind. The dark, rectangular interior contained two objects and neither was all that interesting at first glance.

She beheld the lacklustre contents with a scowl. Ignoring the prickle of frustration she reached in and removed a cloth backpack and a small book.

Harmony deposited the bag on the dusty floor and focused on the paperback. Its dark, leather binding was very fragile and the pages were old and thin. The ink inside was faded with age which made the scribblings practically impossible to read. She thumbed through a few pages but ultimately lost interest in the illegible mutterings.

She placed the book on the floor and crooked her consideration toward the bag. Perhaps the sack would be more fruitful?

She opened the clasp and lifted the flap. The fabric was stiff, its weave dusty and not altogether compliant. Within she found a coil of pale, silver rope. The hoary cord was woven from fine threads, so thin they could have been mistaken for hair.

Harmony felt beneath the twine. Her fingers immediately brushed a hard surface, something more substantial than the rope. She retrieved a cold, metal medallion. The silver disk hung from an intricately woven chain.

She turned the charm over to examine the elaborate design more closely. On the front was an image of a roaring lion. The fearsome beast was surrounded with leaves.

On the back of the disk an inscription read:

For Nova. Long live The Grey Queen.

Harmony gazed at the dedication. *Grey Queen* she read again. The old woman who lived in this tumbled-down cottage was a *queen*? It's just not possible.

Harmony couldn't and wouldn't believe it. It was ridiculous to even entertain the idea that her mysterious, great aunt was a monarch. There is only one Queen. She lives in London in a palace and not in a cottage in the Lake District.

"Stupid girl," she mumbled aloud. She was feeling embarrassed she had become so caught up in what was obviously a mad-woman's fantasy world.

As she stuffed the rope and medallion, along with the delicate book, back into the bag a noise startled her. It sounded like someone was coming up the stairs.

She crawled over to the little door and poked her head through. The noise came again. The intruder must have heard her open the chest after all. Now he or she was coming to find her. Harmony's only hope, she thought, was to frighten them; perhaps they hadn't realised she was here. Plucking up the courage she called out.

"Hello! Mum is that you?!"

Harmony smiled as the sounds abruptly ceased. Her idea had worked, they were startled. She decided to shout again, louder this time.

"I know you're there! I can hear you breathing. I have called the police, so you had best scarper before they get here."

This was a lie. She had not called the police but she hoped the threat would be enough to frighten them away.

The breaths became heavier. When no other response was offered she started to panic. They weren't leaving... She quickly pulled her head back through the little door. Whoever was on the stairs was not scared. Instead they began to climb quickly. In seconds she heard them reach the top and begin crashing down the hall.

Harmony's breath abandoned her. Without rhyme or reason she reached out and retrieved the golden doorknob. She snatched the gleaming handle from the socket and deposited it into the cloth bag. Without the handle perhaps the little door would make the intruder pass-out like it did her? A jolt of terror pulsed through her as a huge, black shape appeared in the doorway. A foul smell crept into the air. Harmony instinctively covered her nose and mouth.

The creature edged into the room. A hulking, black shape closely resembling a wolf slowly moved forward. Its thick, black fur was covered in glistening tar. Oozing drips puddled beneath its frame as the creature paused to sniff the air.

The monstrous beast had twigs and branches protruding from its back and legs, apparently caught in its dark, matted fur. The wooden shafts stuck out like porcupine quills.

The monster swiped one massive paw, embedded with claws like thorns. The foot scratched shards of shattered mirror out of its way. The wolf growled menacingly and it bared its sharp,

yellowed fangs. Its barbaric teeth sat in perfect rows, like splinters of wood drenched in saliva, the tips stained with blood.

The beast lunged forward, its eyes wild with a murderous glow. Harmony scabbled backwards. Her foot kicked out and connected with the little door, slamming it shut. As the wolf collided with the secured barrier a heavy thud and a howl of anger raged from the other side.

Harmony jumped to her feet. All that separated her from the beast was the little door. The wolf clawed at the wood and plaster as it tried to get through. She did not have long before it would be in there with her.

At once she searched around for an escape route but there were no other doors or windows. She was trapped, backed into a corner.

A cold drop of water landed on her neck. She looked upwards, surprised and displeased in equal measure. Immediately locating the source Harmony noticed a thin shaft of light. The scant amount of light shone through a gap at the edge of the strange contraption. She could just make out a blanket of dark rain clouds tumbling overhead.

“The funnel!” she exclaimed, a plan forming instantly in her mind.

She grabbed the backpack and slung the strap over her shoulder. Without wasting a moment she clambered onto the loom and ignored its groans of encumbrance.

The monster slammed against the wall, trying to force entry. The resultant shudder caused the stack of books to topple. They scattered and crashed down, knocking over the small candle in the process.

Harmony was much too preoccupied to notice the spilt flame. She reached up and wrenched on the copper funnel. The apparatus gave way easily. She felt a rush of hope; the cone was as old and rickety as it appeared to be. She yanked it out and dropped it onto the splay of books with a great clatter.

Beyond the door the scratching momentarily ceased. The respite was short lived and as it began again a renewed sense of urgency was evident.

The tiny flame had been quietly burning on his candle, however now he chose to reveal itself. Orange and bright he leapt from the white hot wick to an extremely dry and previously scorched book. *Taming the Flame – A Beginner’s Guide to Pyromancy.*

The flicker thought this to be a fitting title with which to fuel his blaze. He spread across the book, growing bigger and bigger, greedily licking and consuming the tinder-dry pages.

The sound of the door giving way to the stress of attack, coupled with the billowing smoke from the rapidly growing fire, urged Harmony through the small gap in the straw roof.

She emerged from the hole and pulled herself clear. A loud crash from inside indicated the wolf had finally broken through. Seconds later its head appeared, snapping and snarling at her feet as she attempted to manoeuvre across the rain-soaked thatch. Thick, white smoke was seeping through the straw, choking her as she fumbled for safety.

Harmony was terrified and in her panic she lost her footing. She snatched at the straw, fingers pulling out tufts but she knew it was pointless. With increasing speed she slid off the roof and tumbled out of sight. The wolf gave a howl of frustration as it watched her vanish. Fury burned in its eyes as it retracted its head from the gap and give chase.

Harmony landed with a painful bump. She touched down in the garden below the kitchen windows. She cast aside the pain and immediately jumped to her feet. The creature would be upon her in seconds. She had to find a place to hide.

The forest bordering the cottage looked to be a suitable place to escape to. Moreover Harmony was fairly confident wolves couldn't climb trees. She sprinted toward the swaying trees.

Harmony ran. She didn't know where she was going but that didn't matter. The most important thing was staying alive. She needed to find an adult, anyone who could help her.

Her mind filled with alternative versions of this day. In one fantasy, Rose stayed and they fought off the monster together. In another she joined her mother to look for a shop and the beast found the cottage empty. Yet another saw her fling Nova's letter back out the window and her life remained ordinary. Any of these was preferable to her current reality.

After about ten minutes of running a stitch in her side forced her to slow down. She rested behind a very large tree. She gasped to catch her breath, all the while watching for signs of pursuit. The pit-pat of raindrops splashing on leaves filled the forest.

Harmony's breathing was almost level when the sound of a twig snapping heightened her senses. Something was close... A second twig broke, much closer this time. Comprehension dawned on her, she was being circled.

Two options came to mind. Firstly she could climb the tree and shout for help. The only downside being that help needed to be within hearing distance. Secondly she could run and try to make it back to the cottage. Hopefully the billowing smoke would have summoned some attention. With any luck she may find firemen armed with axes.

Another cracking-snap forced a decision. She sprinted away from the tree; her heart beating so hard she was sure the wolf would hear it.

Close behind leaves rustled and twigs broke. The beast was close and giving chase. She didn't dare look back, fearful that the sight would cause her to falter. She rushed on, dodging between trees and ducking under branches.

Rain streamed from the canopy. Fallen droplets blurred her vision and soaked her clothes as she sprinted through the trees. Seconds turned to minutes and still the beast had not caught her. Despite her reservations she had to look behind. She allowed herself a quick glance. There was no pursuer. Two more glimpses and she felt confident enough to slow down.

Still jogging Harmony looked around wildly. The trees seemed to be closing in on her; fear gave way to panic. She was lost. In her desperation to lose the wolf she hadn't thought to map her path. The trees all looked alike. She had no idea how to get back to the cottage...

Scared, lost and alone she slumped against a tree, feeling breathless and defeated. She knew staying still for too long meant the beast would be upon her but dread has a way of making legs heavy. This was not a good situation to be in. How could she have been so stupid? Why didn't she mark the trees or drop a trail of breadcrumbs?

"I can't stay here," she encouraged herself. "Come on girl. Try to find a road or..."

Her words faltered as an unexpected sound greeted her above the rain-splatter. Close by two voices were sharing a muffled conversation. At first she felt a whoosh of relief. Salvation was at hand! She stood up and made her way toward the speakers. However, as she drew closer her initial joy quickly gave way to alarm. Their conversation was muffled for a very good reason...

"This skin doesn't fit properly," said a high-pitched voice belonging to a man.

"It looks fine. So stop your moaning," a second shrill-man replied.

"Tell me what I gotta do again."

"How many times do I have to explain it, Folliver? All you need to do is smile and give the key to the *mundaine*," informed the second speaker. "And no biting this time. *She* won't be happy if they arrive full of holes again. Got it?"

"Oh please, Gickle. Just let me have a little nibble. No one will notice if I take a finger or two," Folliver pleaded. He sounded disappointed, like a petulant child bereft of their desire.

"No. Not a finger nor an ear, nose or any other body part. If you do then *she'll* be after you and you don't want that do you?" Gickle warned menacingly.

"No, I don't want to anger *her*. Smile and give the key. That's all. I promise," Folliver recited. He sounded a dash more cheerful. "Maybe when we finish up we can go find a spare? We can eat them can't we?"

"Ok. If there's time after we bag 'em we can pilfer another. Goodness knows we need to eat too."

"Yummy!" Folliver clapped excitedly.

"Right then let's get moving," Gickle snapped. "We haven't much time left. They're due to arrive any time now."

Thinking it wise to remain hidden Harmony crawled forward to the edge of a clearing. She swept aside the thicket of ferns just in time to see the last of the two men leaving. The gent was very tall and thin. He wore a black suit and long, black coat. Harmony thought his attire was both a strange and unwise choice for a stroll in the woods.

She sat nestled in the undergrowth, somewhat shaken by the conversation. The rain had stopped falling; save for the odd flurry of drops loosened from the canopy. The two creepy men

were far away now, a fact she found comforting. Their chatter of ill-fitting skin and snacking on fingers was unnerving.

Regardless of the weirdness she intended to follow the pair from a safe distance. They seemed the most likely route to civilisation providing she kept her distance.

Harmony stood up and made to follow but as she did she noticed something rather odd. At the edge of the clearing an unusual tree stood apart from the others.

As she neared she observed some odd details. The tree was noticeably different from those around it. The bark was soot-black and it reflected light as if it were glass. The branches were leafless; twig-fingers frozen in cruel, wicked gestures.

Harmony crept towards the odd tree, curious as to what genus it was. She was by no means an expert but she could identify most species of tree found in Britain.

She walked around the wide trunk, stepping in between massive roots that protruded through the mossy ground. It was when she had completed a full circle that Harmony became aware of a large spider's web stretched between two branches. The gossamer threads glistened in the sunlight and she was sure it was making a soft, musical sound...

CHAPTER 13

THE WEBWAY

Harmony moved closer to the singing web. The weave of delicate strands hummed softly as a little of her hair brushed the billowing surface. A thought bothered her a little; a web this size must have an equally large spider living in it. Not that she had a fear of spiders, she didn't. All the same she wasn't keen on them getting close to her face.

The web sang louder as she moved away and a draft stirred the weave. An iridescent shimmer rippled across the fine strings of spider silk. It was beautiful.

Attempting to replicate the effect Harmony took a deep breath and exhaled gently into the centre. The web responded aggressively. The soft, tinkling song was instantly replaced by a high pitched whine which shredded the tranquillity she felt.

Harmony ceased the breath and covered her ears but the netting did not halt its new song. Quite the contrary, the shrill-melody grew louder. All of a sudden the translucent filaments began to shine. Dim at first they quickly became as radiant as the noon sun.

Fearful she attempted to back away; her feet were stuck fast. She tried with all her might to move, but it was no use. She was trapped.

Without warning the web exploded outwards. She screamed as the effulgent cobweb ensnared her, binding her limbs in the net. As a fish caught for supper she was entangled. Time appeared to dwindle into a meander. Lethargic seconds allowed her to seek help from her surroundings.

A spear of horror impaled her as her panicked gaze fell upon the wolf's red, vicious stare. The beast of nightmare prowled along the clearing's edge. The monstrous-wolf snarled and scratched the ground; gouging the mud with thorn-claws. A howl called out and the beast, unfettered by the time dilation, charged toward her.

Harmony closed her eyes. She didn't want to see the monster savage her. She couldn't bear the thought of those vile, yellow fangs piercing her flesh. There was only one person to blame for her life ending like this...Nova.

Without warning time lurched back into a steady stream. The ground under her feet fell away. Harmony opened her eyes just in time to comprehend what was happening.

Just as the web had exploded outward to catch her up, now it began to retract. Harmony watched as the world, the wolf and everything else began to spin away. She closed her eyes again as the dizzying blur turned her stomach.

Her eyes were still firmly shut when she became aware of a strange sensation. It felt like she was floating. Daring to peek with one eye she attempted to ascertain if she was correct. The sight that greeted her was astounding. Hastily she opened her other eye and gasped.

As suspected, Harmony was floating. Though, truth be told, that was not the cause of her astonishment. She wasn't in the forest any longer. Likewise the monstrous wolf was absent too.

Harmony was travelling in an translucent bubble. The sphere was roaming at incredible speeds along a network of pathways. Each track interconnected with those around it so that a lattice was formed.

Beyond the webbing of bridges a vast expanse of emptiness stretched off for eternity. She looked to the other bridges and paths, numbering in their thousands, as they reached across the endless expanse. As she watched she noticed specks of light traversing the plethora of avenues. Were other people doing as she was? Come to think of it what was she doing?

Harmony was suddenly overcome by a sickening thought. Was she dead? Was this the afterlife? Perhaps the wolf had eaten her? Perhaps her mind had created this dream to ease her passing?

The nauseating thoughts intensified as an image of Rose burned across her mind. She cursed that their last conversation was an argument. Rose would come back to find the cottage ablaze and Harmony gone... She would have no idea about the room, the wolf, the odd gentlemen or the singing web. Rose would just think Harmony had become an arsonist and a runaway. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Harmony had never felt so sad. She was only a week away from being fourteen; far too young to die. There were so many things she wanted to do. She had yet to kiss a boy and fall in love. She wanted to climb mountains and scuba-dive in crystal waters.

“I don’t want to be dead,” she sobbed. “Anything would be better than that.”

Lost in her misery time seemed to drift away. Harmony floated along in her little bubble, moving ever closer to the centre where all lanes converged.

She had no idea where she was going and felt no passion to get there in a hurry. The bubble was doing its own thing anyway. It’s not like there was a steering wheel or instructions.

The bubble suddenly changed trails and veered off down a separate path. Unease replaced her woe as she witnessed the bulk of the webbing retreat.

Without warning the path began to spiral downwards. The bubble increased its speed as it descended into the blackness. Harmony wanted the ride to be over. She wasn’t having fun any longer.

As if answering her thoughts the sphere jolted as a wave of light washed over it. A second and then third flashed slowed her even more. The fourth flash brought with it a familiar sound. A high-pitched melody began to bombard her ears as outside shimmers of gold swirled around her. The flashes of brilliance grew in intensity and frequency until, in a sudden wrenching crescendo, the journey ended with one final almighty flash. The light retreated. The noise ceased. The bubble popped and Harmony was ejected into total darkness.

She sailed through the air unable to stop herself, not even a scream managing to escape her lips before she landed softly on a damp patch of ground.

Harmony laughed. The merry-echo rang out into the darkness. The laugh was partly to release her fear but mostly because of an exhilarating rush of euphoria. She was alive!

As her eyes adjusted to the surroundings she picked herself up and attempted to figure out which way the cottage was.

“Wait a moment,” she uttered, scratching her head. “This is the wrong forest.”

She was correct. The forest she was standing in looked different to where she had escaped the wolf. Similarly her journey had taken no longer than an hour, yet night blanketed the firmament above.

“Well. Where ever I am I can’t stay here,” she reasoned aloud. She glanced upward.

The sky beyond the tree tops was strewn with silvery clouds. Behind the drifts of grey a crescent moon offered a scant amount of light for her to see by.

She didn't much fancy sleeping in the woods with just her tattered cape for warmth. No, it was a better idea to start finding an adult to help her. Perhaps if she could locate a road or a river then it would lead her to a town. Surely someone there would help a lost child get home to her mother.

With a plan decided, and a growing wish to leave the dark, creepy forest behind, Harmony stepped out of the mossy patch.

She took look around. It definitely wasn't where she had been when the web grabbed her. All the trees here were twisted and gnarled. Their bark was black and shiny like glass. She paused as a realisation took hold of her mind. The forest was formed of trees like the one which housed the strange web.

A thought erupted. She quickly searched the trees. Then she spotted what she had suspected. A short distance from where she landed Harmony noticed a huge web.

The webbing was almost completely circular, just like the one which ensnared her. The branches of an oak tree, an oddity amongst the black, glass forest, formed a frame for it to sit in.

The web itself was noticeably different too. The design was infinitely more complex. The threads were intricately woven into an elaborate mandala. The fibres shone intensely and pulsed with a gentle hum. Harmony was astounded once again by the beauty, however this time she kept her distance; a wise choice given its explosive nature.

Harmony backed away just as the web began to pulse more aggressively. The threads’ shine increased and a high-pitched whine sounded out. Harmony covered her ears.

Fearful of what was about to happen she ran and hid behind the thick trunk of a nearby tree. She watched from her hiding place terror-struck as, seconds later, the wolf appeared from the web’s glowing centre. The beast flew through the air and landed on the same moss-patch she had.

Harmony held her breath as the monster sniffed the wet, verdant landing spot. It raised its head and looked about, searching for her. For a moment she thought it looked at her, their eyes meeting for a brief second.

The beast snarled as it tried to discern her scent amongst the forest's aroma. The wolf growled and the sticks protruding from its back stiffened, like a porcupine warning an enemy not to come close. Slowly the creature inched toward her. Then, inexplicably he changed his mind. The monster snorted its dissatisfaction, gave a low growl and then turned its back on her.

Harmony guessed he couldn't sense her. Her presence somehow obscured from the wolf's nose. In a few bounding leaps he vanished into the darkness.

She took a deep breath and immediately regretted it. The stench from the wolf was still thick in the air and it entered her throat causing her to gag. She doubled over, her hand resting on the tree trunk she had been hiding behind.

As she straightened up, regaining some control over her stomach, she looked at the tree. It too was different from the others. The bark was brown and dull and looked almost normal, though it did seem to have hairs on it.

The roots at the bottom curled under, forming a rounded shape, much like a ball. Or was it a foot? With care and interest she walked the tree's circumference. She looked toward the canopy in the hopes of identifying the variety.

Some distance about the tree top Harmony saw two large, yellow balls of light floating amongst the branches. At first they remained still. Then as she watched they began to drift closer.

Harmony froze as the nature of the orbs became apparent. These were not merely floating lights. They were giant eyes. Harmony backed away as the head of a enormous lion lowered and focused on her. His thick mane, bizarrely made of brown leaves, framed his ancient face.

As his lips parted, teeth the size of swords glistened in the moonlight. His gigantic paw trapped the edge of her cloak as she made an attempt to flee.

"Name yourself, witch," he growled in a threatening tone.

"I, I'm not a witch," Harmony stammered, her knees giving way to an overwhelming sense of doom. She collapsed on the ground.

He moved his head closer and sniffed at her. His hot breath smelt as sweet and pleasant as a forest on a summer's day. The rush of air warmed her cold limbs.

"If you lie to me again I will kill you," he warned, massive fangs inches from her face. "Now answer me. To which coven do you belong?"

"Coven? What are you talking about?"

The lion narrowed his eyes and then seemingly noticed the cloak on her back. "Can it be? Are you a daughter of Eve?" he questioned. He brandished his teeth again, encouraging her to speak the truth.

"Eve? N...no," she squeaked. "My mum's n...name is *Rose*."

He paused for a moment, his brow indicating he was confused. “Do not test my patience, girl,” he replied in a low, rumbling snarl. His mane rustled in the breeze. “Are you mundane? Have you come from the other world?”

“I don't understand. What other world?” Harmony replied standing up. “I'm just a normal girl, a human. I'm nothing special. Please let me go.”

The massive tree-lion rose to his full height, towering over her cowering form. Harmony guessed he must have been taller than a double-decker bus. His belly only just touched the black, twisted treetops surrounding them.

The monster looked down at her, narrowing his intense, yellow eyes. Then with enough force to shake the entire forest and knock her to the ground again he roared into the sky. The booming power of his voice scattered flocks of squawking birds and even parted the clouds.

When his call subsided Harmony dared to glance upwards. She couldn't believe her luck, he wasn't looking at her. Seizing the opportunity she leapt to her feet and attempted to run. She knew it was pointless really. He was so big that he would catch her without difficulty but she had no intention of being an easy meal. No, he was going to have to work if he wanted to munch on her for his supper.

Harmony's fleeing did not go, as she had hoped, unnoticed. The lion was upon her in seconds, one massive paw slammed down a few feet in front of her. She skidded to a halt, screamed from fright and then changed direction.

“Enough!” he bellowed, knocking Harmony down once again with his voice. “You must come with me, daughter of Eve.”

“I've already told you I'm not Eve's daughter! I've never even heard of her!” Harmony shouted. She was beginning to get angry now. She didn't like being knocked over repeatedly. Giant lion or not she wasn't about to be pushed around by anyone.

“Come. Your fate is waiting.”

“Then *it* can keep on waiting. I'm not going anywhere with you. I want to go home. That's the only *destiny* I'm interested in.”

“Rarely are we the coxswain of our allotted path. You have been chosen. Sadly there is no escaping that which *is*.”

“I'm not doing whatever it is that you want,” Harmony refused. She folded her arms defiantly. “Go on all you like. It ain't gonna happen. Now if you'll just point me in the direction of Bellflower I'll find my own way home.”

“Bellflower?” he repeated.

“Yes. It's in The Lake District.”

“I know of no such place,” the lion admitted.

“I can't say I'm surprised really,” she agreed. “I've never seen a giant lion in Britain either.”

The lion surveyed her. His thoughts looked to be as deep and turbulent as any ocean. After a long moment he spoke. "Come with me, girl. This world has many more wonders beyond my humble form."

"The only way I'm leaving with you is if you eat me. I have..."

"Very well," the lion interrupted. In a flash of teeth his mouth closed around her. The great lion threw his head back and swallowed her small frame without chewing.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Once upon a time Benjamin Feral was minding his own business, sketching out designs for a new sculpture, when his mind inadvertently happened upon a story.

At first he tried to ignore the film playing in his imagination; understandably-mistaking the vivid pictures for a flight of fancy. How wrong he was... Benjamin's nights became sleepless as his dreams were overrun with characters and their adventures. Despite the incoming-tide of ideas he went about his daily-grind and brushed-off the *thoughts* as nonsense.

Unimpressed with this dismissal, *The Imaginings* spilled into his waking life. Daydreams overwhelmed him at every turn. The story demanded to be heard...

Eventually Benjamin decided something must be done to alleviate his rascally-thoughts. He tried to tell the tale with the creativity at his disposal; namely drawing, painting and sculpting. Alas his efforts were fruitless. It seemed no amount of clay, pencils or pigment could capture the world he envisioned.

It was then, amidst the gloom of frustration, that he considered another possibility. What if he painted with words? He discredited the notion almost immediately. He had no idea how to construct a story. His grasp of grammar was rudimentary at best (and that's being generous).

His options dwindled as the daydreams intensified. At last he put pen to paper...

Unsurprisingly the first draft of his story was little more than a poorly-worded pamphlet. Not satisfied with this creation he spent the following years working in a coffee shop by day and teaching himself to write at night. Years passed and many versions of the story were penned as he learned to overcome his dyslexia. Though the iterations were numerous each improved upon the last and in the process of writing he fell in love with the words he once feared.

Now his story is ready to be heard. The world of Darkfern is a living, breathing place. The land Benjamin has created is filled with imaginative and believable characters; all of who want their lives to be told.