

THE DARKFERN LEXICON

BOOK 2

SANCTORIUM

BENJAMIN FERAL

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Smashwords Edition

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Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Sections of this work were first published in the United Kingdom under the title, Tales of Darkfern

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BOOK 2

SANCTORIUM

FROM THE MIND OF

BENJAMIN FERAL

Dedication

For Terri. Without you there would be no storyteller. Thank you for a childhood filled with inspiration.

ALSO IN THIS SERIES

THE DARKFERN LEXICON

BOOK 1 - [WEBWAY](#)

CHAPTER 1

LONELY ROSE

Bellflower's main street was positively buzzing with activity. The high-street had never experienced a gathering of this scale. The lane was crammed with cars and people. Crowds of onlookers from the surrounding villages had flocked to see the pillar of smoke rising from the forest. They gathered in huddles and whispered predictions of possible causes.

A police car screeched into view, cobalt light parting the throngs blocking the road. The vehicle came to a halt outside *The Lion's Pride*. The pub was the only public meeting place in Bellflower; the go-to place for information.

Sergeant Cooper rose out of the car and quickly moved through the crowd gathered around the entrance. He ignored their questions and requests for news. Will the fire spread? Do you have any suspects? He declined to comment. He was looking for someone, his top priority was her...

The Sergeant entered the pub and closed the door. He took a few seconds to prepare himself. Dealing with the parent of a missing child was never easy. His own emotions often complicated his job. A policeman was supposed to be strong and

dependable. Unsurprisingly he learned to keep his feelings bottled up. This may not have been the best solution but he had a job to do. He fixed his mind on the facts and adopted his stern expression. Cooper stepped into the main body of the bar and scanned the patrons.

Rose Ryder was sitting at a small table. In her trembling hand she held a small glass of sherry. She sipped at the medicinal-tipple and shook her head in a slow, despondent manner. All around her people fussed and asked questions. When she didn't respond they gave each other worried glances and whispered their prognosis.

Despite being surrounded by warm, friendly faces Rose had never felt more alone. Tears drizzled down her cheeks as she relived (for what felt like the hundredth time) the moment she returned to the cottage. She scrunched up her eyes, trying to block the memory, but the inferno was not easily forgotten...

Rose felt her heart stop as the plume of smoke, punctuated with glowing embers, came into view. She let loose a scream as she slammed on the brakes, leapt from the purple ambulance and ran towards the burning cottage.

Joseph had to seize her around the waist, halting her attempt to enter the flaming wreckage. Entering a burning building, no matter how important the reason, was always a bad idea. She knew it was too late. The cottage was engulfed in fire but it didn't matter. Harmony was inside... She had to save her! Grief and

shock overcame her and she sobbed in Joe's arms. Seconds later the roof of the cottage collapsed.

Rose came back to reality with a sob. The memory was too painful to recall. She had lost her little girl and even Rose couldn't believe that this was meant to happen. No, The Universe must have made a mistake. This had to be a mistake. She couldn't accept this version of reality...

Sergeant Cooper walked toward Rose. The jam-packed pub succumbed to silence as he arrived at the small, round table. His steel-grey eyes scanned the woman before him. He fought back the urge to join her sorrow.

"Ms Ryder?"

"Yes," Rose replied, her voice rasped with grief.

"I have just come from the cottage. The fire is out now," he began.

"Where is she?" Rose sobbed. "Where's my little girl?"

The Sergeant cleared his throat. "We're searching for her now."

Rose broke down. Her last shred of hope vanished and in its place despair's dark raven took roost. The mood in the pub became still and sombre. Like damp rising from a musty cellar, gloom soured the air.

"I'm sorry to do this, but I need to ask a few question," Sergeant Cooper began.

“*Michael Cooper!*” Martha Trotter snapped at the policeman. She strode from behind the wooden bar and came to stand by his side. Her face was caked in disappointment as if it were makeup. “Now’s not the time for questioning. Can’t you see she’s in distress?”

“I’m ok,” Rose insisted. She lifted her glass of sherry and tipped the remainder of the dark-amber liquid into her mouth. A grimaced twisted her face as she swallowed the overtly-sweet libation. Perhaps that wasn’t the wisest choice.

The sergeant took out a small notebook and a pen. He flicked through a few pages before finding the scribbles he sought. “Now it’s my understanding that you left your daughter alone at the cottage. Is this correct?”

“I wanted to teach her a lesson,” Rose admitted. “I didn’t think any harm would come of it. She’s fourteen in a few days...”

“I see. Does she have a history of starting fires?”

“You think *she* started the fire?” Rose blurted.

“I have to investigate every possibility, Ms Ryder.”

The Sergeant’s radio crackled. A distorted voice buzzed and hissed some indecipherable information. He pressed the button to respond and said. “Say that again, over.” The voice repeated the crackled-response and the policeman looked at Rose.

“Oh, please no. You’ve found her haven’t you?” she sobbed.

“I’ve had confirmation that your daughter was *not* in the property.”

The entire bar collectively gasped. Rose was lost for words. She shook her head not yet daring to believe what he said.

“Maybe she started the fire accidentally and then ran away?” Martha suggested. “We should search the forest for her.”

“She’ll try to find help. Harmony’s a good girl, she wouldn’t run away from a problem,” Rose assured.

“She won’t find much help in the woods,” Martha continued. She looked at Joseph King and the bite mark on his arm.

The policeman stood up and turned to face the crowd. He cleared his throat, stifling any chatter, before he began to speak. “Right then, listen up everyone. We have a young girl lost in the forest. We need everyone to form search parties.”

Rose was not listening. Her mind reeled from the information. She had believed Harmony was inside the cottage. The revelation she was alive was a bit of a bombshell.

Rose tried to listen to the militaristic-orders being issued by Martha. The landlady had taken charge of the civilian search at the request of Sergeant Cooper. She was efficiently organising the groups by telling each person where to start their search. With a precise tap of her finger she indicated areas on a map of the woods.

Before sending the parties off Martha held a photo of Harmony in the air. She passed it to a man on her right and instructed everyone to have a good look at it. As they did she gave a description of Harmony’s clothing.

“Harmony has been missing since this morning. We think she left Darkfern Cottage and headed into the forest. Given that information we will all start from there. Are there any questions?” Martha asked. When no-one spoke she turned to Rose. “Would you like to say anything, dear?”

Rose nodded and stood up. “Thank you all for helping. I...it’s my fault. I never should have left her alone.”

Joseph appeared at her side. He put his arm around her and she sobbed into his shoulder. “Nobody blames you, Rose. We’re all here to help,” he reassured with a smile.

“Right people let’s move. There are only a few hours of light left. So please remember to bring your torch,” Martha advised. She folded the map and placed it in her jacket pocket.

Rose and Joe filed out of the pub with everyone else and got into his van. Every inhabitant of Bellflower along with many people from other villages climbed into cars. All along the street engines rumbled into life. Then, like a procession of festival floats, they began to head off in the direction of the cottage.

“What if we can't find her, Joe?” Rose said. She watched the cars driving away. “What will I do without her?”

“We *will* find her, Rose. People have wandered off into the woods before and we have always found them. Just you wait and see. Before you know it she’ll be back with you,” he maintained with certainty.

“What if the wolf that bit you has got her? What if it came back and dragged her off?” Rose wept into her hands.

Joseph looked at his arm. The scabbed puncture wounds itched fiercely. The wound was still fresh even after all this time; a painful reminder of that terrible night.

“Don't think like that. Those thoughts won't do you or Harmony any good. That monster is long gone.”

“I know. I can feel that she's safe. Inside I can tell that she's ok,” she replied. A small smile spread across her lips at the feeling Harmony really was ok.

CHAPTER 2

THE LOYAL LION

Harmony slid down the lion's throat. Her hands desperately fumbled for a grip or ridge to hold onto but the smooth, slippery surface offered no such support. She screamed as she rapidly descended the short pipe and was ejected with a bump into his stomach.

She opened her eyes, fearful to see the inside of a lion but curious all the same. What she found baffled her. Despite her astonishment she managed to form two conclusions very quickly. Either medical-science was very wrong about the internal workings of lions... or this was no ordinary beast. She concluded the latter was the most credible answer. After all the monstrous-feline in question was the height of a double-decker bus and made from woven tree trunks.

The belly of the creature was not filled with organs and blood as she expected. Quite the contrary, his stomach was lavishly decorated. The interior furnishings resembled the inside of a genie's bottle. Huge swags of red and gold fabric tented the ceiling. Lanterns swung from the ceiling. Giant cushions were piled up against the curved tree trunks which formed the walls.

The floor was hidden beneath a red carpet, its pile so luxurious and deep she left footprints as she crossed over to the round table occupying the room's centre. She slumped into one of the surrounding cushioned-seats the lion began to move.

The rocking-motion was similar to a boat on the open ocean; no doubt it would take some getting used to. She gathered the tattered cloak around her for protection.

A mixture of fear and excitement was forcing her thoughts to run wild. This had to be a dream. Or perhaps it was a *concussion*? She had hit her head pretty hard in the ambulance.

“Ouch!” Harmony squealed as she pinched her arm.

If she could feel pain then maybe this couldn't be a dream. With that realisation she surmised her predicament was a lot more serious than she first thought. Not only was she trapped in the lion's belly but with every moment she stayed he moved further and further away from the spider's web; her only way home.

Harmony looked around the deluxe rib-prison. Her gaze hunted for an escape hatch or weak point where she could break out. Sadly, the structure seemed to be in good condition. Resigned to remain a prisoner she investigated the room in more detail.

She approached a rectangle of curtains. She drew them back and discovered a large bed tucked away inside. Immediately her

gaze fell upon a substantial painting hanging over the slumber-spot.

The portrait, surrounded by an opulent golden frame, depicted a smiling woman. She was seated on a golden throne and dressed in a magnificent, grey robe. Atop her head she wore a tall crown which looked to be fashioned from pure light. Her red hair, decorated with sparkling jewels, cascaded in abundant ringlets down to her waist.

Harmony stared at the imposingly-regal canvas; her mouth gawked in awe at both its contents and splendour. This was the same woman from her dream and the painted doors in the cottage. It was a Nova...

Now she was utterly confused. How could this be? Why was her great aunt (a mad, old woman with a collection of burned books and a cottage surrounded by wolves) on a painting in the belly of monster? The connection between the lion and Nova was evident, though she had yet to grasp the meaning.

Harmony was normally quite accepting of coincidence but this was beyond a joke. She laughed at the absurdity of her situation. Harmony imagined her mother would have relished such an adventure. In fact she was sure, given the same predicament, Rose would have had a great time.

This was admittedly a very strange situation, but who was she to argue with reality? All she could do was accept what was happening and go along with it.

She climbed onto the bed. It was supernaturally comfortable, like lying on a warm, fluffy cloud. Exhaustion from the events of the day made her eyes heavy. Her mind buzzed with questions and excitement, like the feeling of waiting for Christmas morning. Alas her body was too tired to stay awake. The gentle rocking of the lion and the warm, comfort of the cot soon lulled her into a dreamless sleep.

Harmony woke with a start. She fully expected to open her eyes and find herself back in the ambulance. Drat! No such luck. The unrestrained décor of the lion's innards was unchanged save for the sun's glow. The warm, yellow hue of morning radiated through the lion's flank to light the chamber in a rather pleasant manner.

She yawned and sat up; astonished such a restful sleep claimed her. It had been years since she felt this refreshed and alert. She climbed down from the bed and dressed quickly.

On the round table she found a bowl of fresh fruits and a jug of an amber liquid. The pitcher's contents possessed a consistency of thin honey. Harmony dipped her finger into the flask and tasted the amber-gloop. Quite frankly, it was delicious. The liquid's flavour was sweet and rich; a fruity blend of mango and apple. The tangy-tincture tickled her tongue as it tumbled into her tummy.

Licking her lips she quickly poured a greedy-serving into the waiting cup and gulped it down. The juice slid down her throat and at once she felt warmed from within, exhilarated, nourished and thirsty for more.

Harmony quickly checked the room to confirm she was alone. No one was watching. She hastily poured a second cup and then turned her attention to the bowl of fruit. Most of the produce looked inedible; a garish mixture of alien textures and colours.

Amongst the pile she spotted several red apples which sported large, white spots. The crimson fruit reminded her of a highly-poisonous mushroom fairies like to sit upon. As such she made a point to avoid them.

Continuing her search for breakfast she picked through a bunch of orange-coloured grapes and entirely avoided a punnet of shiny, black spheres. The dark pearls looked like toe-sized caviar. She grimaced at the thought of them popping on her tongue. Her belly rumbled as she fondled her way through the bowl looking for something she felt able to eat. The unusual and often gaudy colours acted as a natural warning sign.

Finally she lifted what she believed to be a purple banana. Once peeled the fruit tasted similar to strawberry yet offered the texture of a ripe pear. She munched her chosen feast and named the fruit a *Banberry*. She washed the banberry down with more of the amber juice.

By the time she finished eating she felt full and content. With her belly satisfied and her mind ever-inquisitive Harmony began to investigate the lion-chamber some more.

Unfortunately after searching the entire room from top to bottom she had found nothing of interest; not a scrap of a clue or route of escape. A little defeated she sank back onto the cushioned seats. If there was no way to get out then she would have to make the monster set her free. She would have to outsmart him.

“Hey! Lion, creature, *thing!*” Harmony shouted. “I need to use the bathroom! I’m bursting!”

This was not true. However, she had found no such facilities when she searched. With shrewdness she guessed the only remedy to this would be her stepping outside.

There was no response. She was about to shout again when the rocking of the monster stopped. At the end of the room, near to where she had entered, the wall began to part. The branches which formed the wall slid away to reveal a spiral staircase. The concealed flight twisted up and out of sight. In all honesty she was amazed her ruse had actually worked. If this passage led outside she would make a run for it as soon as the opportunity arose. She donned the red cloak and exited the chamber; eagerly climbing the stairs.

After only a few turns and a short climb she was faced with a trapdoor. The lid was heavy and unyielding to her shoulder. She

pushed against it with all her strength. Finally the hatch gave way and creaked open. Bright light flooded the twisted stairs. Blinded by the intense glare Harmony shielded her eyes. Her vision may have been obscured but she was certain of one thing... she was outside.

The breeze was filled with a sweet scent, a floral-perfume which wafted around her and teased at her senses. She could hear the drone of buzzing insects and the song of foreign birds. Together they formed a musical din the like of which Harmony had never heard before. The harmonious tune unified with the heat of the sun and from their conjoining a perfect day urged her to witness its majesty.

The light faded and slowly her vision returned. She blinked as she regained her sight. Much to her surprise she was standing on the steps of a throne. The regal-seat was perched on top of the lion's head like a crown. His autumnal, leafy mane framed the chair and the steps. The throne was sight enough to be impressed but she only looked upon it for a few second before distraction insisted her gaze wander. Beyond the throne the sight of the forest stole her breath away.

Gigantic trees, as tall as skyscrapers, clad in silver bark, were capped with enormous plumes of lilac leaves. The towering vegetation dwarfed her and the lion. Growing on the trunk of each tree were colossal shelves of luminous, blue fungus. The

fungoid plateaus were easily large enough to accommodate the lion several times over.

Flocks of brightly coloured birds flew across the patches of sky visible through the epic canopy. Vividly glowing insects, some of which were the size of a horse, flitted around the forest floor. It was on the ground where an endless ocean of shimmering wild-flowers blanketed the undulating hills between tree roots.

Harmony considered her perspective. In this forest her height was comparable to an ant in the real-world. It was an eye-opening vantage; both humbling and inspiring.

“Did you sleep well, little witch?” the lion asked. He was seemingly unfazed with the world around him.

His words startled Harmony. Her mind was so engrossed in the stunning vista that she had quite forgotten where she was standing.

“I slept well thanks. And please don’t call me a *witch*. You’re being quite rude actually.”

“But you are a witch,” he remarked.

“Clearly I’m not. I’m a just a normal girl.”

“What should I call you?”

“You could try using my name. Harmony Ryder.”

The lion laughed softly. “With a name like that I find it hard to believe you’re a normal girl.”

“Where exactly are we?” she asked, opting to ignore his comment. She looked up toward the canopy again.

“This is The Aurora Forest,” he informed.

“Nice name but what I meant to say was, where on *Earth* am I?”

“You speak of the realm you journeyed from? The home of the mundane?”

“Realm? No I’m talking about Earth. You know, the *real-world*. And for the record it’s hardly mundane,” she retorted.

“No offence was meant, little witch. *Mundaine* is a word our kind call the lesser beings.” He paused and sniffed the air before continuing. “Those creatures without magic are *The Mundaine*. Conversely, those born with magic are named *The Mordinary*.”

“Well then I’m mundane. I’m definitely not a *witch*. I can’t *do* magic. I can’t even shuffle a pack of cards properly.”

“For the present moment you may believe yourself to be a daughter of Eve. But all things must change. There is magic within you, Harmony Ryder. The first task we face is summoning it forth,” the lion revealed.

Harmony decided to change the subject away from her, magic or Nova. She did not like his tone. Was he mocking her? He was acting as if he knew secrets about her. She thought it best not to mention the painting above the bed. No doubt revealing she had dreamt of the woman would only complicate the situation further.

“I’ve told you my name,” she pointed out. “What’s yours?”

“I am, Leoracle. The Great Tree-Lion. The warden of *Whisper*.”

“Well. It’s nice to meet you, Leoracle. Now that we’ve been introduced we should get down to business,” she added in a matter of fact tone. “Firstly, are you going to kill me?”

“No. I intend to save you.”

“Save me? Well, it feels a lot like kidnapping, but we can come back to that one. Secondly, *what* are you?” she asked.

As she waited for his response she climbed the steps and sat upon the tree-stump throne. At once Harmony felt a surge of authority, a deep sense of power, entitlement and belonging. For the first time in her life she felt complete. His words pulled her back into the present.

“I am a *familiar*. An escort to a great and powerful witch,” he replied proudly.

The conversation was getting too close to Nova again for Harmony's liking. She ignored the burning questions she wanted to ask and, once again, diverted the topic back towards him.

“Are you really made of trees?” she began. Then, with a little thought, she added. “I do hope I’m not being rude.”

“You are a strange girl,” Leoracle laughed. “You are so full of questions. I wonder, do you know as much about yourself as you ask of others to reveal?”

“I'm sorry. I... What did you mean by that?” she queried suspiciously. His voice had that mocking tone again.

Leoracle did not answer. He stopped walking and stared straight ahead into the dense foliage. Harmony looked in the same direction and attempted to see what had snagged his attention.

“What's wrong?” she asked in a whisper. She felt that a hushed tone was appropriate given his alertness.

“I can smell the stench of *howler*,” Leoracle responded in a low growl.

“What's a howler?”

“The wolf who followed you through The Webway was a howler. He is a creature of darkness. A living nightmare...” he answered, pricking up his ears.

“*Oh*. Is that all? I thought it was something serious,” Harmony shrugged. “I’m sure you can handle one of them.”

“Yes. *One* I can handle, but not an entire pack.” His warning arrived as seven black shapes came into view.

“Can you outrun them?” she whispered. Her innards squirmed as fear took hold. The wolves howled and snarled. Red eyes shone and as they brandished their venomous, yellow fangs.

“Let us hope so...”

CHAPTER 3

THE FEAR OF WOLVES

The silvery clouds, covering the dark night sky, had been avidly-watching the rapidly-unfurling story. They all felt very lucky indeed to have happened upon the tale's beginning. No word had come their way of such an unusual event taking place. This meant the *happening* was doubly-rare, even more reason to get excited.

They witnessed the girl, dressed in mundane-clothing and a magical cloak, come through The Webway. Without a doubt a human arriving via a web was a rare occurrence. Unless, that is, you counted the mundane used in the tournament; which the clouds did not.

An unconscious, trussed-up human being dragged through The Webway was one thing. Conversely a mundane entering by choice was something else entirely. The clouds had only seen this kind of occurrence a few times before, and it *never* ended well for the human.

They had also watched, whilst holding their collective breath, as the girl hid from the emerging howler. She had cleverly chosen to hide behind the leg of The Great Lion, Leoracle. The mighty

elder lion in turn scared off the rancid wolf and then swallowed the girl in a single bite.

The clouds concluded this to be a sad tale with a somewhat-predictable end. As such they scattered from the lion's booming roar and raced to catch up to the scurrying wolf.

He seemed, to the clouds, the most likely candidate to entertain them.

The wolf ran on. The rhythmic drumming of his paws on the ground was his only distraction from the thoughts plaguing his mind; judgments of what had happened and theories of what was still to come.

He had found the girl so easily. She'd made so much noise even one of his pups could have tracked her. It was her din that led him to the secret room.

Sadly it was within the hidden-chamber that his plan went astray, a wrong turn which could not be undone. His carefully formulated strategy went up in flames, just like the cottage.

His mission was to locate and secure the relics for his queen. At first glance this was a simple task but then disaster struck. The old woman caught him snooping around and attacked him. She nearly bested him too but luck allowed him to escape with his life.

Unable and unwilling to return empty handed he waited in the forest until someone found where the relics were hidden.

Sadly for him it was that wretched mundane-girl who came to open the door. That blasted-child had ruined everything.

If she'd just stayed still he could have killed her and claimed the objects. He had more right to them than she did anyway. All she had to do was drop dead and let him have them. Then he wouldn't be in this mess. Regrettably this was not to be. She ran away and, to make matters worse, she even had the cheek to use the cloak against him. The little blighter kept vanishing from sight whenever he managed to catch up with her.

At least *The Webway* was not his fault. That fact relieved his rapidly darkening thoughts of the biggest burden. No, *he* would never be stupid enough to leave a *web* open and unattended. That really would be a costly mistake for whoever had made it.

There had been a very distinct scent in the air; the smell of *Stiltskins*. He would be only too happy to pass on that piece of information. Perhaps his queen would be more lenient toward him if he blamed the twig-men?

Likewise her current location wasn't his fault either. He followed her back into Darkfern and picked up her trail easily but then the lion showed up and scuppered his attempt to slay her. Definitely *not* his fault, not even his queen would dare to fight The Timber Lion alone. However, an opinion such as that was best left unspoken. Higher ranks than he had lost their heads for even daring to suggest she feared the old cat.

The running wolf felt some solace in the realisation; his only real failing was not retrieving the cloak and rope. To be honest what did they matter really? An old cloak that makes you hard to find and a dog-eared bit of rope, what use were they? Their only real value, in his opinion, was measured in sentiment. Their loss was nothing when compared to the crime of leaving a *web* open. The stupidity of letting a mundane through was unforgivable; a mistake resulting in death for the culprit.

He entered Queen Nocturna's realm. The vista became as dark and sinister as she who reigned over it. A rotten stench filled the air; putrid and malign. The wolf looked out over Withersoul Marsh, an expanse of bog more treacherous than a god's tempest.

Dark and dead, twisted trees reached from the bubbling, rancid mud. Like undead hands emerging from beneath the ground to claw at the cloud-speckled sky. Ghostly, black shapes swirled in the skies and scoured the marshland lining the black road. The creatures resembled ragged, tormented vultures. Each had a cruel, faceless, twisted mouth. An endless scream ripped from their throats; a continuous heralding of their mournful and everlasting anguish.

The wolf did not like the wailing of the wraiths. Their calls of remorse at crossing the dark queen did not make him pity them. It simply confirmed to him that they got what they deserved. He

was incapable of compassion anyway. Like most of Queen Nocturna's creations, he had no heart.

The road ended abruptly and the wolf stopped at the edge. He raised his head to the clouds above and howled a blood-curdling cry.

The dark, bubbling bog began to rise and then part. A bulging mound of slime and mud rose from beneath its foul surface. The rounded bulk quaked and shook. Suddenly a huge pair of coal-black eyes opened, the hillock of mud was a huge face. The eyes blinked and then focused on the little creature before them.

“WHO DARES CALL ME?!” boomed the massive head.

“Just open up and let me in already!” snapped the wolf.

“Well, I never. That's gratitude for you,” the face blustered. His voice bore a stony-lisp and it differed greatly from his initial greeting.

“Gratitude?” the wolf snorted.

“Just a hint of manners is all I ask. A little *thank you*, or even a, *how are you today?* Any of those might be nice,” the gate continued. “I spend all my time up here, guarding the likes of you. I'm completely deprived of a proper, stimulating conversation...”

“You have the wraiths,” the howler pointed out helpfully.

“Wraiths are very single-minded. They're far too murderous and angry for an intellectual debate,” the gate replied glumly. “My only chance to talk to anybody is when I ask the *'who dares'*

thing and you can't even give me the time of day.” The golem head stopped talking and stared at the wolf, waiting for a response.

“*Ugh*. Ok. Go on then,” he relented. The wolf shook his head wearily.

“Thank you. Right, here goes,” the gate thanked before clearing his throat. “WHO DARES CALL ME?!”

“Geltrum. Loyal minion of Queen Nocturna,” said the howler impatiently.

“YOU MAY PASS!” thundered the head. He gave a wink of appreciation and opened his mouth wide. His tongue rolled out and formed into a flight of steps.

Geltrum shook his head again. What good was a Golem Gate if it just let anybody through? Surely a password or a key would be more effective security?

He decided it really wasn't his job to contemplate the feeble defences of Nocturna's citadel. Any suggestion on how to improve them would likely end in the execution of whoever job it was. No, he had to concentrate on keeping his own head.

Geltrum ran through the golem's open mouth and into the wide, winding tunnel beyond. The entrance closed quickly and the ominous slamming-click of the massive, stone teeth sealed him in.

The tunnel was completely dark excepting a faint, red glow emanating from around a corner. He ran forward and rounded

the bend. A brief flicker of calm flashed across his turbulent mind as his home came into view.

The passageway opened out into a vast cavern which rose to a peak like the innards of a hollow mountain. The glow stemmed from enormous magma-red crystals. The clusters pierced the stone floor and walls in large nodes. They cast out enough light to force most of the blackness to retreat into the far distance.

Geltrum lived with his pack in the army camps at the foot of a gigantic web spanning one half of the cavern. His dark queen, Nocturna, resided in the immense black tower suspended in the web's centre.

He ran on towards the foreboding stronghold and his unknowable fate. He did not slow any as he ran through the fighting ranks of her amassed militia. The combatants squabbled and bickered to relieve the boredom of the never ending war. Oddly enough the unrest in the camp had caused more deaths than the war itself (an unfortunate side-effect of cooping up murderers and monsters together). The term bored-to-death had been given a whole new meaning to those who lived beneath the swamp.

Over the years Nocturna's army had grown so large it sprawled out across the cavern floor. A landscape of pitch-black tents housed the darkest and most deadly scum this world had to offer. A sea of canvas canopies and hastily constructed buildings washed across the cavern floor. Through the centre of the

throughs a lonesome road, bordered by the rotting losers of fiercely fought fights, led to the tower and the web.

The dark stronghold, with its glass-like surface and vicious web covered spires, forced a deep sense of foreboding to swell inside Geltrum. Such was its power that even a beast with no heart would cower at its very sight.

The deafening noise coming from the heaving throng of soldiers echoed around the vast hollow. Its reverberating-onslaught did nought to calm the beast as he neared ever closer to the bridge.

A woven pathway connected the tower to the ground. The conduit was preceded by a skull-shaped entrance; almost as terrifying as the tower it protected. Carved from Noir Obsidian (the blackest of black crystals) the ornate jawless structure had to be passed through if he were to appear before his queen. The route was blocked by a thick web covering the mouth of the skull. Two giant spiders, perched in the empty eye-sockets, stood guard.

They sprang into life as he approached. Each of the titanic arachnids scurried down from their roost in a lightning fast manner. Their bodies scuttling and pincers clicking as they moved. As he approached the gate their long and fearsome limbs struck out to block his path. They raised their front legs threateningly, warning him they would attack if he moved any closer.

He halted just short of their deadly reach. The thick hairs on the monstrous spider legs twitched and rubbed against each other, making a high-pitched whine that alerted the nearby soldiers. Hundreds of faces looked at the wolf as it raised its head and began to howl.

Black smoke swirled around Geltrum as he howled. The acrid smog eddying and twisting around his frame as his body began to warp and morph. The wolf stood on his hind legs as they stretched and straightened. His front paws snapped out to the side and elongated, fingers sprouting from the pads with a painful cry. His fur shrivelled and exposed pale, mottled skin.

A few seconds later a man, of sorts, stood where the wolf had just been and, even though he still had a tail and some tufts of fur down his back, his limbs and face were almost human; albeit an ugly one.

“Geltrum. I’m here to see Queen Nocturna, The Darkest of Majesties.” His voice was a quiet, croaky whimper and he bowed low as he spoke.

The spiders retreated and allowed him to lumber forward. He did so with notably less grace than his wolf form. Geltrum was unused to this feeble shape and its clumsy two-footed body. Sadly the power and speed of his howler guise was not permitted inside the tower. ‘No beast may tread these halls’ – this was yet another law which would see the one to break it sentenced to death.

The arachnid guardians delicately moved the dense silver web aside, allowing him entrance to the long path leading to the menacing tower. Geltrum hobbled along the bridge as quickly as his two legs would allow. He tried not to look at the other spiders as they moved all around him. Busily repairing and tending the web, they clicked their pincers as he scurried past, whimpering to himself.

He was quickly beyond the path and he began climbing the steps spayed before the entrance; he was almost at the tower... His time of reckoning was at hand; fate approached with each step he mounted.

The large, black, iron doors began to open. A thin sliver of light appeared as they retreated. He glanced over his shoulder, seeking one final look toward home before he faced his destiny. With dread in his stomach (and his stomach in his mouth) he entered the black tower.

Beyond the iron doors lay a vast, circular chamber. Geltrum had never entered the tower before, but whispers of the interior were common amongst the amassed fighters. The chamber he stood in was known as *The Sway*. This was where she kept her enemies. He looked up toward the rafters. High above him large, web-cocoons hung from the ceiling. They swayed like crystals on a chandelier; delicate and silent.

Were it not for the fact the pods contained living people, one may have found them pleasant to behold. Each *guest* of the

Queen was wrapped in dense-webbing, only their eyes remained unbound.

This punishment was known as *The Waking Death*. A wickedly-cruel curse applied to any enemy Nocturna deemed too dangerous to simply kill. The victim lived a long life, nourished by the magical webbing. It was said that some would never die; entangled for eternity.

The scraping of metal echoed round the chamber as several guards watched his movements. Geltrum's attention was drawn to their helmets. Each head covering hid the wearer's face behind a silver mask depicting a sleeping child. He shuddered as the sentinels lavished him with their attention.

Geltrum crossed the room as quickly as he was able. Though, he cut short of breaking into a full run. He paused on the threshold of a dark, wooden door. Music and chatter seeped from beyond the robust barrier. A gathering of significance was underway; a party to which he held no invitation.

This day marked the anniversary of Queen Nocturna's greatest achievement. Today the entire Queendom celebrated the weaving of The Rift; the boundary separating Mordinary from Mundaine. A wonderful festivity indeed and one he feared he was about to ruin with his news.

He pushed the door open and stepped into the cavernous chamber. For a moment no one seemed to notice him. He skulked at the edge of a large congregation. The party guests

numbered in the hundreds. He could tell instantly that they were from the richest and most respected families loyal to the dark queen. Each reveller was dressed in the finest outfit money or magic could provide. As per the custom to Nocturna's parties, each guest completed their ensemble with an elaborate mask, unique to the wearer.

The celebrators chatted and laughed as they greedily drank from silver goblets, spilling the excess onto the floor with abandon. Geltrum's belly rumbled as he eyed countless tables laden with food. The banquet surpassed even his wildest dreams. All around him, guests stuffed exotic delicacies into their mouths; gorging and feasting to excess.

Overcome by hunger, Geltrum neared a table and reached for a piece of roasted meat. There was plenty for everyone, more than enough to feed Nocturna's entire army for at least a week. One little scrap of meat wouldn't be missed. He lifted a morsel of meat from the burgeoning platter.

Without warning a hand clamped down onto his shoulder. The grip was so hard he was sure it would leave bruises. He looked up at the assailant, his identity concealed by an unpleasant mask depicting screaming face. The veneer was undoubtedly carved from bone. The bone of what was thankfully not in question. Geltrum felt a chill shiver down his spine as the masked man glared at him. The un-gentleman wore a long, black

cloak. A dark hood was hoisted to obscure any features the mask could not.

The only detail Geltrum did noticed was a ring the man wore on his wedding finger. A ruby-red snake encircled his long, bony finger. The serpent consumed its own tail in an eternal race.

Geltrum thought he recognised the symbol, though he lost the will to think of where from as the hand started to push him through the crowd.

The music and chatter stopped abruptly and the guests parted, like a biblical sea, to form a clear path for the tall, dark figure. Without offering thanks he led the howler-man to the foot of Nocturna's throne.

CHAPTER 4

GELTRUM'S TALE

Geltrum cowered at the stoop of Queen Nocturna's throne. Hewn from bone, several steps lay between the trembling man and his monarch. The tiered-strides led to a wide platform on which her royal chair resided. The seat itself was adorned with rubies the size of apples, each cupped in a twist of black metal. Behind the throne, filling the vast expanse of stone wall, a statue of a wolf's head watched the party guests. Cast from silver, the beast's snarling fangs extended out to form a canopy over the dark queen and her seat of power. Drenched in a pitch-shadow her eyes glinted as they narrowed on the howler before her.

As if to prove a point, the masked stranger shoved Geltrum violently. Compliant he fell forward and hit his head hard on the stone steps. Pain burned across his skull, a hot flash which trailed nausea in its wake. He wanted to cry out but his thoughts of soreness were immediately overwhelmed by fear. The ground beneath his feet began to tremble as Nocturna prepared to speak.

"Why is this...*creature*, in my presence?" Nocturna asked. Her voice rolled with the power of thunder. High above the party a chandelier quaked as she addressed the masked man.

“I caught him stealing food, Your Magnificence,” the man replied. He bowed his head, though his eyes never lost sight of her.

“I was n...not *stealing*,” Geltrum blubbered.

“I will have silence or your heads on spikes!” Nocturna roared at the crowd of guests. Her annoyance aroused as the crowd began to whisper amongst themselves. With the threat of death still ringing, muteness fell. “What is your name, howler?” she continued.

“Geltrum,” he whimpered.

“And what, pray tell, are you doing in my throne room? I do not recall inviting an undesirable-wretch to my party.”

“I came to see you, y...Your Magnificence,” he stammered. “I have news from the mundane-world. My errand is complete.”

“Errand?”

“Yes, My Queen. You sent me to locate some...items, Your Grace.”

Queen Nocturna shifted forward. Her interest peaked, she moved into the light. Her skin, framed by long black hair, was as pale as the moon. Bordering on luminescent, it delicately covered her exquisite face. Her beauty was unnatural (most likely enhanced with several magical procedures, though such speculations were best left unspoken).

“*Oh*. What news do you bring, little howler? Have you found the relics? Have you brought them to me?” Her tone sounded friendly; this only caused Geltrum to fear for his life all the more.

“I did find them, mistress,” he began hopefully. “I searched cottages with old ladies in them, just you bid me. Then I found a strange place, different from the others. The old woman who lived there was different too. She knew what I was. She was waiting for me...”

Nocturna interrupted. “Did she have a child with her?”

“No, Your Grace. I watched her for a long time. She lived alone, Majesty.”

“Are you positive this old woman had no child living with her?” she pressed further.

“There was no child, Mistress. Two mundaine came to aid her on the night she died, but neither was a youngster,” Geltrum finished triumphantly.

“*How* did she die?” Nocturna asked calmly.

The question sounded like a trap, to both Geltrum and the entire party who listened, cloaked in greedy silence.

Geltrum was trying to weave a tale. He hoped this story would save his life. He did not believe survival to be possible before, but now he was starting to feel very confident. The howler felt self-assured that he could impress her enough to spare him; he already had the crowd on side. Sadly the very thought which gave him strength would also be his undoing...

“I entered the cottage in search of the relics,” he began. “I moved as quite as a shadow, Majesty. Tip-toeing around, I sought your desire. But then the old woman caught me. I knew she weren’t a mundane, she was something else. We fought and I nearly bested her. But she was too strong; unnaturally so for an old lady. I was fast and I tore her with my teeth; the wound was deep and in the end *fatal*. As she was dying the two mundane arrived. I escaped, but I did not flee. I watched as she died, Mistress.”

“You are trying my patience, dog. Get on with your pathetic story before I lose my temper and skin you alive. Tell me how this mundane-woman died,” Nocturna snapped ferociously.

“Like a witch, Your Grace,” Geltrum answered honestly. “She was claimed by The Dust.”

The crowd began to whisper again. This news was very interesting indeed. To have been taken by *The Dust* the woman must have been a witch; one who had become trapped on the other side.

“You said that you found the relics?” Nocturna continued, seemingly unfazed with the creature’s information.

“Yes Majesty. After she crumbled I searched, but I found nothing. I had all but given up hope when a mundane-machine appeared carrying two females,” Geltrum paused. All of a sudden he felt a sinking feeling in his belly. He had a bad feeling about revealing this part of his tale.

“Two females...? Was one of them a child?” Nocturna questioned.

“Well. She was more like a young woman,” he answered hopefully. “It was she who found the cloak and rope. But she stole them away before I could claim them, Your Magnificence.”

“If you failed to retrieve them, then why have you returned? I ordered you to return to Darkfern only once you possessed the relics,” Nocturna seethed. Her anger was building rapidly.

“I did as you bid me, Mistress,” Geltrum smiled, his tail beginning to wag. “The relics are in Darkfern now.”

“Do not test me, Mongrel!” she spat. “If the relics are *here* and not in my possession, then where are they?”

Geltrum gulped, he had not meant the news to come out like this. He was sure it wasn't his fault. He felt positive that, in all this mess, there was some vital clue he'd forgotten to disclose; a prudent detail which exonerated him from blame.

“Erm... They're with the *mundaine-girl*,” he stammered. He scratched his head whilst desperately searching his mind for the forgotten element.

“The child brought them? A mundaine-girl entered Darkfern, armed with Nova's remnants?!” she screamed. The dark queen rose from her seat and stood to her full height.

As Nocturna emerged from the shadow her true, unholy form was unveiled. She rose up into the air; hovering several feet from

the polished floor. With a vengeful gaze she looked upon Geltrum and screamed her fury at the whelp.

The dark queen's attire was nothing short of monstrous. Her torso was cinched beneath a tightly bound corset of lavish, black fabrics; lace cords narrowed her waist to an eye watering diameter. Under the cinched midriff a skirt flowed and billowed. The reams of sheer, black drapery more closely resembled an outsized jellyfish than a dress.

As Nocturna drifted through the air the skirt stretched and convulsed. Explosions of light erupted violently from within. Each flash exposed the horrific workings of the garments core; the monster's innards churned...

The crowd, who had previously gathered around the wretched creature so they could hear his misery more clearly, quickly backed away. From the hem of Nocturna's skirt seven colossal, inky tentacles emerged. They seized the cowering howler and hoisted him high into the air. He hung a few inches from her face, their eyes locked.

"Before I consign you to death, wretch. Tell me, the fate of the girl?"

"Mistress, please don't kill me. I tried my best," Geltrum whimpered. The tentacle gripped him tighter, threatening to void his innards like a tube of toothpaste. A recollection flooded his mind; one final glimmer of hope. "Someone left *The Webway*

open!” he announced. “A Stiltskin it was. That’s how she got through. Then The Great Lion took her before I could slay her.”

Nocturna did not speak. For a brief moment, her face flickered with concern. Then, just as quickly, it became angry. She screamed at the howler, her rage rapidly reaching boiling point. The tentacles reacted immediately to their mistress’s call. The squid-arms repeatedly smashed Geltrum against the ground. He cried for mercy. Like an unloved ragdoll they tossed him into the air.

The crowd approved and applauded as the tentacles dragged the howler under the billowing layers of skirt. His screams for help were only partially muffled as he was slowly devoured by the monstrous garment. His decaying body occasionally illuminated as the storm inside the raiment continued.

“Get out!” Nocturna screamed at her party guests.

The response was rapid. In the interests of self-preservation, not wanting to feel the wrath of a malevolent witch, the revellers began vanishing, leaving only a wisp of black smoke in their stead.

In moments the chamber was devoid of life. Silence fell and Nocturna screamed. Her frustration tore into the dark, cavernous hall. The shriek continued to echo around the high, stone walls long after she finished venting her rage.

Nocturna quickly floated over to her throne and retrieved a wooden box from a hidden compartment. She lifted the lid and

released a large, silver spider from within. She offered her left hand to the scurrying arachnid. It leapt through the air and landed on her wrist; immediately wrapping its legs around her to form a bracelet.

She lifted her arm and stroked the hoary creature. Responding to her touch the spider's silk-sac twitched and spewed out a string of blood-red thread. The crimson fibre hung motionless in the air. Nocturna moved her right hand to the weightless-thread and began plucking the strand with her fingers. Her digits moved unnaturally, knuckles dislocated and contorted, moving with the speed and agility of spider legs, to weave the filament into an intricate mandala.

The detailed pattern began to glow with vibrancy. Without warning the thread erupted into flames. The mandala was consumed and in its place a flat disk of a silver liquid hovered, unsupported, in the air. Nocturna tapped the surface with one of her long, bony fingers.

The silver pool rippled and a reflection appeared in the turbulent surface. A grotesque man, similar in appearance to Geltrum, stared out with a shocked expression on his putrid face. Gnarled and twisted, wart-covered and altogether unpleasant, his was the kind of mug only a mother could love.

“Your Majesty,” he snarled. His was voice barely more than a feral growl.

“Volgar, I need your hunting skills. There is a fugitive mundaine-girl travelling with The Great Lion. They will be heading for Sanctorium in The Aurora Forest. She must not arrive. Do I make myself clear?”

“I will bring you her head or forfeit my honour, Your Darkness,” he responded proudly, raising his grubby hand in salute.

“What use is honour if it is you without a head? Do not fail me, Volgar,” Nocturna warned.

She tapped the mirrored surface once more. The howler’s worried expression vanished beneath the ripple. Then from the silver liquid a second face appeared.

A sleeping woman with white hair gathered into an immaculate bun shimmered into view. Her snoozing head had an etched lifetime of wrinkles forming an almost constant smile across her chubby cheeks.

“Natura! Natura wake up!” Nocturna bellowed at the image with obviously frustration.

The drowsy woman woke. She yawned deeply and stretched. Her heavy eyelids were fighting to open, reluctantly emerging from their dreamy stupor.

“Natura!” shouted Nocturna once more, causing the old woman in the mirror to jump from shock. The elderly woman was apparently unaware a levitating head had been the one to wake her.

“Don't sneak up on me like that,” Natura panted heavily. She clutched at her heaving bosom. “You're going to give me a blooming heart attack, Nocie.”

“Snap out of it sister, we have a problem.”

“Oh! *Sister* is it?” Natura blustered, leaning in close so that her face became enlarged in the mirror. “I haven't heard anything from you for over six hundred years. Not a hello or even a birthday card...nothing.”

“We are at war you imbecile.”

“Well, if we *are* at war then why should I help you with *your* problem?”

“I said *we* have a problem...not *I*,” Nocturna hissed. She took a deep breath to calm her frustration and then continued. “There is a mundane intruder in Darkfern.”

“So? Mundaine get in all the time,” Natura said, picking a pink bonbon from some unseen dish and popping it into her mouth. “Just have one of your mutts find *it*.”

“My minions are already in pursuit. However, there is more to the event than meets the eye.”

“Oh? How so, Nocie?”

“The one appears to be an *ancestor*. Apparently she is in possession of the relics...”

Natura coughed and spluttered as she choked on her sweet. This was not what she had expected to hear. This was not the

family reunion she had imagined. This was a matter of life and death.

“Are you sure sister? A *true* ancestor?”

“She is with the lion as we speak,” Nocturna revealed. She raised one of her wicked-eyebrows for emphasis.

Natura's expression of concern turned to one of unabashed terror. Her eyes opened wide and her mouth gaped, like a fish out of water, as she blustered and fidgeted in her seat. “How can this be happening? I thought we were done with this nonsense? This is just terrible. Whatever will we do? Oh, Nocie I’m so scared.”

“Stop calling me, Nocie! And for goodness sake calm down!” Nocturna barked. As was often the case she found her sister’s dramatic-waffling to be a cause of irritation. “You know what must be done...”

“You don’t mean...? We can’t go back there,” Natura gasped. She shook her head. “No, not again, please sister. You promised me I didn’t have to.”

“What other choice is there? We need information about her. Short of sundering the girl’s heart from her body, what other way is there to be sure of her lineage? The Hags must be consulted.”

“Yes, yes. You’re right, I know,” Natura nodded despondently. She was shaken by the news of this girl. This child was the first to emerge in five hundred years. Why now had she returned?

“Are you even listening to me?” Nocturna snapped.

Her words summoned Natura back from her doubts. She popped another bon-bon into her mouth and replied. “Listening to what?”

Nocturna rolled her eyes. “I was saying we must meet.”

“This had better not be a trick,” Natura noted suspiciously. “Promise me this isn’t one of your schemes to bump me off?”

“If this girl is who we think then it will take our *united* effort to halt her fate. Loathed as I am to admit it, I need your help,” Nocturna shuddered, as if fighting back the urge wretch. “I suggest a truce until this matter is six feet under.”

“Goodness me, I didn’t think you had it in you,” Natura cheered. “That’s fine by me, little sister. I accept your treaty. I’ll anticipate our meeting with a belly full of butterflies.”

“And bon-bons,” Nocturna added quickly. “I shall see you at the edge of the world, sister. Don't be late.”

Nocturna tapped the surface of the silver pool one last time. The shimmering puddle rippled and then fractured. The reflective shards disintegrated into a cloud of dust.

An explosion from the underside of Nocturna’s monstrous frock broke the silence. The noise heralded the expulsion of the few clothes Geltrum had worn. Encased in a glob of slime the inedible threads marred the throne’s surround.

One of the ink-black tentacles rose up and gently brushed Nocturna's cheek. She stroked it absent-mindedly in return.

Hovering alone in her throne room, dark thoughts began to swirl around her head. These were troubling times...

CHAPTER 5

SANCTORIUM

The Great Lion was surprisingly nimble for such a large and ancient creature. He strafed and wove through the muddle of trees, dodging and turning with the agility of a kitten. His stride was long, several times greater than the howler's tread. Coupled with his tremendous speed, this made the lion near uncatchable.

Harmony watched the seven monsters giving chase. Despite the lion's head-start the howlers were constantly gaining ground. Smaller than the lion, the wolves used the terrain to their advantage. They slipped through narrow gaps as they drew ever closer. Before long she could hear them panting and growling to one another; perhaps communicating a plan of attack?

The wolves increased their speed and as a unit encircled their prey. Leoracle roared as they ran next to him and began their assault. The pack snapped and tore at his flanks. One wolf bit his heels, whilst another leapt upwards in an attempt to reach his long, broad back.

Leoracle charged toward a narrow passage through the trees. He deliberately grazed his side against the trunks as he passed. The climbing howler yelped as he was crushed in the collision.

His mangled remains tumbled to the ground and the pack ran on, unfazed by his sudden demise.

No sooner had Harmony breathed a sigh of relief than the next howler made his move. The red-eyed mound of rancid nightmare sprinted up a steep bank of dirt. He reached the crest and, without slowing, leapt into the air. Time appeared to slow as she watched the pitch-black monster land on Leoracle's hindquarters.

Thorn-claws anchored into the wooden flesh as the wolf slunk toward her. The wolf growled fiercely; lips retracting to bare a spoiled grin. Tainted-saliva, with an odour and hue of puss, descended from his exposed fangs in thick, viscous globs.

Harmony glanced around for a weapon. However, unless she snapped a branch from Leoracle's body, there was nothing to hand. The howler crept closer...

Leoracle ran on. He was unable to shake the beast from his back without dislodging the girl along with it. To make matters worse the remaining wolves around him continued their violence. Large patches of his bark were missing and sap gushed from his wounds. His legs were injured too and many of his ribs were exposed and splintered.

Seizing the opportunity he grabbed a stray wolf in his mouth. His sword-like teeth shredded the snarling whelp in a single, powerful bite. Now only four remained at his feet, but it was the one on his back which raised concern.

The wolf was almost upon her now, only a few feet away. The stench was unbearable. The acrid pong of decaying meat stung her eyes and forced her to hold her breath.

Save for leaping down to face the others, there was no escape. The wolf leapt forward, splaying its jaws to brandish a thousand splintered-teeth. Harmony cowered and closed her eyes. This really was the end, her time was up.

Suddenly the forest was punctured by a whistling sound. She opened her eyes as an arrow, tipped with purple feathers, flew alarmingly-close to her head. The bolt passed by and pierced the beast through the side of its head with deadly force. The lion ran on leaving the wolf pinned to one of the silver trees.

Harmony turned to look in the direction the arrow had come from. Through the vertical ribbons of silver she saw huge flashes of purple fabric. In the near distance she saw a settlement built high-up on the fungal shelves.

Multiple arrows whistled through the air, forcing the four surviving howlers to retreat. They barked and snarled their displeasure. Leoracle responded with a booming roar. His call was empowered enough to shake the ground and send the birds, perched safely in the tree tops, into a squawking frenzy.

The lion slowed to a walk again, his laboured breathing exemplified just how much the chase had taken out of him.

“Are you ok?” she asked.

“I am fine, little wit... *Harmony*,” he corrected himself. “Just not as young as I used to be.”

“Are they after me or you?” she asked, peering behind them to see if the wolves were still following.

“Both I fear,” he responded. “But we will be safe here, for now at least.”

“What is this place?” she asked. She turned toward the approaching town and her excitement became as lofty as the buildings.

“This is, *Sanctorium*, home of The Rag Witch, Belladonna.” He stopped for a moment. “Do you have the cloak?”

“Well, yes but...”

“Put it on. You must keep the hood up,” he ordered.

“But...”

“Do as I say. Not all those we meet here will be friendly. And less than half of those who are can be trusted.”

Harmony fastened the cloak around her neck and lifted the hood over her head. It was far too hot to wear such a heavy garment but she was not really in a position to argue with him. He had, after all, just saved her life.

Unsurprisingly their approach had caused quite a stir. The edges of the balconies and rope-bridge walkways, linking the tented platforms, were packed with peering faces. A raucous din arose from their mass. Harmony clearly heard the words *lion* and *howlers* mentioned many times. Surprisingly no one seemed to

notice her. Not one pair of eyes looked her way. Not one whisper spoke of the girl atop the lion's head.

Leoracle walked forward into the central clearing. High up on the walkways cheering ushered in a jovial atmosphere. The gaiety spread quickly as more denizens joined in to watch the spectacle. They waved their arms and chanted in a language Harmony had never heard before.

“What are they saying?” Harmony asked. She closed her eyes and listened to the song.

“They are singing an ancient prayer in the old tongue. The words beckon home those feared lost,” Leoracle whispered. “Do not remove your hood,” he warned again.

Harmony did not understand why she had to remain hidden from the gathered crowd. Neither did she understand how, in keeping her hood up, she would be undetected. But she obeyed his command and remained inside the sweltering heat beneath the cape.

Leoracle came to a stop in front of a massive fungal plateau. The shelf housed the largest tent in the town. Easily the height of a cathedral, the structure was peaked with majestic gold-capped spires. Golden runes emblazoned the purple fabric which hung in heavy swags and cascaded over the edge of the fungal lip.

An army of archers emerged from quickly hoisted flaps in the tall, slender spires. Their silver-headed arrows, glinting in the sunlight, instantly trained on the lion. Harmony had seen the

devastation one of those arrows could cause; there was a wolf pinned to a tree that could also vouch for their effectiveness. So the sight of a hundred pointed at her and the lion set an alarm bell ringing in her mind.

A loud trumpet sounded. The cheering and chanting subsided as the crowd hushed. The silence gave way to a discernible-degree of tension. The change made Harmony feel very uneasy. Perhaps the lion *had* been correct when he forewarned not all would be friendly.

“State your business, beast of burden,” an unseen-man's voice called out from the large tent.

“I demand an audience with, The Rag Witch,” Leoracle responded.

There was a brief pause before a second trumpet-call rang out. The entire facade of the tent began to retract. Two enormous curtains, which formed the exterior, parted enough to reveal a platform housing a throne. The regal-seat was formed from a gargantuan cluster of amethyst.

The dark-purple crystals shone in the sunshine. To Harmony they seemed to pulse. A corona of rainbow encircled the gemstone throne and the old woman sitting cross-legged upon it.

The female, though old and wrinkled, did not look frail. She was strong and alert. Her electric-blue eyes stared at the lion with a gaze so intense Harmony was convinced she could have stopped water from flowing downstream.

“Too long has it been since a creature such as this walked our forest,” the woman called out to the crowd. Her voice sounded timeworn and wise. “Yet with him he brings the dogs of war. The tidings are soiled. Such a pity. What has happened to the once-proud lion? Has time robbed him of his courage? Has the old cat become afraid of dogs?”

“I fear nothing,” he snarled. “I have returned because fate has deemed it so. In my time of need I came to you, Belladonna. I seek my old ally.”

“Have you taken leave of your senses? Has it been so long you have forgotten that you abandoned us in *our* time of need?”

“I have not lost my memory, *witch*,” Leoracle bellowed. “Nor do I have to explain my actions to you. Perhaps it is *you* who has forgotten? Shall I remind you of your place? Has the comfort of that throne tricked your mind to believe it belongs to you?”

The woman shifted uncomfortably. Clearly she was a shaken by his aggressive response. Harmony watched as more archers appeared all around the town; in every direction and on every platform and walkway the silver arrows glinted.

“Try being nice,” she whispered into his ear.

“There is no time for *nice*,” he mumbled back.

“Just say, *please*,” she encouraged. She looked up at the quivering arrowheads; evermore plentiful with each glance.

Leoracle murmured his displeasure under his breath at this suggestion. Nevertheless he relented, raised his head and then

spoke through gritted teeth. “Please, Belladonna. I have an urgent matter to discuss. Privacy is paramount to success.”

“Well, well, well, manners from The Tree Lion. This must be important!” she said, with a wry smiling. “Very well, remnant from a dead age, you may have your audience. But if your tongue does not remain civil I shall cut it out.”

The curtains relaxed once more and the witch on the crystal throne was hidden from view. Sounds of excited chatter started up again as life in Sanctorium returned to normal.

“That was intense, wasn't it?” Harmony laughed. Relieved, she watched the archers retreat.

“You should not have made me beg,” he growled at her. “I am the escort and protector to the rightful ruler of Darkfern. Respect is mine to command.”

“I wonder...” she began, doing her best to impersonate his low, grumbling voice. “Do you treat others as you yourself wish to be treated?”

“You dare to mock me, *little witch!*” he replied in disbelief. Then he laughed and shook his mane. Harmony screamed and clung onto the throne as her threatened to topple her.

Leoracle continued to laugh softly as he lowered his head to the ground and instructed Harmony to dismount. At first she thought he was going to swallow her again. Nevertheless rather than devour her for a second time he began to purr loudly and shake his mane.

The almighty sound of rustling leaves drowned out the din from above. Most of the inhabitants had returned to their daily routines; most likely deciding the *show* was over.

Harmony watched from under her cloak as the lion began to shrink. The massive tree trunks, forming his legs and chest, slid against each other. Trunk and bark became tighter and smaller until, with a final stretch of his back, a lion of average size stood before her. He licked his lips and smiled.

“That was incredible,” she gasped, scrutinising his miniaturised form.

“Thank you, but that was simple magic. Nothing compared to what you are capable of,” he uttered. He narrowed his large, amber eyes as she responded with a doubtful shake of her head. “You still doubt who you are?”

“No. I know who I am.” She matched his gaze. “I’m just not who *you* think I am.”

“You are, Harmony Ryder,” he stated. “You are the first Ryder to set foot in this world in countless years. You have flame-red hair, a sign of your lineage. You arrived in this world chased by a howler, a fulfilment of *The Prophecy*. Furthermore, the howler sought items once owned by your ancestors. The cloak you wear is once such article. There is little doubt of who you are.”

“It could just be a coincidence,” she suggested, ever hopeful.

“Not happenstance, little witch. It was *fate* which brought you to us.”

“Well destiny or fate, they’re both the same thing. I don’t care what anyone says, I choose my own path. Life isn’t written in stone, Leoracle. Our journey is fluid. It’s why we call it a *life-stream*.”

Ahead of them a set of doors, carved into the tree’s base, began to open. Harmony moved toward them. She could see a dark interior visible through the rapidly widening gap. Leoracle walked by her side without saying a word. His head was bowed, apparently deep in thought. Before they breached the entrance he stopped and spoke once more.

“You *are* The One, Harmony. In my heart I know this to be the truth.” He looked at her with a deep sadness etched into his eyes. “You doubt yourself, but understand that I do not. Your denial of reality does not make your belief true. You are simply living a lie, blindly adhering to a self-imposed falsehood. Sadly, you don't even know you’re telling yourself stories.”

Harmony watched him as he walked past her into the tree's interior. She rolled her eyes. His speech was quite compelling. The words and tone reminded her of something Rose would have said.

She turned and followed the lion into the darkness, not sure what she would find inside the hollowed tree. However, judging

by her experience in this world thus far, whatever lay in wait would probably attempt to kill her.

CHAPTER 6

THE HALL OF RYDERS

In pursuit of Leoracle, Harmony stepped through the parted doors and entered the gargantuan-tree's interior. Beyond the threshold she found herself in a heptagonal chamber. The hollow was gouged from the tree's core with an aesthetic which focused on organic and ornate details. At the centre of the room a wide column was similarly hollowed-out to house a platform.

As Harmony ventured deeper into the cavity she noticed five of the seven walls, forming the perimeter, housed elaborate murals. Each picture was carved directly into the wall. She veered away from Leoracle's side and ventured toward the closest frieze.

"Hold on," she blurted. With a scrunched-up expression and a slathering of doubt in her voice she asked. "Is that supposed to be *Red Riding Hood*?"

Even to her the answer was obvious. She didn't wait for Leoracle to respond before studying the artwork further. The picture exhibited a young woman dressed in a cloak. Only adding to the mystery, Harmony realised the cape was an exact replica of the one she was wearing. Behind the girl, nestled at the edge of a

forest, Harmony could see a cottage. From the open door an old woman beckoned.

Somewhat bemused she focused on the character in the foreground. Harmony had never seen *Red* depicted as being quite so mature; or aggressive for that matter. This was not the picture of an innocent, altruistic girl merrily skipping to Granny's house to deliver a basket of baked goods. The adolescent carved into the wood was ferocious and intimidating. In one hand she flourished an axe, and in the other she clutched the severed-head of a wolf. The skilled carpenter had even managed to give her a manically-triumphant expression; the kind of look Harmony associated with *unhinged* people. She found the feral-glint in Red's eye to be quite unnerving if truth be told.

Harmony stepped away from Red's relief and focused on the next picture in line. This carving was equally odd, though it lacked the menace Red's radiated.

A boy and girl, neither older than twelve, stood hand in hand. Over his shoulder, the boy carried the axe. By his side the girl, clothed in the red cape, clutched a handful of gemstones. Their identity continued to be a head-scratcher until Harmony scanned the background. Tucked away in the distance she spotted a cottage which looked to be entirely edible. The tiny cottage was fashioned from cake, toffee and various other sugary-treats. It even had a red and white candy-cane fence surrounding it.

“This one has to be, Hansel and Gretel,” she mused. This was all very strange. Harmony contemplated the reason for honouring fairy-tales in such a grandiose manner. Perhaps The Rag Witch really loved bedtime stories? This seemed as good a reason as any though it failed to explain the repeated presence of the axe and cloak.

She shrugged off the judgements and moved on to the third wall. Much like the second, this image contained two people. However, this time the boy and girl were adults. On the left-hand side, the man held the familiar axe. He stared at a tall mountain in the distance; his face hidden beneath a mop of dark, shaggy hair.

On the right side of the mural the depicted woman smiled. Wrapped in the patchwork mantle she looked calm and serene. In her hands she carried a bouquet of wild flowers; each stem, petal and frond was whittled to perfection. Upon her head she wore a diadem; a woven and knotted crown of three metals.

Harmony stared at the couple and scoured her mind for their identity. Alas, try as she might the answer remained elusive. She just couldn't think of a fairy tale containing this combination; a man, a woman and a mountain...?

“Ok. I give in. Who are they?”

“She was the third *Red Ryder*, Jill. Her companion was a man named, Jack,” Leoracle revealed. His voice resonated with pride and nostalgia.

Harmony nodded. “Oh, I see. Jack and Jill, I get it now. The mountain is the *hill* they went up. You should really put a pail of water in here somewhere. It would make the story a bit easier to see. Funny, I hadn’t considered nursery rhyme characters.”

Leoracle frowned. “I do not understand your meaning.”

“I thought these pictures were exclusively fairy-tales,” she explained, gesturing to the murals.

In all honesty she thought the answer was clear and didn’t really warrant such a detailed explanation. She walked away from the puzzled feline and approached the fourth carving. All she required was a cursory glance and the represented heroine was fathomed.

“This is an easy one. It’s *Rapunzel*. Here’s the tower, it’s got the axe and cloak at the bottom,” she motioned to the fine points. “And that’s Rapunzel’s long hair trailing-dangerously out of the window. Here’s the prince too. See that’s him climbing up the tower to indenture her into a lifetime of matrimonial-servitude. There’s no mistaking this story. It’s one of my mother’s favourite fairy tales.”

Leoracle watched her with a blank expression; he looked utterly flummoxed. Undeterred, Harmony moved onto the fifth and final panel. She scanned the girl. The female was of a similar age to her. She held a finger against her lips, encouraging the viewer to be silent. Atop her head, oodles of ringlets were gathered into two, perky bunches. Behind her three bears were

ensnared in a thicket of brambles. Clearly this was Goldilocks. Harmony was just about to announce this realisation to Leoracle, when an aspect caught her eye.

Harmony's gaze fixed onto Goldilocks' other hand. The appendage was partially concealed beneath the cloak's drapery but not enough to hide what she held. Harmony neared the carving and traced her fingertip over the etching. In her hand, Goldilocks grasped a small, golden ball. Written across the surface were two words. *Latro Gradus...*

"That can't be?" Harmony refuted in a whisper. It was the same doorknob she found in Nova's cottage. The one she used to gain access to the hidden room; the very same doorknob still inside her backpack.

"Is something wrong?" Leoracle inquired. "'You appear shaken."

She looked at the lion and at once noticed the expectancy behind his gaze. Unable to foresee the truth leading to a positive outcome she opted to take the easy route.

"Wrong? No, nothing's wrong," she lied.

At the far side of the chamber a door creaked open. Leoracle warned in a whisper. "Do not remove the cloak, unless I signal to do so."

"She may as well take it off," countered a voice from the shadows. "Even if I couldn't already see her, no one could miss the constant chatter."

With a nod from the lion Harmony lowered her hood. As the cloak's magic dissipated she was immediately and unexpectedly greeted by a small, bowing gentleman. She couldn't help but notice he had a distinctly *insect-like* appearance.

Harmony gasped as his leathery, green skin became transparent. The limpidity caused by the rays of sunlight streaming in through the rapidly closing door. He quickly scuttled to the side, immersing his reactive skin in the shadows once again.

“My apologies, fair-maiden. I did not intend to startle you,” the little insect-man replied in a delightfully chivalrous manner.

“Erm... No problem,” Harmony responded. Her eyes were transfixed on the interlocking plates of exoskeleton covering his pint-sized body. He looked like a tiny knight clad in shiny armour.

Harmony studied the creature for a moment. Though she did not profess to be an expert on critters, her guess was that he was a *grasshopper*; albeit a three foot high grasshopper wearing attire normally associated with gallant-men on horseback.

“If your name's, Jiminy I'm going home right now,” Harmony laughed, though she was seriously starting to question her sanity.

“I know not of this '*Jiminy*' you speak of, my lady. I am, Sir Barnabas. Queen's-guard to Belladonna,” he bellowed, bowing deeply once again.

“Are you a...a cricket?” she questioned.

“I beg your pardon!?” Sir Barnabas exclaimed. Clearly he had taken offence.

“Oh. I’m so sorry. I didn't mean to be rude.”

Sir Barnabas exchanged a glance with the lion. Without a word he gestured for them to step onto the platform in the room’s centre. He muttered inaudible words as Harmony stepped onto the disk. Sir Barnabus pressed a switch and a barrier enclosed the dais. A second press and the platform began to rise. With folded arms the grasshopper watched the platform rise until it vanished into the ceiling.

“What was he?” Harmony asked as they ascended.

“I do not understand your question. Do you wish to know his origin?” Leoracle paused waiting for a response. Harmony nodded and he began again. “He is Arthro by kin. His kind was created by Queen Nova to protect her realm.”

“Well, without meaning to sound judgmental, he looks like a bug. He kind of gave me the creeps a little bit,” Harmony admitted.

“This word, *bug*, is unknown to me. Admittedly, I have missed much of the world. I waited many years for you to arrive.”

Harmony's stomach sank; she hated it when he spoke to her like that. Like he was expecting some miracle from her or perhaps he was demanding one? She had tried to tell him she wasn't ‘*the one*’ but he just wouldn't listen.

She hoped The *Rag Witch* would be able to convince him of her ordinariness. Then maybe she could start finding a way home. This was the longest she had spent away from Rose. Harmony knew Rose would be out of her mind with worry by now. She probably thought Harmony had run away, but that wouldn't stop her from searching. Rose was many things, but not the kind to give up hope.

The elevator came to a halt before a pair of grand doors. More images were engraved into their solid, wooden surface. The picture depicted a beautifully elegant scene. The vista looked out over the forest canopy.

Leoracle walked forward and the doors cracked open. For a moment she was dazzled by the fiery, orange light from the setting sun. Her vision momentarily blinded as the sun's glare replaced the relative darkness of the lift shaft. Harmony shielded her eyes and walked behind Leoracle. The unlikely duo exited the lift and entered into the room beyond.

CHAPTER 7

THE RAG WITCH

Her eyes adjusted quickly and she was soon marvelling at the grand hollow around her. Paintings with frames of pure, sparking gold covered most of the walls. Each gilded border surrounded a portrait, no two faces alike.

A sweeping balcony offered a spectacular vista of the forest canopy. Harmony's gaze sailed out across the undulating ocean of lilac leaves.

Her attention shifted upwards to admire the chamber's vaulted-roof. The ceiling was tented in a dark-purple fabric. Glowing crystals, as numerous as stars, floated in the air. The twinkling gems shone ample light to illuminate the entire cavity.

Leoracle slowly walked across the chamber. Without distraction he strode toward a large, circular table.

The table, hewn from a thick slab of grey stone, was surrounded by twelve chairs. Each seat was whittled from a unique variety of wood. The grandest of which was made from the silver tree the very room was nestled in. The chair was so bulky it dwarfed the other eleven. More notably perhaps, it was occupied by The Rag Witch.

The old woman lifted a pipe to her lips. The device was formed from a white, snail shell and a length of bamboo. She applied a glowing taper to the shell and puffed on the pipe happily as she watched the lion saunter forward.

Her demeanour appeared to be relaxed; clearly an act. In truth she was on guard and with good reason. Leoracle had not returned to Sanctorium in five hundred years. This reunion was not altogether welcome.

Large rings of blue-smoke rose from the pipe in intermittent bursts. The bands of powder-blue smog drifted out the open balcony; sailing into the afternoon sky.

“It is good to see you, Belladonna,” Leoracle greeted, bowing his head slightly.

“I wish the feeling were mutual, Leoracle,” she responded sharply. She stared down her long nose at him. “Let’s forget the pleasantries and get down to business. What cause do you have to intrude, *cat*?”

“As I have already stated, I have come to seek aid,” he replied. He reached the table and placed a huge paw on the cool, stone surface.

“And you thought you would find help *here*?” she retorted angrily. “You come home acting like a hero returning from war. Don’t make me laugh! You are a coward. I will never forget what you did...”

“Neither will I,” he replied, unabashed.

Belladonna shook her head. “To make matters worse you charge in and lead the enemy into our midst.”

“The beasts are of no significance,” Leoracle. “Need I remind you, the throne beneath you is not yours, steward?”

“Enough. Why are you here? Say your piece and then leave.”

“I bring a gift,” he said, motioning to his side.

Belladonna shrugged at his empty gesture. There was nothing at his flank. The senile, old cat was nodding at thin air.

Realising the girl was no longer with him, Leoracle shook his head. She was worse than a kitten; always wandering off and getting into mischief. Perhaps he should have kept her in his belly until now?

“Harmony!” he bellowed. His voice rumbled into a roar.

“Rude! Don’t shout at me like that, please. I’m like, ten feet away from you,” she retorted, clearly irked and no less defiant for it. Moments later she arrived at the table. “You gave me such a fright. I was only looking at the...”

“Hush child,” he interjected. “Allow me to introduce you. This is The Rag Witch, Belladonna. She is the warden of Queen Nova's court.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m, Harmony Ryder,” she said, reaching out a hand to shake their introduction properly.

The old woman did not take her hand. Neither did she respond in any way. Unblinking she stared-fixedly at Harmony's face.

“How? How can it be so?” Belladonna whispered.

She looked at the lion with a disbelieving stare. Then, suddenly, she seized Harmony's, now rather grudgingly, offered hand.

“*Oh no*. Not you as well,” Harmony groaned. The look of wonder on the old woman's face could only mean one thing. “I'm not a witch, ok? I just wanted to make that clear before you go saying anything.”

The lion and Belladonna exchanged a second glance; a look which Harmony knew only too well. It was the kind of glimpse *adults* share when they don't want to tell a child something. Like they are somehow protecting the youth by excluding them from what is obviously happening. Rarely, in Harmony's experience, did this actually work.

Harmony took a seat and looked at the witch with a high degree of annoyance. The old woman had been her only real plan of escape. She was supposed to tell the lion that Harmony was human. Then she was going to be magically sent home, maybe by clicking her heels three times? Of course this imagined-reality was looking less and less likely with every passing minute.

“Tell me, *Harmony Ryder*,” Belladonna began. Her mouth flickered with a hint of a smile. “What do you know of, Queen Nova?”

This was the one question she had hoped to avoid. The mere fact Nova was a very distant relation would no doubt hurt her

argument of being normal. Nevertheless, Harmony was *not* magical in any way; of this she was certain. In her opinion to think otherwise was *bonkers*.

“What do I know about her? Well...*almost* nothing,” she replied truthfully.

“*Almost?*” Leoracle questioned.

“Ugh, fine then. Now don't go reading into this, but...” Harmony began to explain, rolling her eyes. “I had a great aunt called Nova. She was not a queen, but rather an old woman who lived in England. I never met her. I didn't even know she existed until the other day. I received a letter you see. My Nova gave me a cottage. I kind of wish she hadn't actually -”

“You were raised out with her home?” Belladonna cut in. Her ancient face fogged with confusion. “Nova didn't teach you *The Way?*”

“The way to where?”

“You misunderstand. She means, *The way of Whisper,*” Leoracle explained.

“Seriously? People from this world need to be taught to whisper? That's weird,” she noted with a bemused smirk. “Anyway, I grew up in an ambulance with my mum. Like I said, I never met her. So, clearly I'm not a witch.”

“Oh my dear child, there is no doubt in my mind. You are a witch. A good one, I shouldn't wonder,” Belladonna insisted. She lifted the pipe to her lips again and puffed out more blue smoke.

“For most magic is learned through years of exhaustive training and dedicated study. Even with all that effort, not all will pass the test to become a fully-fledged witch. But then there are the exceptional few; witches who are born with the very essence of magic flowing in their veins. This is especially true of those lucky enough to be gestated within an ancient bloodline.”

“You, Harmony Ryder, are of this lineage. You are sprung from *her* blood,” Leoracle purred. “You are The Chosen One, sent to this world to destroy the boundary. It is you who will defeat the tyranny of light and shadow. It is by your deed that the rightful queen shall be restored. In you I see The Champion of Whisper.”

“That's a lot of responsibility for a thirteen year old,” Harmony stated.

She was a little confused with all the names they were bestowing upon her. One minute she was just a witch and in the next they were proclaiming her to be a saviour. No, this didn't feel right. Clearly the old woman and the lion were mistaken. The straw they clutched was obviously a crazy one. She cleared her throat and shifted forward in the seat. Their attention was hers.

“I'm not interested in going on an adventure. Thanks, but no thanks. I just want to go back to my own world.”

“Harmony, you are The Eve Child. Fate has brought you to free the people of Darkfern from domination. Please, you cannot

abandon us,” Leoracle implored. His voice was distressed; Harmony felt it tug at her heartstrings.

“You really haven’t met her, have you?” Belladonna realised. She smiled as if suddenly bestowed with insight. “You don’t know how important you are. Harmony, you are precious beyond measure. Your journey is the last *signature* of a long and significant story.”

A realisation dawned on Harmony. This wasn’t a choice, not really. No matter her will, neither the witch nor the lion was about to let her walk away from this *destiny*. Like it or lump it, for now, she had to play along. Harmony forced a smile across her mouth and perked up, feigning interest.

“I’m all-ears.”

“Nova was a great and benevolent ruler, adored by the entire Queendom. The adulation was deserved, under Nova’s protection all citizens lived in peace,” Belladonna began. “Unfortunately, she was not an only child. Nova has two sisters, Natura and Nocturna.

“Nova may have been the youngest but she was also the most powerful. More so than any other witch to lift a wand. Jealous of her gift, her sisters cast a powerful spell and cleaved the universe in two. On one side of the barrier magic exists, on the other all is *mundaine*.”

“But if Nova was a super-powerful witch then why was she on the wrong side of the spell?” Harmony queried.

“Technically, she wasn’t a witch at the time of activation,” Belladonna elaborated. “You see, Nova had a fondness for taking a mundane-guise. She enjoyed the freedom, the anonymity of being fragile and faceless. It was during one of her *holidays* that Nocturna incanted The Rift.

“Why didn’t Nova use The Webway to get back?”

“No witch may travel The Path of Threads,” Leoracle replied, misty-eyed and sorrowful. “When Nocturna’s invocation took effect Nova’s mundane-guise was destroyed. She became a witch again. It took her many years to locate The Webway. She made countless attempts to cross back, but each of them ended in failure. Nocturna had fooled us all. You see, The Rift prevents witches from crossing between worlds.”

“But I crossed?” Harmony pointed out. “Therefore I’m not a witch.”

“Perhaps not at the time...but you are now,” Leoracle commented.

“I can’t believe her own sister trapped her like that.”

“Natura and Nocturna sought power. With Nova exiled, they seized the throne and tore the Queendom asunder,” Leoracle continued. “They declared war on one another and forced a choice of alignment, light or dark, on every citizen. It has been that way for over nine hundred years.”

CHAPTER 8

FLEEING THE PAST

“Are you being serious? *Nine hundred years?*” Harmony gawped. “Nova spent all that time trying to get home? Well, you needn’t think I’m sticking round for that long.”

“Your task is far simpler than Nova’s. All we require is that you open the way for her to return,” Belladonna revealed.

“But Nova can’t return,” Harmony corrected. “She’s dead... I thought you knew that? I didn’t get her letter until after she had passed.”

“Are you certain of this?” Leoracle gulped. His eyes were wide and glassy with grief.

“I’m afraid so,” she nodded.

“If Nova *has* perished then your fate is uncertain. Your purpose is...” Belladonna began to say before her voice faltered into silence.

“My purpose is *what?*”

Belladonna glanced from Harmony to Leoracle, gears of recognition turned in her mind. At last she clapped her hands together and called out in a shrill-shriek. “Articus! Come to, mummy.”

From the shadowed corner a creature appeared. The instant he stepped into the light Harmony went *gooey-eyed*. Articus was a plump, fluffy, ginger cat...of sorts. The feline's breed was peculiar to say the very least. His most distinguishing features were a bushy tail, six pairs of legs and sizeable, neon-blue whiskers. The latter left a trail of cobalt sparkles as he trotted.

The cat nimbly galloped across the floor and leapt onto the table. He came to a rest in front of the old witch, yawned and immediately lay down; apparently he was exhausted from his excursion.

"He's adorable," Harmony cooed. She reached out and tickled his chin, his fur felt warm and incredibly soft. "What is he?"

"The creature is a Wishkamog, a glorified pack-mule" Leoracle informed with a derisive snort.

"I'll have you know that Articus is a very loyal and resourceful companion," Belladonna spat, obviously offended with the lion's appraisal. She ran her fingers down the cat's back. "His talents are many. The primary of which is thus, he can unite his owner with any of their possessions, no matter the distance between..."

To Harmony's astonishment the cat's back opened with a click, a hidden pouch lay inside. The witch inserted her hand into the feline-pocket and withdrew a long and slender, yellow stick.

Belladonna twirled the buttery-rod through the air. Harmony's backpack, filled with the object she found in Nova's cottage, appeared on the table. Harmony knew she'd left the bag

inside Leoracle. He did not look best pleased about the removal method.

Ignoring the lion's grumbling, Belladonna opened the bag and rifled through the contents. She removed the rope, the golden doorknob and lastly the silver medallion. The journal remained contained in the cloth.

The Rag Witch lifted the hoary chain and draped it around her neck. "I'll care for this for now," she smiled, tucking the silver disk beneath the neckline of her dress. She pushed the pale rope and the door handle toward Harmony. "You're not the first girl Nova sent. Before you there was Scarlet, Jill, Gretel, Rapunzel and Goldeen. These five are your ancestors; The Red Ryders."

Harmony couldn't help but laugh. She quickly clasped her hand over her mouth, the response seemed entirely inappropriate. Controlling herself, she turned to the lion and asked. "Does she really expect me to believe this? My relatives are fairy-tale characters, all of who were sent into this world to open a magical doorway for an exiled, witch-queen?" Harmony chuckled.

"Belladonna speaks the truth," he replied solemnly. "You are the first *Red Ryder* to enter Darkfern in five hundred years."

"Supposing I believe you, why didn't they open it then?"

"The sad truth is that each simply failed, succumbing to peril or distraction. Do not be mistaken, the path before you is fraught with dangers," Belladonna warned. She fell silent as a thought

stole her attention. When she spoke again Harmony felt a rush of hope. “But you have an advantage, they did not. Luckily for you the world at large has forgotten you exist; your fore-sisters have fallen into legend.”

“What does it matter? Nova is dead, so I don’t need to open the door for her. Look at that, I guess my fate is to go home after all,” she announced with a broad-smile. “Can you help me find The Webway please?”

“You can’t leave now,” Belladonna laughed. “You are Nova’s heir... In her eternal-absence, the crown belongs to you.”

“Give it a rest. Do I look like a queen to you?” she baulked.

Belladonna narrowed her gaze into a scrutinising-squint. “I see what you mean,” she agreed after a moment. The old witch raised her yellow wand and aimed at Harmony. A dense shroud of yellow particles jettisoned out the wand-tip and encircled Harmony before she could react.

For a few, startling, seconds the cloud of magic pulled and pushed at her body. A shimmer of light rippled out and the flaxen-haze vanished abruptly.

“There we go, much better,” Belladonna chimed happily.

Harmony felt a cold breeze, brush against her legs. She glanced downward and shrieked. “What have you done!”

Other than the red cloak, her entire outfit had been changed. Gone were her jeans, favourite sweater and trainers. In their place she wore a lemon-yellow dress. The bodice was strapped

and plain, but the skirt was full and trimmed in a white lace. On her feet, a pair of matching heels threatened to hinder her chances of walking, let alone running away. She thought the outfit was more suited to a child pageant-contestant than a teenager. Harmony grimaced, unable to hide her disgust. “I can’t wear this... I’ll die of embarrassment if someone sees me. Where are my real clothes, please?”

“They have been disposed of. The mundane clothing was hardly suitable attire. You must remain *incognito*, Harmony. Your life depends on it,” Belladonna informed.

“Incognito! You’re completely mental if you think I’ll slip *under the radar* in this garb?” she scoffed.

Uncaring of her remarks, Belladonna gestured with her wand toward Harmony’s head. “The hair will have to go too. Red is a symbol of your lineage. Hmm, let’s see...”

Harmony gasped as her fiery-locks changed to chocolate brown. Fighting back tears she said. “What about blonde? I always fancied being a blonde.”

“No. The colour I picked will do you just fine,” Belladonna snapped.

“You look beautiful,” Leoracle purred.

Harmony was on the brink of explaining why that statement was both offensive and untrue when an explosion shattered the calm. Following the calamitous-sound, a swell of screams and

cries flowed in through the open balcony. The scent of smoke, flame devouring timber, filled the air.

“What's happening?” Harmony cried.

Leoracle ran onto the balcony and looked over the edge. He turned and shouted. “Nocturna’s minions are here! We are under attack! Belladonna, protect the girl!”

“I will get her to safety. Quickly Harmony this way,” the ancient witch called. She gestured for Harmony to follow.

Harmony snatched up her backpack, stuffing the rope and doorknob into the cloth-confines, before racing to catch up.

Belladonna, Articus scooped under one arm, tapped the wall with her wand. The façade melted away, flowing like molten wax.

The old witch stepped through the gap and into a circular room beyond. Harmony followed her in and the two stood shoulder to shoulder. The space was minute, and its purpose was not at all clear to begin with.

Belladonna pressed a crystal, mounted to the wall. At once the floor beneath them shuddered and then it began to descend. Harmony felt her stomach lurch as the elevator plummeted rapidly.

“Are they attacking because of me?” she asked.

“Most likely, yes. It’s to be expected. You are a great threat to The Queens. They will not stop until either you or they are dead.”

“Because they think Nova’s sent me?”

“Precisely, but neither queen has seen your face. To all but a few you are just another, untrained witch. You are *faceless*, an advantage we must exploit.”

“But I’m not a witch, untrained or otherwise,” she mumbled under her breath.

The witch-nonsense was becoming boring. Nothing they had said convinced her she possessed any magical ability. She knew the blood in her veins was mundane. This was an unchangeable-truth, whether she liked it or not.

“So, Nocturna is a relation of mine too, I suppose?” she commented. Internally, Harmony chastised herself for ever wishing she had a larger family. The fulfilment of the wish was not really what she had in mind.

Belladonna laughed and shook her head. “You share blood with, Nocturna, Mistress of Torment and Shadow, but do not mistake her for family...”

“*Torment and shadow?* Hmm, I’ll not hold out for a birthday card from her then?”

Belladonna ignored the quip. Her tone was worried. “Raise your hood, girl. The cloak will hide you from the howlers. When we exit, stay close to me. I will guide you to safety.”

Harmony just had time to lift the hood before the lift ground to a halt. Belladonna pushed door open and stepped out, wand raised.

Under the cloak she followed the old witch out of the elevator. They emerged onto a grassy slope; a long, gentle decline which ended at the bank of a wide river. All around howlers fought with Belladonna's forces. Arthro, the stout grasshopper-men, fought alongside humans wearing armour fashioned from metal plates and clusters of amethyst.

Harmony recognised one of the combatants. Sir Barnabas dove through the air and mounted a howler. With a cry of fealty he ran the nightmare-mutt through with his sword. Triumphantly, he disappeared into the warring-throng with sprightly-leap. She made a mental note to be extra polite to him should their paths cross again.

Harmony followed Belladonna as they weaved through the battle. A howler leapt toward them. A second later he was impaled on the spear of a brave knight. As the knight saluted Belladonna he was overcome by two more beasts. The wolves savaged him until he lay deathly-still. With the man dead they turned on Belladonna.

An arrow whistled past Harmony. The archer's aim struck the closest howler. The mutt dropped to the ground without as much as a dying-yelp. The second wolf looked to his fallen ally. The howler snarled and then he advanced on Belladonna.

The Rag Witch raised her wand. A volley of fireballs erupted and hurtled toward the encroaching wolf. The creature dodged with and closed the distance. In nightmarish-teeth he seized the

hem of her dress and dragged her to the ground. Belladonna kicked out at the howler with her spiked heel. She scored a direct hit in its eye. The rabid-dog whimpered but did not relinquish its brutal grasp.

In a moment of stillness Harmony glimpsed, through the bloodshed, a small boat moored to a jetty in the river. This was her chance to escape. She looked at Belladonna, struggling against the monster.

The old witch looked to her. "Help me!"

Harmony turned her back and ran. If she gave aid to Belladonna then her chance to go home would be squandered.

Harmony held fast to the cape's hood, the magical properties were the only thing keeping her safe. She sprinted down the slope, running past men swinging swords and howlers biting back. Unnoticed she arrived at the boat and jumped in.

She quickly untied the mooring and pushed off. The fast flowing river caught the little boat in its current. She glanced back up the hill. Belladonna was charging towards her. The elderly enchantress was shouting orders at her, gesturing toward the river bank with a stern expression.

Harmony waved and smiled, glad to see the back of her. She couldn't hear a word the old-dear was saying anyway; the river was much too loud. Still smiling she turned back around to face the river's flow.

Articus, Belladonna's wishkamog, was sitting on the bow of her boat. He meowed and narrowed his eyes.

As the vessel drifted further away Harmony breathed a sigh of relief. Despite the cat's presence she was free and hopefully heading toward home. She never wanted to set eyes on the witch or the lion, ever again.

Her only focus was finding The Webway. Belladonna was mad to expect a child to save them all. No, Harmony wanted to get back to reality as quickly as possible.

The first thing she needed was directions. She had no idea how far Leoracle had taken her or how big Darkfern was. Suddenly she felt rather lost and afraid...

CHAPTER 9

THE HOUSE OF STYX

The sky terminated abruptly, its edge a serrated tear. The fractured-firmament mirrored the land beneath; both wounded in a cataclysmic event. Beyond The Sundered Cliffs, where one world was severed from another, there was *nothing*...

In place of life, sky, land and love a vacuous-blackness prevailed; an empty and star-barren void. Spectacular to behold, the panoramic-slash in reality offered a sight unlike another.

All along the toothed-edge the land was dead and barren. No plants grew; not a moss, lichen nor mould. No creature scuttled, flew or burrowed. Only one aspect broke the endless stretch of wind-polished stone. One tiny wart on the lip of eternity; an imperfection not even time could hope to remove...

Resting on stilts, which leaned out over the edge, was a dilapidated, wooden house. It was the kind of dwelling most sane people would mindfully-avoid. Even if you overlooked the distinctly-hostile location, the residence itself was unwelcoming. Its *face* was altogether more sinister, wicked and downright-evil than it ought to be.

Additionally, to reach the building's crooked-stoop one was required to negotiate a path of wooden columns. Thirteen steps,

to be precise. A metal signpost, driven into the ground at the foot of the crossing, offered an ominous warning.

*You stand before The House of Styx,
Wherein, we three descry.
For a rate-unknown, one fate will be shown,
Fail to pay and the cost will be high...*

An addendum, letters angrily-gouged into the metal, beneath the rhyme read;

*This is not a guest-house; tourist information, gift shop,
sight-seeing opportunity or entrance to another dimension.
Consider yourself warned...*

Nocturna stared at the sign from under her cloak. She shook her head disparagingly and lowered the hood. Her moon-hue skin shone against the blackness around her. Turning her back on the stilted-shack she searched the landscape for sighs of movement. The horizon was still, disappointingly so. Nocturna folded her arms and tapped her foot impatiently.

She had been waiting for what felt like an eternity. In all honesty she really couldn't be sure of time's stride; not when she was this close to the edge. The Sundered Cliffs had a way of

distending things like time and thought. Over the edge such concepts did not apply.

Nocturna searched the distance again. At last spying the signal she sought. A white carriage, mounted between two large racing-snails, charged across the horizon at tremendous speed.

The lightening-fast molluscs were gleaming white and their shells golden. Behind them two iridescent ribbons, streaks of viscous rainbow, marked the hasty-trail.

The passenger-cabin, strapped between the sizeable shells, bore a striking resemblance to a boat. The front bow provided a deck from which the driver navigated. Queen Natura turned a large, captain's wheel and steered the vessel toward the wooden house.

The carriage hurtled across the rocky tundra and skidded to a halt, kicking up clouds of grey dust, a few feet from the edge. Natura waved enthusiastically from the lofty deck. She removed a pair of filthy goggles and lobbed an anchor over the side. "Look out below!"

Thwack!

The anchor struck the ground, kicking out sparks, a short distance from Nocturna. "You took your time," she complained, producing a bone-white wand from beneath her cloak. She waved the magical-pointer and the specks of dust on her outfit vanished.

"Oh, *pish-posh*. I wasn't that long. Besides, the old-girls needed a descent run," Natura replied flippantly. She laughed

and tapped the snails affectionately on their shells. “It certainly cleared the cobwebs out of my ears too.”

With a good deal of sighing she hoisted herself over the railings and, unceremoniously, shimmied down the anchor’s mooring.

Nocturna waited for her sister to touch the ground before scolding her. “We are facing a Red Ryder, the first in half an age, and you take the scenic route?”

“Well I’m sorry, your *high-and-mightiness*. However, unlike you, I don’t often get the chance to relax. My life is hectic. I have a Queendom to rule,” Natura blustered. She produced her own wand, soot-black and sharp. With a flick, the dirt on her gown disappeared. “Then there’s Narsci. Goodness knows how many sleepless nights that girl has given me lately? On top of that lot I’ve got a tournament coming up and the preparations for All Sun’s Day are still to be finalised. Honestly, there just aren’t enough hours in the day.”

“Will you shut up,” Nocturna snapped, she pinched the bridge of her nose, hoping to relieve her mounting stress. “I have little patience for your incessant jabbering today. Our very crowns are at stake and you’re worrying about garlands and fireworks. Wake up! We are in peril!”

“You’re right, of course. Forgive me,” Natura apologised.

“That’s more like it. Now, I’ve sent my wolves into Sanctorium. The attack was flawless. Nevertheless, other than a faint scent, they found no sign of the girl.”

“Have they tried looking for the lion? If memory serves she’s likely to be with him.”

“Leoracle was present but the child was not,” Nocturna elaborated, she paced worriedly. “Mark my words, *something* is different this time. I can’t fathom what, but there is a variance in this Ryder. She possesses a quality the others did not.”

“I can’t say I’ve noticed anything peculiar, but then again I’ve not been looking,” Natura laughed nervously. “Look on the bright side. On her own she’s less of a threat.”

“On the contrary my dear, dumb, sister. The girl is now more dangerous than ever,” Nocturna countered. Natura’s brow furled with confusion. The dark Queen sighed and then explained. “The child has nobody to escort her. We know the path The Ryder must take, we know her goal. But she is not following her *allotted* path. She is trying to side-step her fate. This is an unguided-Ryder, and a Ryder who wanders free is…”

“*Unpredictable?*” Natura suggested.

“Precisely,” Nocturna agreed. Her mood darkened as a storm of thoughts drifted in. She looked to her elder sister and added. “There is something I have not told you, Natura. I received news from the mundane world.”

“Oh? What news is that then?” Natura asked as she scattered some food-pellets for the snails.

“My howler witnessed Nova, fade to *dust...*”

Natura dropped the bag of feed. The sack split, scattering pellets across the stone and sprinkling them over the edge. She turned, her head shaking in disbelief. “That can’t be true. Your dog must be mistaken. She is immortal, just as we are...”

“He spoke the truth.”

“I always thought Nova would find a way back. I never imagined she’d die there,” Natura sobbed, her eyes glossy with tears. “So this is the last Ryder? Hold on, this is only the sixth girl. I thought the prophecy said there would be seven?”

“I have noticed that too. It’s a discrepancy we must look into,” Nocturna noted. She beheld the cruel-faced house. “When this child dies, so too does our curse. At last, the end approaches.”

Nocturna smiled. The expression took considerable effort to produce and did not look at all comfortable. Though her air implied happiness, internally she brooded. Their curse was also their bond. What would become of the sisters without their common enemy?

“We did the right thing, didn’t we?” Natura asked, shattering the woe-heavy thoughts. “Casting Nova out, the way we did, I mean,” she continued

“We did what was required of us. Our actions were for the good of all. Nova was too powerful and I dare say she would have done the same to us if she’d thought of it first.”

“Oh I know you’re right. I just feel guilty when I think of her alone in that world. She must have been terribly angry with us,” Natura sniffed, tears glistened in her eyes.

Nocturna scowled at her sister’s emotional display. It was the trait she found most irritating in her elder sibling. This instance was no exception. They had wasted too much time already and Nocturna was growing impatient.

“Will you stop faffing,” she snapped. “Let us make haste and go inside. I have no wish to linger in this place any longer than is necessary.”

With haughty-indignation Natura barged past her dark-sibling. She muttered to herself, clearly upset. Nocturna shrugged, she really didn’t care how her sister felt. Her only concern was the Red Ryder.

Nocturna crossed the stepping-posts first. With a wave of her wand she summoned seven squid-like tentacles from the fold of her dress. The slithering, black limbs snaked around the thirteen posts and hoisted her over the hazardous path. As she stepped onto the porch the appendages retreated.

The summoned creature was known as a Mab. It was a symbiotic-entity hosted by a witch in return for power. The

creature's appearance always represented the hostess, a glimpse of her truest self for all to see.

Whilst Nocturna's were black and sinister, Natura's were equally characteristic. Effortlessly-light and ethereal, they radiated beauty and poise. They looked much like the tantalizing stamen of an exotic flower, though considerably longer of course.

Natura's Mab, though soft and gentle, was by no means feeble. The tendrils were easily as strong as their darker kin. With little effort they lifted the plump witch across the endless drop.

With her sister by her side, Nocturna rapped her knuckles three times on the wooden door. The force of her knock, whilst not overzealous, caused several tiles from the porch canopy to break off. The loosened slates drifted away and disintegrated, crumbling to dust, a few feet from the queens. The sisters exchanged a nervous glance.

The house, the location, the crossing, every detail of this place oozed danger. Yet all laughably-paled when compared to the beings within. The House of Styx was residence to three hags; all immortal, powerful and devious beyond measure. Even in primeval texts, timeworn tomes gathering dust on library shelves, the three were referred to as ancient. This house was home to The Nexus Sisters.

“Who is it?” asked a dry, croaky voice.

“The ruling monarchs, Natura and Nocturna, humbly seeking your guidance,” Natura answered in a trembling voice. The tone was inconsistent with someone claiming to be a queen.

“Ugh. What do you two want?” the woman within barked.

“Open the door, Lachesis,” Nocturna retorted. “We have come about *The Prophecy*.”

“Do you have any idea how many prophecies there are? You’ll have to be more specific,” Lachesis replied exasperatedly. She opened the door and glared at them. “Well? Don’t just stand there. Come in already, you’re letting *The Void* get in.”

CHAPTER 10

FATE-WEAVE

The queens crossed the threshold together. Though neither spoke, each was equally disgusted with the cleanliness. The hovel was as grubby inside as the exterior suggested.

Bones of man and animal littered the floor in numerous piles. A large wooden table, occupying the centre of the room, was burdened with a banquet of food. Each dish was in varying stages of decomposition.

Lachesis closed the front door and scuttled in front of the guests. With outstretched arms she blocked their path before they ventured far. It had been many years since The Nexus sisters last received visitors; though not so many Lachesis had forgotten how sneaky they could be.

Her face was moulded from dark, leathery skin. A crooked mug framed with a dishevelled crown of course, white hair. Across her cheeks and forehead she was heavily tattooed with runes and symbols. The malevolent markings only furthered the abundantly-sinister appearance she already depicted.

One could have easily mistake her hunched-back and toothless grin as signs of fragility. Though to believe that thought would prove fatal to even the most powerful of witches.

“Morta! Clotho! We have callers!” Lachesis caterwauled. She grinned and rubbed her hands together.

In the corner of the room, quite hidden by the velvety shadows, something large moved. The unrest triggered a tremendous vibration, so violent the entire hovel shook. From the darkness a breathless voice greeted them. “It’s so good to see old friends. Please, come closer. My eyes have grown dim and I cannot see you.”

“Give it a rest, Clotho. No one falls for that ruse anymore,” Lachesis cut in. She shook her head, halting Natura who had begun to obey the beckoning wheeze. “Take a seat, Your Grace. Help yourself to some grub,” she offered. Her smile exposed toothless, blackened gums.

Natura grudgingly took a seat and did her best to not breath. The stench rising from the rancid feast was worse than one of her sister’s howlers.

Lachesis poured out two cups of steaming black-gloop. Natura nodded her thanks as the teacup was thrust into her hands. She sniffed the vapours and immediately paled. She twirled her wand and a flurry of sugar melted into the dark slop.

As she stirred the mixture she glanced down and grimaced. Scooping the spoon, she lifted a large clump of black fur from the

tea. Revolted, Natura placed the lump of hair onto the table. Much to her horror and surprise the clump sprouted six legs and scuttled away. She abandoned the cup next on the table and decided she wasn't thirsty anyway.

At the edge of the room a curtain of finger bones rattled and parted. Morta emerged through the dark entry with a smile on her face. "Oh my, what do we have here? Is this royalty, at *our* table? Mother would be so proud of the company we keep," she mocked.

Morta was the third and youngest Nexus sister. In tales of old she was named, The Nightmare Witch. Famously earning herself the, rather menacing, title after she was caught draining the life force from sleeping children.

Morta was by far the most dangerous of the demonic-trio. She was both charming and attractive; a deadly-concoction in an eternal entity sustained on the souls of her victims.

She was slim and graceful, a seductress with each gesture. Her skin was as bleached as bone, devoid of colour to the point of translucency. Morta shone in the gloom, far brighter than Nocturna's own pallid-hue.

Her youthful appearance was alarming in such an ancient creature. To the uninitiated she looked to be little more than a teenager, a young maiden at most. Beautiful but not without flaw, Morta was marred by one blemish; an aspect not easily

overlooked. Her eyes were sewn shut, cruelly affixed with brutish-crosses of black thread.

As Morta strode into the room Natura felt herself recoil. She fought the urge to scream, instead swallowing the terror welling up from her gut. Behind the youthful witch her shadow loomed; a monstrosity, the site of which no amount of happy thoughts could hope to diminish. The tormented, demonic shape faded as she took a seat opposite the two queens.

“Welcome,” Morta said in a babyish voice. It was disturbingly sweet, innocent almost. Natura shuddered. “Well? Come on, out with it. Why are you here?”

“A Ryder has emerged. But I sense something is wrong. The girl isn’t behaving like she ought to. I fear Fate’s weave has been altered,” Nocturna alleged. Her tone was shrill and urgent.

“Not easily are the threads tweaked,” Clotho wheezed.

“My sister is quite right. Your worry is unlikely to be more than a figment of ego,” Morta trounced. She raised a finger to silence further questions. “Nevertheless, such possibilities must not be ignored. Very well, my sisters and I will descry for you. We shall transcribe *Fate’s* web, but first there is the question of payment.”

“What would you have us pay?” Natura inquired, her voice trembling. She was not at all comfortable around such dark, malevolent women.

“Such a special reading will require an exceptional gift,” Lachesis croaked. She appeared next to her sister, her face cracked with a wicked grin.

“A child, for a child,” Clotho suggested, breathlessly.

“Oh yes!” Lachesis agreed, clapping her gnarled-hands excitedly.

“My sisters have decided on a price, Your Graces,” Morta laughed. “The cost is the soul of a firstborn, a child of your making.”

Natura shook her head. She would not let them take her only daughter's soul. She would forfeit her crown before she'd agree to that.

Nocturna sneered at Natura's rejection. Admittedly it was not the most desirable of choices. Of course she didn't want her son to be devoured by these hags either. Still, there was a reasonable chance they would choose Natura's child over hers. A pure soul was always more attractive than a tainted one.

“On one condition,” Nocturna said, ignoring Natura's frantic pleas. “The soul won't be harvested before their natural time.”

“Agreed!” Morta laughed. She smiled and spat into her palm. Nocturna reluctantly did the same. The two witches shook hands and the deal was done.

“Now then, let us see about your Ryder,” Morta began. She turned to Lachesis. “Stoke the fire...”

The wizened, old crone's eyes widened with excitement. She scurried over to a panel on the wall which housed three, silver buttons. She pressed the first and light immediately flooded the dark corner Clotho hid in. Natura gasped, the sight of the middle sister was not something one could prepare for.

Clotho resembled a giant baby, an obese and monstrous infant. Her stomach was a gargantuan mound of rippling flesh. Her arms and legs, layered with swags of slimy-skin, were fastened to the walls with huge, iron shackles.

Atop her enormous torso, above the cascading tyres of lard that encircled the gargantuan abdomen, was her head. A pair of hungry, coal-black eyes blinked in the light. The peering orbs were only just visible amidst boil-covered sacks of fat which hung from her face. The dangling lumps parted around Clotho's mouth; a lipless, teeth-lined hole.

Lachesis cackled as she pressed the middle button. A hatch, hidden in the rafters above Clotho, retracted and a wide funnel descended.

Clotho grew excited and she tipped her head backwards. Her tongue, black and necrotic, hungrily licked her cheeks. It lashed around like an eel fished from the water. Flailing desperately as it waited for the third button to be pressed. Lachesis obliged the tongue's desire. She pressed the silver disk until it clicked.

A rumbling, from deep in the bowels of the house, sounded out. It grew louder and louder as something flowed through a network of pipes which ultimately lead to the funnel.

“Feast, my sister. Feast,” Morta shouted over the din. She raised her arms above her as a torrent of crimson liquid, peppered with chunks of foul meat, flowed from the funnel and into Clotho's ravenous mouth.

The gargantuan baby suckled as if she were starving. She gorged on the putrid-gloop, all the while squealing with delight.

Morta drifted closer to her sister's stomach. The bulge began to shudder and quake. Like a death-bound whale, stranded on a lonely shore, the expanse of flesh heaved and convulsed.

Placing her hands on the writhing membrane, Morta moved her eyeless face close to the sweat-drenched bulk. She listened to the violent-gurgling echoing from the belly's depths.

All of a sudden, Morta took a step backwards. Faces began to appear in the undulating flab. She watched and listened as they whispered to her, sharing secrets only she could hear. Morta turned and looked at the queens.

“She is The Ryder. The heir has returned,” Morta announced in an unholy voice. Her child-like tone was replaced with one which resembled a thousand voices speaking in unison. “She came to this world through The Webway. The girl is armed with relics, rope and orb...”

“We already know she’s here,” Nocturna pointed out. She was growing impatient. “What can be done to stop her?”

Morta glowered over her shoulder. She curled her lip upward and exposed clenched teeth, snarling her displeasure at the disturbance.

“The child is afraid, doubtful of her heritage...” she paused for a moment, as if hearing something she had not expected. “That can't be!”

Morta pulled away from the quivering stomach, as the faces continued to whisper. She turned her attention to the deep crevasse which housed her sister's naval. Without warning Morta plunged her hand, elbow and then shoulder inside.

Lachesis watched avidly as Morta withdrew her arm. The appendage was drenched in fetid, green slime. Long strings of the rancid secretions began to slide off and trickle towards the ground, like wax escaping from a burning candle.

Morta pinched one of the strings and passed its length between her fingers, inspecting the nodules as she did so. She repeated the process with several more twines until one particular formation enthralled her. She paused again and then she laughed.

“The Ryder is *mundaine*.”

“She can't be!” Nocturna sputtered. It sounded too good to be true.

“The girl is empty... She has no hope, she does not believe in magic,” Morta continued. “She mistrusts, The Lion. To her mind Darkfern is a place to escape, not conquer. All she desires is a home, her mother...”

“Oh. The poor thing must be ever so scared,” Natura supposed. She instantly regretted voicing her thoughts as the other witches in the room looked at her with revulsion.

“The girl has fled from the lion. She means to shirk her responsibility,” Morta elaborated. “In body and in spirit, the last Ryder walks *alone*.”

“When last we came to you, your reading foretold of seven Ryders. This girl is number six, yet you call her the last,” Nocturna remarked. Clearly she intended to get her money’s worth from this meeting.

Morta scraped the secretions from her arm and cast the goo to the floor in three angry flicks. “I do not make mistakes. Neither do I divulge beyond the contract’s limit. Heed my word, this girl is the last of her blood.”

“So, she isn’t a threat then?” Natura questioned. “If the girl is mundane she doesn’t have any magic, right?”

Morta shook her head. “This child carries the power of Nova within her blood, only her mind is mundane. If she is taught to believe in her gift, to shed her mundane ego, then I foresee only one destiny. The Grey Queen shall retake her throne. Darkfern will be forever hers...”

“Nova can’t come back,” Natura blurted. “She’s dead.”

“My sister speaks the truth,” Nocturna added. “Our sister is dust.”

Lachesis cackled. “Interesting questions, Your Graces. Perhaps you’d like to negotiate another bond?”

Morta swooned for a brief moment. She grasped the table for support. Lachesis rushed to her side to give aid, guiding her to an empty seat as the light illuminating Clotho vanished.

“Right, Majesties. Time you two left. Come on, that’s your lot. Find the girl and kill her before she becomes a witch or else you’ve had it. Understood?” Lachesis barked in her gruff croak. She ushered them towards the door. “Come back any time. Oh and we will be collecting our, *payment* in due course,” she said, adding a fiendish grin as the two royals were abruptly ejected onto the stoop.

Lachesis slammed the shack door closed with a final departing grunt. Several slates, from the already hole-riddled roof, broke away and dispersed into the blackness.

Natura and Nocturna summoned their mab and quickly traversed the thirteen columns. Both were exceedingly happy to be away from the shack. However, a thousand questions now plagued their minds; as was often the case when a *reading* of this nature was executed.

“I don’t get it. How can she be the last when there hasn’t been a sixth?” Natura asked finally.

“I do not know.”

“Why wasn’t she taught to believe in herself? Who is she? What was Nova thinking sending a mundane to fight us?” Natura pondered allowed. Suddenly she issued a loud, dramatic gasp. “What if she has sent two girls?”

“What do you mean *two*?” Nocturna interjected.

“What if one has no magic, she makes a very loud entrance to get our attention, a red-herring so to speak.”

“Whilst the other *trained-one* sneaks in unnoticed,” Nocturna finished. “That’s quite brilliant! You’re not as stupid as you look.”

“Oh thank you.”

“Then again, looks *can* be deceptive,” Nocturna whispered, under her breath.

“So what do we do now?” Natura questioned as she clambered back up onto her snail-carriage.

“Let us concentrate our efforts on the girl we know of, she should prove the easiest to curtail. We must both send out our spies. Find the girl and make a deal with her, send her home for the relics. Are we agreed?” Nocturna finished sounding doubtful of her sister's comprehension.

“Yes, I think so. I will find the curly-haired girl and help her get home,” Natura shouted as her snails began to pull away.

Nocturna shook her head. It was obvious she would have to take care of this Ryder along with the other; if the other even existed.

She had waited for this day to come. Five hundred years spent waiting for the sixth heir to emerge. Now she had two to contend with. These girls would meet the same end as their ancestors, an end that would come with the fatal swoop of Nocturna's wand.

CHAPTER 11

HECKLER IN THE DARK

The grey clouds, magnificently lit by the soaring silver moon, were watching the girl once again. They had lost sight of her a day or two earlier when she was unexpectedly eaten by a giant lion.

Miraculously the clouds chanced upon her again. The girl was in a small row-boat, aimlessly drifting down a fast flowing river. She seemed to be quite worried and with good reason too.

A spectacular waterfall, which plummeted several hundred feet into blackness, was only a short distance ahead of her vessel.

The girl, urged on by a frantically-meowing cat, was desperately swinging a lasso of silver rope above her head. As she released the hoary-cord it arched through the air, stretching impossibly far. The roaring river was lined on both sides with overhanging trees. The foliage offered the ideal anchor for the searching loop of twine. The rope found a desirably thick bough. It latched on, looped around and formed a knot. The girl braced herself on the side of the boat as, like a length of retracting elastic, the rope began to shorten.

Moments later the craft collided with the bank with a clatter. The wishkamog abandoned the doomed dinghy first. The twelve-

legged feline landed skilfully and quickly meowed for her to follow.

The girl leapt from the unsteady boat. Her ragged, red cloak billowed in an odd manner. It seemed, to the eagerly watching clouds, to propel her across the gap to the shore. Evidently this was no ordinary girl and that was no ordinary cloak.

Free of its anchor the boat sped to the roaring crest and disappeared from sight. The clouds continued to watch as the little ship sailed over the torrent-crowned lip.

The clouds fully expected the boat to plummet. This was not out of the question, even in a magical-world *gravity* reigned supreme. However, the boat had no intention of falling.

The clouds gasped as they watched huge, mechanical wings unfurl from beneath the wooden hull. They flapped in unison; gently guiding the boat through the air with the intention of drifting to the river beneath.

Unfortunately, after only a short distance the little flying-boat was struck by a flock of two-headed birds. The feathered creatures squawked as several of their company thudded against the side and spiralled, unconsciously, to their deaths.

The winged-vessel swerved to avoid a second collision as the flock sought revenge for their fallen comrades. They swarmed on their wooden adversary, pecking and scratching. Working as a team they forced the boat towards certain doom. The craft

crashed against the cliff face with enough force to crack its hull. Cogs rained from its underside.

The bow of the stricken vessel became lodged in a fissure. A shower of sparks, coupled with the unmistakable sound of metal grinding on metal, heralded the boats demise. The huge wings shuddered and then stopped moving altogether. Satisfied the boat posed no further threat, the flock of birds moved on.

Back on the safety of the river bank, Harmony laughed. The exhilaration of escaping death was intoxicating. She felt amazing! Now she understood why people did dangerous activities, like jumping out of planes or swimming with sharks. By escaping death she was reminded of being alive; of how miraculous and wondrous life is. She wanted the sensation to last forever (which seemed possible given that narrowly escaping death was becoming a common occurrence).

Of course she owed her life to the magical rope gripped in her hands. She lifted the coil to her lips and kissed it. “An enchanted rope is an essential for every budding adventurer. Never leave home without one,” Harmony laughed. She smiled at Articus.

The Wishkamog purred his appreciations for the timely rescue. He rubbed his flank against the side of her face. Harmony stroked him back and then sat up. She looked around at her location.

The forest was dark. Inky-black shadows lurked beneath the dense canopy. Such depth of murk would have normally terrified

her, but not today. Thankfully, in this moment, she felt invincible. She understood what it meant to feel courageous; to face a fear and become victorious.

“There is nothing to fear when you’re filled with courage,” she announced.

Harmony got to her feet and carefully followed Articus as he valiantly led the way. The darkness was not so intense once out of the moonlight. Harmony happily discovered she could see quite well. A soft yellowish glow, emanating from the buzzing insects, resulted in a relatively constant light source.

Harmony paused for a moment, distracted by a memory. The recollection of seahorse creatures, which had chased her in a dream, flashed across her mind. It wasn't possible. Surely such a creature couldn't exist? If it did, as ridiculous as that thought was, how could she have dreamt it without ever having seen one before?

She approached and inspected the light source. Harmony shook her head in confusion, she was witnessing the impossible. The bright-gold seahorse had tiny, delicate wings. In its wake an iridescent trail of tangible shimmer smeared the air. The creature was hovering above a patch of velvety, green moss. Its long trunk-like mouth sipped drops of moisture from the sodden greenery.

Harmony straightened up again and stepped carefully away from the apparition. She was utterly astonished. This world just

kept getting stranger. Her initial conclusion, that this adventure was simply a lucid dream, seemed all the more likely now.

The Wishkamog, standing a few feet ahead, meowed for her attention. Harmony smiled at him as he beckoned with his bushy, ginger tail. She obeyed his command and walked carefully in the direction he wanted.

She supposed the cat was trying to lead her back towards Sanctorium. Obviously she had no intention of returning; nevertheless she was lost. As his was the only help on offer, she had little option but to follow.

After only a short distance Harmony heard the tinges of a gentle, tinkling sound. Both soft and melodic it drifted through the dark forest in elusive wafts. The jingle evolved into a haunting, beautiful tune. The arrangement willed her to seek its source.

Against her better judgement, Harmony followed the ringing deeper into the forest. As she neared her quarry the melody became more complex. The music filled the air as if she were accompanied by her very own soundtrack.

An aroma, drifting in tantalising pockets of mouth-watering splendour, enveloped her. The scent was unmistakable; smoky and meaty it could mean only one thing... Someone was having a barbecue! The instantly recognisable tang permeated the air and she licked her lips. Harmony crept forward, cautious not to make

a sound. As she neared the edge of a clearing she spied the music maker.

A man, his back hunched and crooked, sat next to a roaring fire. He was taller than any person she had ever met. His clothes were old fashioned, the style almost Dickensian. On his head he wore a shabby top hat, he was every bit the archetypal-beggar.

Opposite the man sat an old, bowtop-caravan. Harmony had seen many of these as she and Rose travelled around, though this one looked to have known better days. The paint was tarnished, cracked and dull, yet it was the imperfections which relayed its deep history. This wagon had seen many grand adventures.

Across the wooden boards, the once glorious colours of red and gold were painted in intricate, woven patterns. Harmony considered the design to be of a Celtic origin, though many of the shapes seemed almost hieroglyphic.

The fire's light shone against the wagon. Flimsy shadows danced across the painted surface and around the edges of large, metallic letters fastened to the side. Harmony read the sign:

Heckler's Emporium.

*Trader, procurer and collector of all things, both mordinary
and mundane.*

Harmony thought *procurer* sounded far better than smuggler, which she suspected was his real profession. It was at then, as

she watched him, that she became aware of a peculiar detail. Her gaze fixed onto his arms, all four of them...

Two of the appendages were playing a bizarre, musical instrument. The device looked somewhat akin to a accordion. The only variance being the concertina in the centre had been replaced with three violin bows and their accompanying strings. Each bow was orchestrated by a series of small, mechanical arms which worked in perfect unison. They drifted across their set of vibrating threads, resulting in the sweet music she had been so compelled to follow.

His remaining two hands were busy frying, aggressively spitting and deliciously smelling, sausages. Their heavy scent, wood-smoke and meat, greeted her again. Harmony was salivating. She hadn't realised how hungry she was.

The moment he stopped playing the instrument, carefully returning it to a box at his side, Harmony's stomach gurgled from hunger. The bodily-noise echoed around the clearing, filling the silent void left by the music's absence.

Apparently oblivious to Harmony's digestive plight, the man continued to cook his sausages. She gave a silent prayer of thanks that he had not heard her.

"You may as well come and join me. I can't eat all these by myself," he announced without looking up. He tilted his tall hat with one of his spindly arms in Harmony's direction.

Harmony looked at Articus. She could have sworn he shook his head. The ginger cat turned and trotted off, clearly indicating for her to follow. If she went with Articus he would lead her back to Sanctorium. That was not a direction she wanted to go. Besides, she couldn't just walk away, it would be incredibly rude and the man was already aware of her presence. There was little sense in hiding any longer.

Harmony unclipped her cloak, folded it up and packed it into her backpack. She didn't want to take any risk of being recognised as a Red Ryder. With all signs of her identity concealed, she took a deep breath and stepped out from the tree line.

Unbeknownst to her, deep in the undergrowth, Articus turned and caught sight of her intentions. He looked toward the four-armed man, groaned and rolled his eyes...

CHAPTER 12

A FRIEND IN NEED

The man did not turn around as she neared his fireside. Instead he stabbed each fat, juicy sausage with a barbaric-looking fork and shared them between two wooden plates.

He offered one of the platters to her without a word. Harmony approached cautiously. He seemed friendly enough but she knew appearances could be deceptive. Friendly or not she didn't want to be rude and she was exceptionally hungry.

Harmony reached out and accepted the food. She sat down on a log beside the fire and prodded the sausages with her finger. Despite her gnawing hunger she did not dare to eat. Considering the food was given by a four-armed stranger, she thought it wise to wait until he took the first bite.

"Thank you, *Mr...*?" she enquired.

"Heckler Spinks, at your service," he replied, tipping his hat again. "I'm sure you've heard of me before? I'm infamous amongst witches. There are few mordinary who haven't required my talents or reagents at one point or another, *my dear.*"

His last two words were slick with a strange inflection; it made Harmony's skin crawl. She fought back the heebie-jeebies

and scolded herself for being so judgemental. “Well. Thank you for your hospitality, Mr Spinks. I fear I would have wandered all night had I not heard your music.”

“I’m glad I could be of service. These woods can be dangerous at the best of times. And you can double that danger past dusk,” he remarked with a wink. He took a bite from one of the sausages. With the meat still rolling around his mouth he asked. “May I inquire as to your name? Why you are out here alone?”

Following his lead Harmony shoved half a sausage into her mouth. This was not in keeping with her typically impeccable table manners, but she needed time to think of an answer. She had not given her *alibi* much thought.

So far telling the truth had gotten her eaten by a lion and practically bullied into become a queen. Nevertheless she simply could not condone lying, no matter how dire the consequences. By the time she finished chewing and swallowed the colossal-mouthful she had formed a plan. A *version* of the truth would be the safest way to proceed. *Augmented-reality*, her mother called it.

“My name is Harmony, and I’m... Well, I’m lost,” she revealed feeling confident.

“That much is evident, my girl. What a fortunate stroke of luck you had in finding me, *Harmony*. There’s all manner of beast and villain lurking in these woods. It’s not a safe place for a

youngster like you. Not at all,” Heckler warned with a wide grin. The expression exposed an unruly sprawl of warped, yellow teeth.

A loud crashing sounded from deep in the woods. Alarmed, Harmony jumped to her feet. Panic fluttered in her chest, her stomach knotted. Was it Leoracle and Belladonna? Or could it be the howlers? Had they really caught her so quickly?

She scanned the edges of the clearing, fear causing her to imagine the wolves already at its border. Another, louder and much closer, clatter echoed through the veil of shadows. She didn't know what to do. Which way should she run? Would Heckler protect her?

Harmony did not have to wait long to find out. Whoever made the noise was heading straight towards them. In seconds they would break through into the clearing. She was out of time. She would have to put her trust in Heckler.

The trees parted roughly as a huge snail raced into the fire-lit camp. The creature barged past Harmony, who was cowering by her seat, and skidded to a halt next to the four-armed man. The snail immediately began nuzzling at his hair and face.

Heckler stared at Harmony with an expression of utter bafflement. He was quite confused as to why she was so jumpy. This little witch did not seem at all normal. She was most definitely hiding something. By hook or by crook he was going to find out what it was.

Harmony sat back down as Heckler smiled again. She returned the friendly gesture and then quickly returned her attention to the food. Though her eyes were averted she could still feel him watching her.

“Is this your pet?” she asked.

“You mean, Sidney? He’s no pet,” Heckler responded, tickling the snail under its chin.

The lovable creature sniffed his hand like an inquisitive dog in search of a treat. Harmony hoped Heckler didn’t have salt on his grubby, outstretched hand. The last thing she wanted to see was a giant, frothing snail. Sidney was far too cute to meet such a grizzly end. *Cute* was not a word she had associated with snails before. They were usually disgusting, slimy horrors hiding in her shoe.

“He’s more of a companion really. He pulls my cart and I scrape the moss off his shell,” Heckler dabbed a tear from his eye. “I found him years ago. Poor, little mite was just a baby, he was all alone, his mother dead by his side. So we adopted each other really. It’s been the two of us ever since.”

“Well they say every cloud has a silver lining. Even though he lost his mother, he found you,” Harmony said, as she finished the last of the sausages on her plate. “Thank you for the food, Mr Spinks.”

“Think nothing of it, my dear,” he replied. “I must say, I’m quite impressed. Most youngsters can’t stomach Arthro larvae.”

“Arthro larvae? What are... actually, don't answer that,” Harmony said. She suddenly felt very sick. She was doing her best to ignore her mind's attempts to recall exactly what an Arthro was. Unfortunately for her stomach she already knew what the word *larvae* indicated.

“I hope it's not too bold a question,” he began whilst lifting the accordion from its box. “But is there a reason you're acting strangely? Hmm?”

Once more the tune began to drift through the air. At once she felt her thoughts become syrup-thick, a burden she wished to be free of. The music offered an escape. The tinkling melody carried away all doubt in glittering clouds.

“Your accent is a little odd. Remind old Heckler, where did you say you were from?”

“I didn't say,” Harmony replied astutely. Her eyes closed, though she fought to keep them open, as she listened to the blissful composition.

“My mistake sweetness and where are you heading?” he asked, his gaze still intently fixed on her.

“I'm... I don't really know.”

“I see,” he said, beginning to chuckle. “A runaway are you? Off on some grand adventure?”

“Yes... I suppose I am,” Harmony laughed along with him.

“Then, my sweet friend, why don't you travel with me. I'm bound for, *Helmghast*. There is no better place in all of Darkfern to find adventure.”

“What's Helmghast?” Harmony asked, before she could stop herself.

“Why it's the capital city, my girl,” Heckler responded with suspicion ringing in his tone.

“Oh yes. How silly of me,” Harmony giggled, she made a mental note to always think before speaking in future. “Do you think I can find a trustworthy guide there?”

“I dare say so my girl. Do you wish to be guided somewhere in particular? Old Heckler has travelled to all corners of this world...and even into others. *Oro Axiom*, tell me what you seek,” Heckler whispered softly. The music melted into his words. The two joined to form an irresistible command. A compulsion surged through her, forcing her to speak. Truth was on her lips and she could not stop it from tumbling out.

“I seek a forest of black-glass trees.”

“Why do you search for this place?” Heckler continued in his buttery-tone.

Harmony fought the wrenching urge to share her secrets. The sense of danger was a very sobering one, even against whatever trickery he was using. If it was the truth he wanted then truth she would give him. To Harmony, *reality* had always been subjective to experience. Like witnesses to an event, each person recounts a

different version of what happened. Although the stories may differ greatly, each one is true; their own truth.

“I’m trying to find my way home.”

“And where is your home? There are no villages or houses in The Black Briar,” Heckler questioned further, still playing the hypnotic tune.

“Not a house. A web,” she was beginning to play him at his own game now.

“A web? Oh you mean The Webway. Then you must be mundane,” Heckler chortled. This was an assumption Harmony was happy to let him think.

“Tell me, girl. How did you come to be in Darkfern?”

“I received a letter,” she answered truthfully.

“That old trick. Ha!” he laughed. “It must’ve been a Stiltskin, bringing you over for the... Well, never you mind what for. How did you escape?”

Harmony had no idea what he was talking about, but it certainly sounded better than the whole truth. It was better he thought one of these Stiltskins brought her here, than the lion and Nova. He was creating her alibi for her. The plan was working perfectly.

“I fled down a river. Then I found you.”

“What an adventure you’ve had already,” he chuckled.

She smiled coolly. She had learned a considerable amount of information from Mr Spinks. Firstly, the web was located in The

Black Briar. Secondly, other mundaine were in Darkfern for some unknown reason. Lastly, and most significantly, Heckler spoke in the same language Nova used in her dream. This was the second time *Oro Axiom* had been said to her. On both occasions she unwillingly uttered the truth.

“You have nothing to fear from me child. I will keep your secret,” Heckler announced. He stopped playing his accordion and put it carefully away. “Sadly I have to inform you that The Webway will be long gone by now.”

“Are you sure?” Harmony demanded. Her mind her own once again.

“Assuredly so, my sweet,” he nodded. “I hate to bring you more bad news, but you face an even greater hindrance. A new web cannot be spun without the command of Nocturna or Natura.”

“Is there no other way?” Harmony questioned abruptly. This was most upsetting news. It was not the update she wanted to hear, not at all.

“The Webway is controlled by royal command. But, as I said earlier, I have travelled to other worlds.” Heckler stopped talking and looked around to make sure they were alone. “There are ways, secret ways, across the divide. Old Heckler will take you home, for a price...”

“How much will it cost? I don’t have any money to pay you.”

“The cost will be something and nothing, I shouldn’t wonder. Let’s not worry about payment for now. I’m sure we’ll think of fair price along the way,” he replied, flippantly.

“In that case I’d be happy to accept your invitation, Mr Spinks,” Harmony concluded, holding out her hand. “Please, help me to get home.”

“On my word, I will convey you to where you belong,” he replied, shaking her hand to seal the deal.

Though his offer seemed genuine enough she needed to tread carefully. Clearly he was clever and generous, but also devious and decidedly *creepy* too. Not to mention his ability to lull the truth from her. That particular talent warranted more investigation.

All the same, providing she kept her wits about her she should be safe with him. She had already outwitted him once; with a little luck she could do the same again.

“Well, you must be tired, my sweet. As my guest, and a visitor to these shores, it’s only proper I loan you my caravan. I prefer to slumber under the stars anyway,” Heckler insisted. He stood up and stretched his stiff limbs.

His arms reached an impressive and rather intimidating distance. Harmony noticed this as she watched him stand to his full height and yawn at the star-speckled canopy. His shabby clothes, his simple life, cooking on a campfire, it all felt so familiar...

“Come on now, my sweetness. Off to bed with you,” he said, gesturing to the open door of the wagon.

Harmony walked over to the caravan and climbed the little steps. She thanked Heckler again for his assistance and wished him pleasant dreams. He removed his hat and bowed deeply as she entered the carriage and closed the door.

The caravan’s interior was simple and uncluttered. The soft, warm light from a candle cast heavy shadows over the piled boxes covering the walls and littering the floor. She was reminded all the more of home. She felt safe (relatively safe that is) for the first time since arriving in Darkfern.

Harmony climbed into the bed fully clothed, too tired to even kick off her shoes. She snuggled into the soft, lavender-scented pillows and sleep found her moments later. She felt lucky to have met Heckler. Perhaps her adventure had taken a promising turn?

CHAPTER 13

HECKLER'S EMPORIUM

Harmony woke and for a long moment mistook the gentle rocking and comfy bunk for home. The thought, unquestioned, quickly evolved into a hope; her journey had been nothing more than a dream, or rather a nightmare... In that blissful moment she was safe and in her own bed, far from the dangers Darkfern offered up so readily.

She opened her eyes and a realisation slapped her awake; she was definitely not in the ambulance. This wasn't a dream, an imagining, a fever, something she ate or a concussion; Darkfern was real and she was here. She could have easily given up hope, succumbed to the enormity of the situation and retreated into a helpless depression. She may well have done so were it not for her meeting, Heckler. He had promised to help her. For that assistance she would be eternally grateful.

Harmony sat up and instantly regretted the decision. Her head swam, whirling at stomach-turning speeds, as a pounding pain erupted behind her eyes. Harmony was reminded of her mother the morning after too much wine and not enough water.

The swaying movement of the caravan, which only moments before had been calming, was now starting to induce nausea.

Why did she feel so ill? All she had eaten were sausages. She forced herself to believe they were just sausages.

The thought of food made her wretch. She needed fresh air. Fresh, clean air was sure to help *un-fog* her brain. Slowly and unsteadily she moved off the bunk and crossed to the window.

The window was covered with little doors, secured by way of a simple latch. She freed the hook and opened the shutters. Harmony closed her eyes as sunlight flooded the dark cabin. The instant the rays drenched her skin she felt a little improved. She even managed to smile.

Sadly the faint breeze blowing in through the portal was not sufficient to cure her sickness. In need of a heftier dose she made to poke her head out the gap. She wanted to feel the wind in her hair, the breeze on her skin. With her eyes still closed she placed her hands on the little, wooden sill and leant forward. Her forehead connected, painfully, with something across the opening.

Dazed and confused she opened her eyes. For a moment the brightness was blinding but as her vision adjusted the obstacle came into focus.

Two metal bars crossed the window; their weave blocked anything larger than an arm from protruding through. Her initial reaction assumed this prevented thieves from stealing Heckler's goods. However, as she looked around at the room (now lit with

more than just candlelight) the carriage looked more like a prison cell than a residence.

Rough, wooden boards covered the floor and walls. The bunk, a comfort to her only moments before, in truth was little more than a crate topped by a sack of straw and a mouldy, old blanket.

Muddled, she crossed to the rear door and turned the handle. The exit was locked, as ridged as the metal bars. She felt a flood of panic swell in her stomach. She was trapped...

“I see you slept well,” Heckler laughed.

Harmony searched for his voice. Her gaze glanced upon a tiny, retracted partition in the wall. The opening was just large enough for a person to peer through. Heckler stared back at her from the driver’s cabin.

“What’s going on? Why is the door locked?”

“I can’t have you running away, my sweetness. I’ve already got a buyer lined up.”

“A buyer for what?”

Heckler laughed hard, he sounded genuinely amused. “For you, *my sweet*.”

“Me! I thought you were helping me? We had a deal?”

“Do you feel betrayed?” he questioned.

“Of course I do! What a stupid question.”

“You sound annoyed, or is it anxious?” he pondered. “Either is fine really. Then again, if you could spiral into a depression I’d be ever so appreciative. Heck, why not go all out and fly into a

blind-rage? Go on lash out! Starting getting angry, girl. You've been wronged."

"Let me out!" Harmony bellowed. She neared the hatch, meeting his uncaring stare with her own furious glower. "You double-crossed the wrong mundane, Mr Spinks. When I get out of here I'm... I'm..."

For a brief moment Heckler's eyes flashed, lit by a bright glow. He laughed derisively and shook his head. Harmony recoiled as his sour, rotten breath seeped through the narrow opening.

"You mundane are so easy to manipulate, and all the more profitable for it too. Go on now, wallow in that fear...burden yourself with misery, feel its weight pulling you down. Let your doubts fester in that pretty little head of yours. The more you hope and despair the higher you're value climbs."

"This isn't fair! You can't just *take me*. I'm not an object. I'm not for sale," she informed angrily.

Without answering Heckler slammed the flap shut. She could no longer see him but his cold, malicious laugh continued to reverberate into her cage unhindered.

Harmony stood still for a long moment. She was in shock, shaken to her core. Heckler was the most duplicitous, immoral, back-handed, yellow-toothed, good-for-nothing, unscrupulous...

She took a deep breath and calmed herself. Anger would not help her find a way out, unless she planned to kick the door down.

She took a sideways glance at the door, sizing up the sturdiness of the barrier.

Lacking any other plan, Harmony charged at the door. She ran full-force into the blockade without a thought. As her shoulder struck the wood a sharp, metallic, ping sounded. The entire interior flashed white as a force-field activated. The magical barrier repelled her with force equal to her input. Harmony barely had time to squeal before she was catapulted across the chamber.

“Did I forget to mention the shield?” Heckler jeered as Harmony walloped against the wall separating them.

Bruised and a little battered, she picked herself up. She limped over to the bed and slumped down. Perhaps now was a good time to give up?

Her eyes felt hot as she held back tears. She didn't want to cry, she could at least deny him that iota of satisfaction. One tear snuck past her defences and rolled down her cheek. She quickly wiped it away, but as she did another escaped.

Harmony had never felt this afraid. Her only real experience of fear was self-induced by means of a book, film or campfire story. That brand of terror was fun, but only because it could be stopped at any time; the book closed, the screen turned off, the story brought to resolution.

The anxiety she felt now was different; endless and unrelenting in its will to consume her. She was a prisoner, kidnapped and at the mercy of a monster.

“It’s not fair,” she sniffed. Harmony flung herself, facedown, onto her pillow. She creamed into the cushion, as per her mother’s instructions. “I just wanted to go home! Why must everything be so difficult?”

Harmony chastised herself for not following Articus. He had tried to guide her away from Heckler, but she thought she knew better. If the wishkamog were with here she could have summoned a saw or even an axe. Sadly she was not that lucky, all she had was her backpack...

“The backpack!” she blurted feeling a flurry of hope.

Inspired she launched off the bed and searched around for her bag. It wasn’t on the floor, or under the bed. As she explored the room more closely she quickly noticed a peculiar knot in one of the wooden boards. Curious, she pressed the nodule. The dark-blemish depressed and clicked. Steam rushed around her as the walls and floor began to change. The wooden boards retracted to reveal hidden compartments.

Cupboards rammed with oddities and shelves lined with jars, bottles, trinkets and reagents filled the prison cell with colour, scent and sound.

A low, disgruntled chittering drew her attention to a collection of cages mounted inside a tall cubbyhole. Most were

filled with strange little critters. Each trapped in a prison of its own.

A few of the creations were very nearly attractive, though Harmony had now learned not to judge by appearance when in Darkfern. One creature, roughly the size of an apple, proved her point perfectly.

Atop six legs the pink, fluffy critter looked completely adorable. However, as she neared the enclosure the beastie suddenly growled and brandished hundreds of tiny, syringe-needle, teeth. She backed away as it growled menacingly and barked. The varmint was cute but deadly, just as she had expected.

Harmony ignored the various bottles, potions and ingredients. The names, scribbled in aged labels, were unpronounceable in most cases anyway. She fixedly searched for her bag. At last she pulled open a small door and her eyes fell upon the familiar, blue cloth.

Snatching up the satchel, she immediately delved inside. Thankfully Heckler hadn't thought to check her belongings. The cloak, rope, dairy and doorknob were all present. It was the latter of these she sought. Even to her the reasoning for this action was unclear; the need to find it was more of an impulse than anything else.

Harmony grasped the doorknob. At once the words carved into the metallic surface sounded in her mind. *Latro Gradus.*

She renewed her search, this time looking for somewhere to place the handle.

High and low she scoured the entire chamber. It was hopeless. The room was obviously built to keep people in. Feeling the familiar creep of despondence, she looked out of the window. Even the landscape seemed mockingly-free from where she stood.

Lush green meadows glittered with patches of vibrant flowers. Amidst the sprays of colour, white trees, their leaves clusters of crystals, blanketed the sides of meandering hills. The vista stretched of into the dazzling distance. Harmony exhaled, longingly.

Despite being crammed full of dangers, monsters and villains, Darkfern was undeniably beautiful. Harmony wished she were a poet. She knew her description of this land would not convey its splendour.

She lapsed into self-loathing again. How could she have been so stupid? With hindsight Heckler's dupe was lousy and obvious. Worst of all she had discounted her own instincts, ignored her gut reaction.

In part she blamed the music he played. It was the tune which lured her to his camp. However, it *was* her own decision to ignore her doubts and climb into his wagon. This was a contradiction to something Rose had made her recite time and time again: '*never, ever, ever* accept a ride from a stranger'.

All of a sudden a shadow passed by the window. Harmony looked a moment too late. She approached the barred portal and pressed her face against the cold, metal rods.

Her attention was drawn down to the wheel arch below the window. Perched on the narrow covering was a fat, ginger cat.

“Meow,” Articus greeted, looking up at her.

“Hello, *Kitty*. How long have you been there?”

Articus surveyed her in a nonchalant manner. He licked his paw and then began grooming his sparkling whiskers. He turned his face away, haughtily lifting his nose into the air. Clearly he was annoyed with her for not following him.

“Look, I’m sorry, ok? You have every right to be angry with me,” she acknowledged. Articus continued to ignore her; she would have to try harder. “Oh, don’t be like that. I’m trapped in here. Go and fetch, Leoracle. Tell him what’s happened. Help me, Articus. You’re my only hope.”

Her words must have appeased his grump because in a flash of orange-fur he leapt up and shimmied through the bars. He plopped down onto the floor and plodded around, sniffing here and there.

“No, *Kitty*. Go and get some help,” she ordered, gesturing to the window.

Articus tilted his head to the side in apparent confusion. He meowed again and then jumped onto the bed. Harmony shrugged, it was pointless to try and communicate with him. He

was as arrogant as he was cute; a typical cat. She had always wanted a cat, but Rose had a ban on pets.

Her mother believed all animals should be wild, admired from a distance. According to Rose, caging an animal was akin to cutting down a tree or picking a flower. The act went against nature and therefore incurred negative Karma.

Harmony was pulled from her thoughts as the wagon unexpectedly came to a halt. Muffled voices echoed through the walls. She could hear Heckler laughing, though he did not sound at all jovial. On the contrary, he sounded worried...

CHAPTER 14

THE BRIEF ENTANGLEMENT

Harmony pressed her face against the bars in an attempt to see who Heckler was talking to. If there was a chance they could help her, free her even, then she had to take it. However, self-preservation warned her to be cautious. She may well draw the *wrong* attention and end up in even hotter water.

“I can’t see properly. I need a mirror, or something reflective.”

She eyed the compartments of clutter. Surely, within his hoard, Heckler possessed a shaving mirror? Feeling confident she rifled through his collection of oddities until she happened upon a silver, hand mirror. It was remarkably similar to one Rose had owned when Harmony was much younger.

She doused the idea, that the two mirrors were one and the same, in rationality. Rose’s looking glass had been stolen from the ambulance years before. Harmony recalled her mother’s *dramatics* following the burglary; it was not a pretty memory...

Abruptly, Heckler began to shout. An argument was escalating beyond her confines. Harmony crossed to the window

again and slipped the mirror through the bars. Contorting her arm as best she could, she endeavoured to catch a glimpse.

Sadly, no matter how she twisted her arm she just couldn't find a helpful view. She pulled the mirror back inside and looked at her own reflection. Her brow was furled with frustration, her hair unkempt and her face unwashed. In short, she looked a mess.

This was the first time she had seen herself with brown hair and the feature caught her off-guard. It felt odd, as if a stranger were looking back at her.

“This is no good,” she griped. “I need to see who’s talking to Heckler...”

The mirror's shining surface instantly pulsed with light. Harmony watched as her reflection wavered and was replaced with a new sight. The gilded frame filled with an altered perspective; a bird's eye view of Heckler's wagon.

“This is odd,” she commented. Harmony examined the silver frame. She felt confident the device was a digital; not unlike a smart-phone or tablet. That belief wavered a little when she failed to locate a power button or recharge socket. “Well, magic or Wi-Fi, this is super handy.”

Her questions faltered along with her composure as, with the flick of her finger, the image zoomed out. The bowtop caravan was not the only noteworthy detail the looking glass revealed. Beyond the snail-drawn carriage a brutish-pack of howlers

blocked the road. Harmony dropped the hand mirror onto the bed. The picture vanished, returning to a simple reflection.

“I have to get out of here,” she whispered, panic rising in her chest. “He’ll hand me over to the wolves if I don’t run...”

Sensing her fear Articus stood, meowed for her attention and then ran over to the rear door. He rubbed his flank against the wooden barricade. As Harmony crossed the cabin and knelt by his side, a memory swam to the forefront of her mind; words spoken by Belladonna.

“You can produce anything I possess,” she recalled. “Does that really mean...*anything?*”

“*Meow,*” Articus encouraged.

“Can you summon the door this handle fits into?” she asked, offering up the golden doorknob.

Articus twitched his whiskers, the sparkling increased. He flicked his tail lazily across the bottom panel of the door. Harmony watched as, in the fur’s wake, the small ingress from Nova’s cottage appeared.

The instant Articus stepped aside she inserted the handle. She tried to open the door but it refused to move. Her thumb brushed the engraving.

“*Latro Gradus,*” she recited in a whisper. The handle turned without prompt...

Harmony felt a flicker of hope as the small door opened. The how and why of the door’s appearance could be mused over once

she was safe. She lifted her bag and slipped on the cloak. Before she slithered out, Harmony added the mirror to her backpack. She did not consider taking the mirror to be stealing; rather it was *compensation* for the kidnapping.

Doing her best to remain silent she wriggled out of the portal and exited the caravan. She snatched the doorknob from of the socket and tossed it into her satchel. The instant she removed the handle the little door vanished, leaving a yawning-hole in the rear of Heckler's wagon.

"Serves him right," she smiled, feeling entitled to be a little mean.

Articus rubbed her leg with his flank. She glanced down and watched as he gestured with his tail towards the wagon's front. A flurry of angry words spurred her into action. The howlers were beginning to lose patience with the four-armed man.

"Lead the way," Harmony insisted.

The orange cat trotted ahead as they ventured off the road and headed into a forest of crystal trees. The ground began to slope upwards, rapidly steepening into a treacherous hillside.

The trees, which Harmony used as support on her climb up the hill, were dazzling in its construction. The vegetation was entirely transparent, from root to leaf. Harmony gazed at the inner workings; cells absorbed and sap flowed before her eyes.

One might have assumed such fantastical foliage would grow in equally magical shapes, yet the forms the plants took were

much like the vegetation found in a rainforest. Towering trees laced together with draped vines and huge, tropical fan leaves.

As she ventured deeper into the jungle the *transparency* spread beyond the trees. Soon every plant, flower, leaf and mushroom also looked to be made of glass.

Sunlight bounced from the canopy and cascaded down to the flower-strewn floor. The beams of light reacted as they passed through the leaves, trunks and petals. Each ribbon of light fractured into a splay of rainbows.

“Is this an enchanted forest? It must be,” she proclaimed, shielding her eyes from the auric-sheen.

Articus meowed for her to hurry up, she was falling behind again. Harmony looked toward him and immediately burst into laughter. His backend was gigantic, magnified in one of the crystal-trees. Without waiting for her to catch up, he trotted off huffily.

Harmony had only taken a few steps in pursuit when a noise caused her to freeze. A twig broke; the snapping-sound still rang in her ears as she scanned her vicinity. It was conceivable the howlers had caught her already, though she prayed it wasn't so.

She scoured the treeline but even after a long pause no wolf emerged. A metaphorical lightbulb switched on above her head, perhaps the hand mirror would be of use? She quickly retrieved the silver frame from her bag and stared into the reflection.

“Show me Heckler's wagon.”

The surface rippled and once again the bowtop caravan came into focus. She breathed a sigh of relief, neither Heckler nor the howlers had moved; their conversation was still in full swing.

Satisfied her escape had gone unnoticed she deposited the mirror back into her bag. She scrabbled up the remainder of the hill and crested the summit. Articus was waiting at the top, sunning himself in her absence. He leapt up and immediately set off again.

Barely catching her breath she jogged to keep pace. The humid, jungle air was getting hotter by the second. The crystal-clear trees offered no shade from the climbing sun; no shadows to cool in.

As she chased the wishkamog she pushed past a peculiar plant. The shrubbery was covered in sizeable pods. The shucks reminded her of oversized butterfly-chrysalis. Each casing looked to be woven from silken threads, so delicate they could rupture with little effort.

As if hearing her thoughts, one of the bulbous-pods burst; stressed to decimation as she disrupted its branch. In an instant the air filled with millions of fluffy, white spores. They drifted on the breeze and swarmed around her, completely obscuring the world from sight. Blinded by the blizzard of seeds she was forced to stay still until the shoal of spores dissipated sufficiently.

As they cleared the first thing she saw was Articus. He watched her from a few feet away. Several of the floating seeds were attached to his fur and he did not look at all impressed.

“It was an accident,” she insisted. The cat rolled his eyes and beckoned for her to follow.

They left the storm of spores and began making their way down a treacherously-steep hill, the counter to the one she climbed. The descent was remarkably fast; this was mostly due to how slippery the banking was. More than once Harmony lost her footing entirely and tumbled down until she grabbed hold of a branch or root.

By the time she reached the bottom her dress was filthy and torn, her skin was scratched and she was bruised all over. Exhausted she collapsed onto the verdured-bank of a meandering stream. Harmony rolled onto her back and stared up through the canopy. The sky was cornflower-blue.

She smiled. No matter the location, the sky was always blue. This was a fact she found comforting, especially when Rose dragged her off to some far flung place. The one consistency in her life was the sky.

Articus flopped onto the ground. Apparently he was in need of a rest too. He languidly drooped across a flat, grey stone and gently flicked his tail as he watched her with lazy, half-closed eyes.

Harmony's stomach complained that she had skipped breakfast. She hadn't eaten since the previous evening and the new day was already getting on.

She looked around, noting the plethora of translucent plants. Most of the river's bank was occupied by more of the volatile pods. As beautiful as they were, they looked far from edible. This was fortunate because munching on strange, potentially poisonous, plants was a terrible idea.

She sat up and searched in her backpack for the mirror. In lieu of food checking on Heckler seemed a good distraction.

“Show me, Heckler.”

A jolt of shock surged through her. The scene had changed. Heckler was lying on the ground; he was battered, bruised and bleeding. The pack howlers were nowhere to be seen.

“Show me, the howlers,” she ordered. The mirror obliged.

At first she was confused. The image didn't make sense. Then the sickening-thud of comprehension landed in her stomach...

The mirror showed the area around her. In a confusing, paradoxical-cascade she saw herself kneeling on the river bank. The image of her was looking into the mirror at another image, likewise peering into the mirror and so on to infinity...

This was already a hard enough concept to understand without added complications. The mirror also showed the howlers, sneaking up behind her.

Articus hissed and Harmony seized the moment of surprise to run. She leapt across the stream. As she lifted into the air the red cloak around her neck struck out and slapped the snapping jaws of an encroaching howler. The impact loosened several of his splinter-like teeth.

Harmony landed on the other side of the river and broke into a sprint. She headed straight for a bushel of pods. As she passed the delicate shrub her cloak caught for on a branch. She tugged it free and was on her way without looking back.

The brief entanglement of cloak and branch, even though it was tiny, caused the husk-heavy limb to shudder. The first chrysalis popped and ejected its contents into the air. The dense cloud of seeds engulfed the howlers.

As she ran, Articus by her side, the sound of bursting pods filled the forest. Her impact had begun an unstoppable chain reaction; which sounded a lot like corn popping. She laughed at the picture in her mind's eye; howlers covered in the fluffy, white spores were far less of a threat.

CHAPTER 15

THE UNINVITED GUESTS

Percival woke with a start. He had been having a rather unpleasant dream. Though the details faded rapidly he was left feeling at odds with himself.

To make matters worse, the incessant tweeting of birds first thing in the morning was not something he was used to, nor did he think he could ever grow accustomed to the racket. Born and bred in the city, he preferred the rumble of traffic to wake him.

He rose from the bed whilst being careful not to wake Mavis, who was still fast asleep. He pulled his dressing gown on, quietly made his way out of the bedroom and then descended the stairs on his way to the kitchen.

Percival put the kettle on to boil and began preparing a teapot and two cups. Out of the blue a loud and rapid knock on the front door disturbed his routine.

“Who on earth would knock on our door at this time in the morning?” he groaned gruffly. He looked looking at the clock face it read a quarter to six. Who apart from Percival got up at this hour?

He quickly hurried up the wide hall as another rasping barrage of knocks thwacked the entryway. Percival angrily wrenched open the heavy, wooden door. He had intended to launch into a respectable rant about the appropriate hours a *normal* person should visit someone else. However his words faltered as he caught sight of an immaculate police uniform.

On the doorstep of his luxury, holiday cottage were four people; two women and two men. One of the men was wearing the instantly recognisable uniform. The two women he had seen before also, not that he wished to recall either encounter. However, the second man was a stranger and Percival did not like the look of him, not one bit. He was far too handsome to be a good person. In Percival's experience when a person was pretty on the outside they were usually rotten on the inside.

"Oh, it's you," Martha Trotter groaned. She grimaced and the continued. "We're looking for a girl."

"Well! You *won't* find one here," Percival replied shortly. He had met Martha a few days prior, their conversation did not end well. He looked at her down the length on his nose. "I'm surprised you managed to find this place. As I recall you said the cottage didn't exist. I'll accept your apology when you're ready."

Martha narrowed her eyes angrily, though she maintained her composure and replied as if she hadn't heard him. "The girl has been missing for three days. We had hoped you may have seen her. Did she pass this way?"

“If a child wandered onto my property I would have shooed *it* off,” Percival announced.

He was about to close the door on the quartet, clearly this conversation was pointless, when Mavis appeared at his side. Encased in a polka dot bathrobe she fretted as she spied the policeman.

“Oh dear, what’s he said now? Is this about the other day? I know he was rude but calling the police, really?” Mavis voiced.

“We're looking for my daughter. She's gone missing,” Rose replied. She cried freely, unabashed with her worry and grief.

Percival knew this *brazen*-woman too, though he was not about to admit how. If she was the mother, then the child was the same one he delivered the letter to, *Harmony Ryder*. He knew the name from the letter well; he had read it a thousand times or more. Admitting that would only complicate the issue. Why would he connect himself to this runaway girl? Admitting his connection would only raise questions he wasn’t comfortable answering.

“Your daughter is missing? Oh, you poor thing,” Mavis gasped. She nudged Percival out of the way. “Come in, come in. I’ll put the kettle on.”

Martha didn't even try to hide the smirk across her face as she followed Percival’s wife into the house. Behind her Rose, Joe and Sergeant Cooper smiled and nodded at him as they too made for the kitchen.

Percival closed the door. He was utterly enraged. Martha's smirk pulsed inside his mind, boiling his blood. He was furious with Mavis for embarrassing him in front of the unwelcome guests; especially that frightfully rude country-woman. She was by and far the worst of them.

As he tracked the intruding-quartet he scrutinised the mother of the missing girl. She wore a purple dress and sandals. In Percival's opinion this was hardly the correct attire for searching for one's AWOL offspring.

Percival knew Rose's type, he'd seen them before. She was the kind of person commonly referred to as a *hippie*. London was peppered with them; arty-types all of whom were unkempt and disorganised. Two of the most deplorable traits a person could have, according to Percival that is.

He considered the possibility that Harmony may have had the right idea in running away. The weeping woman claimed to be a good mother but who out of the group could vouch for her? Perhaps she was awful to the child? She certainly didn't look like the kind of parent he would have wanted.

Percival entered the kitchen and took a seat at the table. The visitors all sat down without even waiting for an invitation; this made them practically *squatters* in his book.

"Well?" he grumped, folding his arms across his chest.

"Well what?" Martha responded.

“Well? What more do you want with us? We haven’t seen her?”

“Percy!” Mavis exclaimed. “I am so sorry about him. He can be a bit cranky in the mornings, *can't you dear?* Now, tell us everything. How can we help?”

Percival was on the cusp of a rant when his wife flashed her eyes angrily at him. His rage withered, halted by a bitten lip.

“Her name is Harmony. She's fourteen in a few days and she has beautiful, red-hair like mine. Of course mine is longer and slightly more lustrous but,” Rose stopped talking as a fresh flood of tears rolled down her cheeks. “I don’t know what I’m saying...”

Martha took over. “She was last seen a few mornings ago at a cottage on the other side of the wood. We’ve had search parties out looking her, but no one has found anything more than a few footprints.”

“What are the police doing about it? Have you notified the press?” Percival asked briskly.

“I’m doing all *I* can, Mr...?” Sergeant Cooper replied calmly.

“Mr Montague.”

Martha Trotter and Sergeant Cooper exchanged a quick glance. There was a flicker of recognition at the mention of this name, though neither made it obvious to the others.

Mavis poured the contents of the steaming kettle into a large teapot. She lifted it over to the table along with cups, spoons, sugar and a milk jug. Her face was clouded with concern.

Percival did not share her sympathy for people or their sob stories. On the whole he was not a charitable man. He believed people are poor because they are lazy and, therefore, not worth his help.

“We never had any children. So I can’t claim to know what you’re going through,” Mavis began. “But you have my word. We’ll not rest until she’s found and safe home with you. *Isn’t that right, Percy?*” The last part was inflected in a manner which implied ‘Percy’ would not be disagreeing.

“Yes, dear,” he responded through gritted teeth.

“Now, you all drink the tea while it's hot and we will go and get dressed,” Mavis suggested. She smiled and hoisted Percival out of his seat by the elbow.

“What an odd couple,” Martha whispered to the others when they were alone. They silently nodded in agreement...

CHAPTER 16

THE HOLLOW MAN

Percival tutted loudly as his raincoat caught on a vine of thorns. He pulled and tugged but the barbs refused to let go. He grabbed the snagged-hem with both hands and heaved with all his might. The cloth held fast for a second or two, before it sundered with an almighty ripping sound. Unprepared and unbalanced, Percival toppled backwards into the undergrowth.

Above the canopy, the sky blazed with spiced colours as the sun began to sink. He had been out all day, searching for the missing girl. His head was sore, the pain brought about as people called out her name over and over.

“Oops a daisy,” Martha laughed. She towered over Percival, her large belly casting a shadow. Martha smiled and offered him a hand up.

“No thank you,” Percival snapped, swatting her hand out of the way. “I don't need *your* help,” he derided.

“I think you may be right there, *Percy*,” she commented. “You need *professional* help.”

Percival sneered, he was not comfortable being teased. He was not comfortable in this forest and he was most certainly not

going to waste another minute looking for this stupid girl. For all he knew she had most likely run away from these people for a better life.

“That's it!” he shouted. “Mavis, come along. We are going home, right now.”

“But, dear,” Mavis countered. Her cheeks flushed an embarrassed-shade of pink. “We haven't found Harmony yet. She's is still missing.”

“As sad as that is,” he retorted, haughtily. “We will not find her in the dark. We have wasted enough of our holiday already, and I refuse to stay in the company of this repugnant-*woman* a moment longer. I'm going home!” he finished with a stamp of his foot.

“You've got a nerve calling me rude!” Martha bellowed. “You're just some pathetic, little man. You're nothing but a dark name in your family tree.”

“That's enough, Martha,” Sergeant Cooper cut in.

“Yes, *Martha*, that's enough. You know nothing about my family. You ignorant, *country-bumpkin!*”

“And we've all heard enough from you, Mr Montague,” the Sergeant scolded. “Now, Mr Montague is right about one thing. It's going to get dark soon. Seeing as you both need to calm down why don't you go and get some torches,” he suggested to Martha and Percival. “Maybe you can find a way to stop arguing and gain

a littler perspective. Need I remind you, that Harmony is about to spend her third night alone in a dark forest.”

Percival was just about to tell the Sergeant exactly what he thought of the plan, when Mavis coughed and shook her head. He decided to just accept the policeman's order rather than argue further. He would go, but he wasn't promising to come back. Martha did not look happy either. She held a whispered conversation with the officer.

“Well? Are you coming or not?” Percival sneered, his hand firmly lodged in his pockets.

“Oh! Pipe down, you old fart,” Martha countered.

Each as sulky as the other, they walked away in the direction of Kilt's Cove Cottage.

Their journey back to the lodge was mostly a silent one, excepting for the odd, uncomfortable, attempt at conversation.

“So? What was the name of the house again?” Martha asked. She was tired of the stagnant silence.

“Kilt's Cove,” Percival replied, shortly. He was in no mood to converse with her; he liked the stagnant silence.

“What an odd name.”

“Don't get me started,” he replied, rolling his eyes.

“I have been out on this road a thousand times,” Martha waffled. “I have never seen the gate before. I swear this place is new.”

“Ridiculous! It can’t have just appeared out of nowhere.”

“I’m not saying it just appeared,” Martha sighed.

“Look. To suggest that there is a mystery here is nonsense,” he alleged. He glanced at the short, round woman by his side. “You must be mistaken. It’s all the answer we need,” he finished with a condescending smile.

“Don’t you dare tell me what I need,” she barked back. “I’m not mistaken. And I’m not making it up. Someone built the house without anyone else knowing, is what I meant.”

“Yes, well. We’re almost there now and we shall see how...”

“How what?” Martha asked when Percival lapsed into silence.

When he failed to respond, Martha followed his line of sight. Through the thinning trees she spotted the poorly-named cottage. It looked ordinary. She couldn’t see fathom what had stolen his attention.

“What’s wrong with you?”

Percival didn’t speak. He simply gestured with a finger toward a large tree. Martha stared in the direction he indicated. There, hidden behind the trunk was a tall, thin man dressed in a black suit.

He was lurking whilst watching the front door of Percival’s cottage. The peeping-tom was quite unaware he had been seen.

“Who is he?” Martha whispered.

“He gave us the keys to the cottage. Never gave his name. He smiled too much, an odd fellow.”

“Odd? You don’t say,” Martha noted. “Why is he spying on you?”

“I don't know. Maybe you should go ask him?”

“Right then, *I* will,” she countered. With a surge of confidence she marched up to the loiterer.

Percival cursed her under his breath. He didn’t want to have a confrontation, or cause a scene. However he couldn't very well keep hiding now. He too marched forward, trying to look as dignified as possible. He dreaded to think what impression his ripped coat and muddy clothes would give.

“You there, *pervert!* What do you think you’re doing” Martha bellowed.

The man did not move a muscle. He didn't even get a shock as she shouted at him. He just stayed very, very still. Martha had cleared the gap and was standing a few feet behind him.

“Are you deaf?!” she shouted. Percival arrived at her side. “He's a rude bugger, Percy.”

“Language, Martha. That’s not very lady-like,” Percival retorted, raising an eyebrow in disapproval. “Come along now. You’ve been rumbled, turn around. There’s a good fellow.”

Again the man failed to turn. Martha looked to Percival. She nodded her head, silently communicating a plan to seize him.

Percival replied with a frown. Silently he declined her invitation to accost the key-giving voyeur.

“Right! That's enough,” she blurted. Martha stepped forward and grabbed the man's shoulder. She yanking him backwards forcing him to turn and face them.

The man's body was empty... Not full of muscle, bone and blood. He was a vacant sack of skin. His body fell to the floor in a torrent of rippling flesh. The hollow man collapsed, air forced from the cavity inflated his hood-like head. Martha screamed and turned to run. Yet something stopped her from moving. Then she screamed even louder.

Percival wanted to look away from the man's crumpled body. He wanted to turn around but he was too afraid. He could sense that *something* was behind him.

Martha, at his side, was frozen to the spot. Her wide unblinking eyes and short gasping breaths only perpetuated the fear charging the air.

The sound of breaking twigs, snapping and cracking, scratched against his nerve. He had to turn around, but he lacked the courage. He needed to see what was approaching, to defend himself. From some unknown source he found a burst of bravery. He span on his heel.

His vision was instantly filled with a dark, rough, black cloth. The coarse fibres scratched his skin. His nose and mouth filled with the scent of mulch and decay. He heard Martha scream

again. She was fighting, struggling to free herself. Then, suddenly, silence fell like an executioner's axe.

Percival panicked, scared by the abrupt stillness. He thrashed against his capturers as their hard, bony fingers fastened his hands and feet with rope. He felt a length of wood slipped between his bonds. Then, gruffly, he was hoisted into the air and carried like a hunter's kill.

His mind tried to search for an explanation. Why would anybody want to kidnap him? Taken hostage in the English countryside was not something even he had planned for.

He attempted to communicate. When his words instigated no response he called out to Martha. His cries were eventually answered, though not in the way he hoped. A hard and heavy object collided painfully with his cloth covered head.

His mind burned hot and white. His fear and discomfort, along with everything else for that matter, faded effortlessly into tranquil blackness.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Thank you for reading.

*I invite you to share your thoughts
Reviews are very much appreciated.*

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BOOK 3

MORROWSHALE

COMING SOON...

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.