

Sisters in Arms: A Creative Study of Queer  
Female Protagonists in Urban Fantasy  
Fiction

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## Declaration

I hereby submit this thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy to the College of Arts, Humanities and Education at the University of Derby. I have been supervised by Dr Matthew Cheeseman and Dr Simon Heywood.

This thesis is my intellectual property and original work, except for other authors' citations, which have been appropriately referenced in the text, captions, and in the reference list at the end of the thesis. The original work has never been used in any other submission for an academic award.

## Abstract

*Sisters in Arms: A Creative Study of Queer Female Protagonists in Urban Fantasy Fiction* is a creative practice-based research project which explores the nature of queerness in relation to genre, place, and characters. In the critical analysis of my novel, *Sisters in Arms*, I explore two areas connected by intersectionality: the representations of queer protagonists and the role that locality plays in identity.

To consider the first I examine in detail how queer theory, current events and socio-political climates have influenced my writing and the creative decisions that I have made, particularly in regard to gender identity.

In terms of the second I explore the relationship of location in fiction to identity, and the importance of locality in a setting. The urban fantasy novel *Sisters in Arms* is set in a small town and features queer protagonists, the novel explores platonic relationships and queerness without romantic queer relationships and gender identity being a central issue for the plot to be solved.

The thesis draws on both the critical commentary and the creative work to form a complete exploration of queer female protagonists and their roles in the small-town urban fantasy landscape.

## Acknowledgements

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Finally, thank you to all the authors in the urban fantasy genre who have inspired my writing, and the academics who have paved the way for me to make this research possible.

# *Sisters in Arms: A Creative Study of Queer Female Protagonists in Urban Fantasy Fiction*

## 1. Introduction

This is a practice-based exploratory research project. The research was primarily carried out by writing a novel, and supplemented by a theoretical component that supports the creative work to form an integrated research project, which makes an original contribution to knowledge. The novel, *Sisters in Arms*, explores the sexual, gender, and social identities of queer<sup>1</sup> characters in urban fantasy fiction, focusing on female protagonists.

I have loved the urban fantasy genre since I encountered *Storm Front* (Butcher, 2001) in the old Ottakar's bookshop in Cooper's Square, Burton on Trent; I was thirteen, sat on the bench outside Boots, waiting for my Mom and Nan to be done with their Saturday shopping. It also was around the same time I started playing video games that offered in-depth storytelling, and character development, which would soon turn into a love of roleplaying games. My influences at the time were other world fantasy, like J. R. R. Tolkien, R. A. Salvatore, and Terry Pratchett, and I was used to creating my own worlds and stories to mimic what I was reading. So, coming back into this world with magic was something new, exciting, and fascinating. I started dabbling in stories set in a contemporary Earth, but I did not take them seriously, partially because others around me, and in the online spaces that I was starting to venture into, were into the more open 'other world' style of fantasy writing.

In the stories I loved, I never saw characters that I felt were like me; relationships often existed but they were between heterosexual couples, or rarely a doomed side couple, if not baited as a joke. It was a frustration that a lot of friends have shared over the years, and I decided if I wanted to see what I wanted to read out in the world, I'd have to be producing it myself, but I also wanted to gain a better understanding of the landscape of urban fantasy, and the role of queer female protagonists, which is why I began this research project.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis my use of the term queer is inclusive across all LGBTQ+, non-heterosexual, and non-cisgender identity spectrums.

I have always had a clear idea of the core aim of this research project: I wanted to represent queer characters, particularly queer women as protagonists without making their queer identity a central plot device. Even before I started this project, there were not many queer female protagonists in the urban fantasy genre. This is slowly starting to change, but there has always been a slight disconnect between myself and the characters, even in my favourite books, especially when romance always appears to be inevitable. Nevertheless, the depiction of queer characters in urban fantasy fiction has remained the research area that my work investigates.

The thesis is divided into two parts. The first contains the critical analysis and is composed of three chapters. The first chapter covers my methodology and discusses my practice-based method of creative writing and research and examines how the novel came together. The second encompasses my literature review, where I explore the urban fantasy genre, diversity in publishing, female protagonists, queer theory, and the queer lived experience. The concluding chapter of my critical analysis explores the key ideas in my novel, *Sisters in Arms*. This novel then follows in part two, to create an integrated thesis.



## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 My Method**

In creative research projects, the creative aspect cannot stand alone, and must be accompanied by a critical analysis. Jonathon Crewe (2018, p27) states that creative writing cannot reach its full ‘research potential without a framework for theoretical and contextual analysis and reflection.’ This thesis therefore has two components: the critical analysis and the creative artefact. The latter is an urban fantasy novel, whose imagined audience is broader than that of the first, which is specifically intended for academic readers.

The methodology behind this division is a practice-based model of research. In creative practice as research, the creative work is the foundation of the contribution to new knowledge and is accompanied by a critical appraisal that contextualises the creative work. Lyle Skains (2018) defines practice-based research as a method that is applied to investigations seeking new knowledge through practice and its outcomes, where the creative artefact is accompanied by a critical discussion of the significance and context of the claims through a cohesive creative artefact and critical analysis. This project has been characterised by research and development throughout the drafting process of the novel, which has continued through the production of this thesis. Jeri Kroll (2013, p110) suggests that writing is a process of discovery, one of experimenting to develop ‘a systematic work that draws on existing knowledge gained from research and/or practical experience that is directed to producing new materials, products or devices.’ The creative work has been formed and informed by the critical work, and likewise, the critical work has been formed and informed by creative decisions. There is therefore a feedback loop between research and writing, though this is a simplified description of the process, as writing is a chaotic practice: art and creativity, in all forms, is messy, and it does not follow a set linear path from beginning to end with neat milestones that can be measured and attained. This has been an exploratory and experimental project; I have tested ideas as I wrote, which led the research for the critical component, and in turn, led

me into honing those ideas and reworking them, writing again, and testing them again as I was writing the next draft, and so on.

Through this process I have completed three different novels, with three different plots, while using the same characters. Two of them were not viable to use in the completed thesis. The first novel was not enlightened by an understanding of place, and how that can form identity through intersectionality – it was through writing this draft that I came to understand the importance of these factors. The plot of the second novel was more engrained in place; however, it fell short in too many other aspects, and read more like a third, or even fourth book in a well-established series, than the first novel that could even stand alone. I was able to take different pieces from each of these early novels and work them into the third novel *Sisters in Arms*, which is presented in Part 2 of this thesis.

This method of practice-based research has been an interesting and new way of working for me. I had not considered research as writing—outside of the usual things I might need to know for a story to work, such as how to temper steel, different properties of poisons, or even how smaller-than-atom particles *could* theoretically be discovered as a scientific basis of magic existing in the world. However, writing, and researching, in the context of making a contribution to knowledge has been a new way for me to consider how to approach writing, and the broader themes that I explore.

## **2.2 What is Creative Writing Research?**

Creative writing research explores and mobilises certain kinds of knowledge, particularly through the creative artefact. Stories have the ability to convey experiences and elicit empathy for others through characters and events that occur. Narrative theorist Howard Sklar (2013, p59) states that readers recognise the emotional and psychological experiences of a character, providing a route to the identification and re-evaluation of pre-existing assumptions about a person or character from an excluded or ‘other’ group. Creative writing also has the ability to build connections with readers through representation, particularly when the

representation is inclusive of voices that are often overlooked by someone of that community<sup>2</sup>.

Jeremy Hawthorn (2023, p6) states that ‘a novel should involve an investigation of an issue of human significance...and by common consent a certain length is necessary to allow for such complexity.’ I have chosen to write a novel as the creative component of my thesis because it enables me to present my research, and the complexity of issues that have been uncovered and discussed in the critical analysis, in a manner that is not possible through other prose forms. This is because fiction, and especially the novel, allows the researcher to investigate complex social scenarios that develop over time. In a short story, the conflict is the story, but in the novel, the conflict is only the destination (O’Connor, 1963, cited by Hollingshead, 1999, p878). While short stories can be very impactful in the way that they are crafted and delivered, I wanted to use a longer narrative to explore developing themes. A novel enabled me to do this more easily, as it is a form of creative work that takes the reader on an extended journey with the characters. Novels allow the writer to creatively use and fill time, both in terms of the story, and also in the time readers spend reading the book. Fiction can compact events into a short period or stretch them out. Fictive events do not always have to be linear; when used effectively a writer is able to make time stop and give a character the space to think and observe their surroundings, and their company, in a way that people cannot even begin to experience in real life. In fantasy novels, time can become even more complicated, as magic offers a route to both the past and the future, making narratives even less likely to take a linear approach to storytelling.

Young adult author John Green said in a keynote speech, ‘reading forces you to be quiet in a world that no longer makes place for that’ (Green, 2011, cited by Miller and Kelley, 2014, p6). In the time that my readers have with my work, I wanted to offer relatable characters, that might, through action or circumstance, cause a reader to re-evaluate their perceptions, or bring comfort and a sense of empowerment through that connection.

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<sup>2</sup> I believe that we, as a queer community, need to be at the forefront of the representation that we want to see and share, especially in creative media, which can be accessed by all demographics, because we do not know what might connect with a person and encourage them to rethink their ideas.

### **2.3 My Research Aims**

I began the project intending to depict queer women as protagonists in urban fantasy fiction without problematising their sexual orientation or gender identity as a focal plot point or character trait. This aim was derived from the frustration of reading my favourite genre and only finding either men or women who were straight and cisgendered as protagonists, or when I did locate queer characters, they were often finding their queer identity was a mechanism in the plot<sup>3</sup>, as opposed to the queer character just being allowed to exist on the page as themselves. So, writing an adult urban fantasy with queer characters who are comfortable with their sexual and gender identities, so they are not sources of conflict in plots, became my initial research aim. As my research progressed through successive drafts, my aims have also developed.

Something that I reflected on through my research and planning was Wendy Pearson's (1999) observation that the presence of queer characters does not make a text inherently queer. I then had to consider what would make a text queer, and by extension what it means to be queer itself. It is a strange process, trying to remove oneself from reflecting on an identity, because queer identities include significant subjectivity – how one person identifies themselves might not be the same for someone else. Queer by its very nature is a broadly inclusive and ambiguous term for anyone that does not fit neatly into socially acceptable cis-gendered heterosexual norms. The term queer itself is a reclaimed slur, which has its origins in ambiguity (McCann and Monaghan, 2020). It allows for unity in its experience of being non-cisgendered and non-heterosexual, and reclaims that experience, and that is why it is a welcoming umbrella term, and a deeper interrogation led me to conclude that queer was more inclusive.

As I wrote, I continued to read in the genre, looking for comparable novels. I searched the catalogues of queer publishers such as Bold Strokes Books, Bella Books, NineStar Press, visited the nearest queer-specific bookstore in York, Portal Bookshop, as well as the catalogues of other queer bookshops online, including Amazon and Goodreads lists. I found that while this search was as broad as I could make it, there were also limitations because the self-publishing

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<sup>3</sup> This is something that I found was more common when looking at books that were marketed as young adult fiction.

industry has become so vast. Because increasing amounts of authors publish, promote, and sell their books outside of typical booksellers, including the big online retailers, some novels may have been overlooked by my literature search. Nevertheless, I read a lot of urban fantasy novels, and noted, from my reading, that the Midlands remained an untouched landscape for contemporary urban fantasy novels.<sup>4</sup> I found urban fantasy novels were predominantly set in North America. When they were in the UK, they took place in more well-known cities, mostly London, but sometimes Oxford, Glasgow, Dublin, with the odd Manchester or Brighton trip.

This interested me and I explored setting my novel in the Midlands, creating an unremarkable, but archetypal, everyday town. The ‘ordinariness’ of this setting spoke to my initial research aim of depicting queer women without using their gender identity as a focal plot point or character trait. As this work progressed, in both my reading and writing, my interest in everyday settings evolved into an interest in the role of place in queer identity. In other words, my novel started off deploying an everyday setting as a tactic of presenting everyday queerness, but then evolved into wider thinking of how place intersects with queerness and queer depiction. Ultimately, this led my writing to consider the intersectionality of gender identity, sexuality, and social class. Contemporary queer identity became a research area I began exploring by writing my novel and became part of the original contribution to knowledge that underpins the research as a whole.

The original contribution to knowledge that this thesis intends to make is through expanding queer representation within the urban fantasy genre. It does this through a novel, *Sisters in Arms*, a queer novel where queerness is not a central issue or problem to be solved. Queer identities are normalised and part of the everyday, just as much as the supernatural, magic, and mundane live side by side successfully. It is a novel that is written by a queer person wanting more representation for minority voices. This representation serves two main purposes: to allow queer readers to feel seen in a genre that they enjoy reading, and to engender empathy towards the community through readers, regardless of their

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<sup>4</sup> I chose a specific parameter of first in a series, or single novels that were set on contemporary Earth, and then omitted results with queer male protagonists as they are not the focus of my critical or creative work.

queerness, developing a connection to the characters. Through making this contribution to knowledge, my novel also gives insight into the role of everyday settings as fictional devices, and place as an intersectional factor in the development of queer identities. As discussed, these insights are a result of setting the novel in an archetypal everyday small town in the Midlands. The rest of this critical analysis will define and explore these aims.

### **3. Literature Review**

#### **3.1 Urban Fantasy**

##### **3.1.1 The Nature of Fantasy**

Urban fantasy is a subgenre of fantasy, which encompasses the unreal and impossible, but is set in the real world. Fantasy as a genre is free from the restraints and conventions of realistic works of fiction. It is the place to showcase the unexplainable, which gives the genre its sense of wonderment and escapism. Despite this ‘anything goes’ defiance against the real, fantasy requires some concept of realism before it can exist, as Sullivan (1992, p97), a theorist of fantasy, explains. These required ‘realistic’ elements can be in any form, just as long as they allow the reader to suspend their disbelief and immerse themselves in the story they are reading. They need to be recognisable to the reader, allowing them to relate to the story and keep them interested; this could be characters with traits that the reader is familiar with (whether they are human or not), a familiar theme, or a setting that can be identified with. Nothing should be so alien to the reader that they cannot process and accept what is happening.

Rosemary Jackson (1981) maintains that fantasy is subversive by nature. She notes that fantasy’s association with the imagination makes it difficult to define and gives the genre its ‘free-floating’ and ‘escapist’ qualities. Jackson states that ‘fantasy functions to subvert and undermine cultural stability’ (p69). It is in fantasy’s naturally subversive and transgressive nature that one would expect to find themes and cultural taboos. However, while there is a prevalent sense of being able to throw any and all conventions out of the window when engaging in fantasy, there is a surprising amount of restraint and formula when it comes to the content of novels within the genre, and while the individual stories are not predictable, there are often unsurprising moments and repetitive themes that can leave readers feeling a lack of variety. This absence of diversity has not gone unnoticed. The queer fantasy theorist Stephen Kenneally (2016, p8) states that ‘fantasy is typically heteronormative’, and that any queer aspects that can comfortably exist in fantasy are ‘elided to maintain normative frameworks’. This

makes it challenging to identify and define queer fantasy novels, particularly in those earlier works that came from an era where queer elements were hidden within subtext, so anyone who is not looking for those elements will miss them.

Indeed, fantasy is produced within and is determined by its social context and cannot be understood in isolation from its contemporary socio-political background (Jackson, 1981). So too is its criticism: Todorov (1975, 12), a structuralist and one of the first critics of fantasy, described how the genre was previously discounted for being ‘popular mass media’ but could be held to and evaluated by literary standards. In *The Fantastic*, Todorov (1975) stated that homosexuality was a kind of love that the fantastic accommodated, though he mentions this alongside other sexual taboos such as incest and bestiality. At this time, with homosexuality having been recently decriminalised both in the United Kingdom and the United States, queer acts and artefacts were still dismissed as deviant behaviours. Despite this, Todorov failed to consider the impact that a socio-political context has on a fantasy work (Jackson, 1981 p3).

If fantasy is a genre that operates by subverting norms, even if it frequently fails to do so, what is urban fantasy and how does it relate to the contemporary socio-political climate? By being set in the reimagined contemporary world, urban fantasy takes influences from the world around it, whether this is a conscious choice on the author’s part or not. The author has to consider how the supernatural species or communities have impacted history and historical events and movements. It would be easy to gloss over such matters with the excuse of the supernatural not being involved in human affairs for fear of discovery, or ignore historical events altogether;<sup>5</sup> however, if these often-immortal characters have been living among humans and have impacted communities, then they would also impact history.

Deborah Harkness demonstrates this well. In her books there is a ruling congregation, consisting of two members of each species (witches, daemons, and vampires), and these people ensure the covenant is upheld, in which states that there shall be no interference in politics or religion, and keeps their existence a secret. This does not stop supernatural beings from being involved in conflicts; for example, In *A Discovery of Witches* (Harkness, 2011), Matthew reveals that his

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<sup>5</sup> Unless the novel is either an alternate history or time travel specific.



father Phillippe was captured and tortured by witches who were in collaboration with Nazis in World War II. In another instance, it is mentioned that Marcus met Matthew during the American Revolution, when they were both fighting British soldiers, and Marcus was eventually turned into a vampire by Matthew when he became ill.

Another instance of mirrored real-world issues can be seen in the Southern Vampire Mysteries, where author Charlaine Harris uses human rights issues and turns them into vampire rights issues. As the novel *Dead until Dark* (Harris, 2001) begins, a few places, including the USA, have acknowledged the existence of vampires. Despite this, they do not have many rights, such as the right to marry. Organisations like the American Vampire League are campaigning for their species to have equal rights with humans. At the time of the final book being published in 2013, the UK had only just passed same-sex marriage, and it would be another two years before the US legalised it in all fifty states. Writing urban fantasy is about being able to create a credible link between the supernatural elements of the story and events that have impacted the world historically, sociologically, and politically, in a way that does not feel too contrived, or like things are being ignored or glossed over, because that would be easier than finding an answer to deal with them.

### **3.1.2 The History of Urban Fantasy**

There is no long literary history of urban fantasy, although a canon can be pieced together from fans and critics like Alexander C Irvine. In 2012, Irvine wrote a brief chapter on urban fantasy as a genre, citing its beginnings in the 1980s, though he focuses on the mechanics of the city and its importance of its role as a literary and genre device through which to tell stories. In the decade since the chapter was written, urban fantasy has branched out, and as people move out of the cities into smaller towns, they take the stories with them, and the genre is starting to adapt with the smaller town urban fantasy landscape, which I shall discuss in more detail in 4.2.1.

Scholars like Alexander Irvine (2012), and writers like Ellen Kushner (2022) and Terri Windling, (2022) who speak of the genre, detail the defining works as *Moonheart* (de Lint, 1984), short story collection *Bordertown* (Windling

1986), *Sandman* (Gaiman, 1987), and *Sunglasses After Dark* (Collins, 1989). It is fiction that conceives an alternative but contemporary earth, where the supernatural has the space and ability to exist. While there are some evident similarities with magic realism, in that both depict magic or the unexplained within the world, magic realism tends to be rooted in works that follow a postmodern literary pattern and is comprised of the uncanny and fantastic, which is mysterious and unexplainable (Todorov, 1975, p91). In contrast, urban fantasy has a more contemporary and commercial appeal, and the supernatural is not so hidden and mysterious. This latter distinction is my own and offered in the absence of literature that defines the two; after all, Keneally (2016, p4) advises that sometimes one has to give oneself the authority to state an observation as fact from the information that is available, as long as it draws a general logical conclusion.

As discussed in 3.1.1, realism is important if the reader is to accept the fantastic elements and suspend their disbelief (Sullivan, 1992). Because it is set in the familiar world, I maintain that this is even more relevant to urban fantasy, as the reader will expect that anything magical will have to make sense and seamlessly fit into the world as we know it. Characters, whether they are human or not, need to have traits and motives that are identifiable so that the reader can engage with them and invest their time and emotion into the story.

Alexander Irvine creates his own distinction, that there is a literary axis for urban fantasy where the urban city sits at one end and the fantastic elements are at the other (p201), and he states that bringing the fantastic events into an almost-real city is one way of telling an urban fantasy story, or, creating a fantastical city where events happen is another (p201). This distinction could be a useful way to categorise different types of stories, but it also appears have a very hard linear approach, particularly as he is distinctly referring to the cityscape alone, and as I have already mentioned, urban fantasy has grown beyond the traditional boundaries of what was considered to be the basis of the genre. Ellen Kushner said that modern urban fantasy was vastly different to what she, and her friends created in the 1980s, but it was very much considered to be urban fantasy (Kushner, 2022).

The origins of the genre could be argued to stretch back even further than the 1980s, and that Gothic literature is a predecessor to the genre as much as it is

to horror. *Dracula* (Stoker, 1897), for example, with its vampire in contemporaneous Victorian England, establishes many elements that are still commonly seen in the urban fantasy genre; while authors differentiate their take on vampires, common elements have remained, such as the need to be sustained by drinking blood, an inability to be in sunlight, or being weakened by it, and needing to be invited into places. The foundations of urban fantasy, where the supernatural could be found hidden in aspects of the modern world, can be identified in the horror genre in the 1970s in works like *Carrie* (King, 1974) and *Interview with the Vampire* (Rice, 1976), which is also a precursor to paranormal romance and erotica that have branched off as their own subgenres.

In a panel at the World Fantasy Convention 2022, Ellen Kushner (in ‘Urban Fantasy Past and Present’) discussed the works of her friends Terri Windling and Charles de Lint who she considered to have written the first urban fantasy novels; she conversed about how they were coming out of the 1970s, a time of rebellion, young Americans wanting to don their leather jackets, hop on motorcycles, and head to the cities to find their ‘tribe’, and how that was an influence on their writing. Early urban fantasy stories were set in American cities, they had a sense of the noir, with magic and all manners of supernatural beings existing within a cityscape, moving away from the earlier rural Tolkienesque style of fantasy that had come before. It was the first of Laurell K. Hamilton’s Anita Blake series *Guilty Pleasures* (1993) that started shaping the urban fantasy genre as it is known today, by introducing the independent female investigator to the world of vampires, werewolves, and other creatures.

Nearly a decade later, Jim Butcher’s *Storm Front* (2001) refreshed the genre with the snarky private investigator, Harry Dresden, at the start of a resurgence in urban fantasy that often follows the pattern of private investigators working in the hidden supernatural world. In an interview at the World Fantasy Convention 2022 Terri Windling (2022 – ‘Spotlight with Terri Windling’) noted that the genre has been influenced by pop culture and television media such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon 1997–2003), in which supernatural events and creatures appear frequently in one small town; in this series Willow and Tara’s relationship was also one of the first exposures that many people of that generation had to mainstream queer characters.

Around this time, some of the influential series of urban fantasy novels began to be published, such as the Dresden Files *Storm Front*, (Butcher, 2001) and the Nightside series *Something from the Nightside* (Green, 2003). There was also an increase in series that featured female protagonists, such as the Merry Gentry series *A Kiss of Shadows* (Hamilton, 2000), the Southern Vampire series *Dead Until Dark* (Harris, 2001), the Rachel Morgan Series *Dead Witch Walking* (Harrison, 2004), and the Anita Blake series (Hamilton, 1993–present), had six books published in this period as well, *The Killing Dance* (1997), *Burnt Offerings* (1998), *Blue Moon* (1998), *Obsidian Butterfly* (2000), *Narcissus in Chains* (2001), and *Cerulean Sins* (2003).

### **3.1.3 Trends in Urban Fantasy**

Former Editor-in-Chief of Ace Books and Roc Books, Ginjer Buchanan (2022) explains that genre is a tool that helps editors and marketers to put a book in a box, so they know where and how to sell it. In this sense, it is easy to infer, novels are written to market and target audience, because publishers, and authors are aware of what has been successful in the past and believe that is what will continue to be so in the future. Certainly, from reading extensively in urban fantasy, there are many similarities in the genre that are almost formulaic in nature. This comes from the long line of private investigators with tragic family backgrounds, murder mysteries, and the casts of characters that are set up for typically heteroromantic sub-plots. It is how the author tackles these similarities and makes them more original that makes their work stand out.

Most of the protagonists are investigators in some capacity or get drawn into an investigation. In *Guilty Pleasures* (Hamilton, 1993) the protagonist is a necromancer and executioner by vocation, the plot is centred around her being blackmailed by a master vampire to help solve a series of vampire murders. In *Tempest Rising* (Peeler, 2009), the protagonist begins as the town's outcast working in a bookstore, but she happens on a dead body while swimming, and is drawn into the supernatural aspects of the world, learning about herself in the process. Diana Bishop in *A Discovery of Witches* (Harkness, 2011) is an academic researcher whose discovery of a lost book draws the attention of other

supernatural creatures who want the book and its power. There is a romantic subplot that runs through the novel, which is another common feature of urban fantasy novels.

Romance is a common subplot for main characters and side characters as well; a few examples of this are Diana and Matthew, Sarah and Em (Harkness 2011), Jean-Claude and Anita (Hamilton 1993), Dresden and Susan (Butcher 2011), Ruby and Grace (Mascarenhas 2018), Sookie and Bill (Harris 2001). Given that romance is a common subplot within the urban fantasy genre, it is worth underlining the difference between urban fantasy and paranormal romance. In urban fantasy the protagonist usually gets involved with the supernatural long before a love interest comes along (or losing their love interest to the supernatural is their introduction to the supernatural world). Paranormal romance shares tropes with the romance genre, and it is the supernatural elements that appear later (Hutchins, 2022). For example, the protagonist meets a love interest and feels an instant attraction, and then finds out their partner is a supernatural being, or that they themselves are not entirely human<sup>6</sup>.

Another common feature is the first-person narrative voice, with the novel following one protagonist, who often has a snarky and sarcastic manner about them. There are always exceptions, *The Psychology of Time Travel* (Mascarenhas, 2018), tells the story through five different protagonists, through different timelines; each character builds up their story, contributing to the overall motive behind the murder that is revealed early in the novel. While this novel could technically be categorised as science-fiction, I have decided to classify it as science-fantasy because the ability to time travel was created and accepted by the population with some scientific explanation. Time travel is seen as a tourism venture, and there are none of the usual time travel paradox-related dilemmas that frequently occur alongside the more science-fiction-oriented novels.

In the majority of urban fantasy novels, the supernatural elements are hidden from the general human population, and while this is often not explained, some species are hidden because they have historically abused their powers while being prominent in the human world (Harkness, 2011). In *The Dresden Files*

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<sup>6</sup> The line between urban fantasy and paranormal romance can be subjective, especially as a lot of urban fantasy have romantic elements in them. As someone who is demiromantic, this trend in the blurred lines has been increasingly obvious, especially as my research has continued.

series (Butcher 2001–present), it is explained that humans simply do not want to see or acknowledge that supernatural beings exist, and they wilfully ignore supernatural phenomenon. However, there are some novels where supernatural elements, usually vampires, have recently ‘come out’ to the public, (Hamilton, 1993, Harris, 2001), and are receiving acceptance and pushback from humans.

### **3.1.4 Diversity in Publishing**

When it comes to addressing diversity there are three areas to look at: who is publishing, who is being published, and what is being published. In the 1980s, there were a few publishers who were producing queer fantasy novels such as Berkley Books, Ace, Bantam Books, DAW, and Tor (Gaber and Paleo, 1992). However, as time has moved on, even more publishers have become open to minority and diverse voices. Owner of Wizard’s Tower Press and transgender awareness advocate, Cheryl Morgan (2022), stated that many independent small presses and agents in particular were often only open to minority voices in an attempt to publish a more diverse range of books. In the same interview Cheryl Morgan stated that representation of transgender people in all media has gone through several cycles, starting with being seen as monsters, and then jokes, and most recently cycling through sensationalising transgender lives and struggles. I have focused on transgender as an example because that community is the one currently facing the most issues both in the UK and abroad<sup>7</sup> (McLean, 2021).

In my extensive literature search, I attempted to find and read as many novels as possible with queer female protagonists in the urban fantasy genre. While it was hard to find an exact number<sup>8</sup>, I found under 500 adult urban fantasy novels with queer female protagonists published (first in a series, or stand-alone<sup>9</sup>). Books featuring queer male protagonists are more plentiful. Aside from extensive literature searches, I spent hours in a queer bookshop with their owners discussing the state of the genre, and queer fantasy in general. There are novels outside of urban fantasy: otherworld fantasy such as *Three Parts Dead* (Gladstone 2013), or

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<sup>7</sup> This is further discussed in Chapter Four.

<sup>8</sup> There were difficulties in finding exact numbers with lists changing, self-publishing inflating and deflating listings, and catalogues being updated with new, and hiding out of stock books.

<sup>9</sup> I did not include obviously marketed paranormal romance in my search as that is a genre of its own and not a focus of this study.

science-fiction/set in a dystopian future with no real fantastical elements to them (A Study in Honor (O'Dell, 2018)).

The situation is beginning to change. There has been a very slow shift over the last six years toward including queer female protagonists in the urban fantasy genre, rather than tucking them away as side characters, with *Both Ways*, (Young 2018), *Magic for Liars* (Gailey, 2019), and *Kissed the Mark* (Gwynn 2022), being some of the most recent examples. However, these novels are set in North America. There is still more work to be done for representation in urban fantasy novels, because there needs to be a wider variety of queer protagonists in settings that are outside that particular context. It is hard to identify who among the authors might be queer, because not all make that information public, but even if the writers of queer urban fantasy are not queer themselves, they are at least allies and advocates, adding much-needed representation. Likewise, it is important to consider who is working in the publishing industry, due to their influence over what is being published. The Publishers Association conducted an industry survey in 2021<sup>10</sup>, and found that 13% identified as queer, and 1% were transgender. If there are more agents and buyers who are queer, then they may be thought more likely to champion writers and books that offer queer representation. There are independent publishers who specialise in publishing queer novels such as Pride Publishing, Blind Eye Books, Riptide Publishing, Interlude Press, and Bold Strokes Books, although, adult queer urban fantasy novels with queer female protagonists are not as common to find as other genres or their queer male counterparts.

### **3.1.5 The Female Hero in Fantasy**

The creator of *Wonder Woman*, Dr William Marston (1943, p42) said 'girls don't want to be girls as long as our feminine archetype lacks, force, strength, and power'. While this was written in response to the shortage of strong female characters in comic books eighty years ago, and there have been some attempts to change that sentiment, it is still relatable, and can be applied to all forms of media, whether it is characters in comics, television shows, or novels. Even in novels

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<sup>10</sup> 14,089 participants across 60 businesses in the publishing businesses took part in the survey. (Publishers Association, 2021).

where the female protagonist is highly capable, she often needs a male character to step in to help them out. This is seen in urban fantasy: in *Guilty Pleasures* (Hamilton, 1993) Jean-Claude steps in to save Anita's life. In the climactic fight in *Borderline* (Baker, 2016) Millie is proved incompetent in a fight and is rescued by group effort. It appears women struggle to hold their own and save themselves.

In an interview with the *New York Times* in 2003, Joss Whedon gave a view on the difference between the heroine and the hero, stating that the heroine is typically the protagonist of her own story, she needs someone else to save her, whereas a hero is a more complex figure who has their own rites of passage and journey to complete. This is a traditional perspective. In *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2008) Joseph Campbell claims there are common archetypes in mythology. He discusses women in roles as helpers, lovers, mothers, carers, and adversaries; in this context, a woman is set to take care of the hero either in a benign or malicious way, but never to be a hero themselves. Campbell has a very patriarchal view and approach to what a hero should be, which creates a definitively gendered approach to these journeys. Jennifer K. Stuller, in *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors* (2016), reframes Campbell by noting that the feminine hero's journey is based on collaboration, redemption, and love while the male's is based on materialistic objectives, such as a quest to destroy something, or bring back a trophy. These physical feats of prowess are considered more 'masculine' traits, where as a journey that is based on feelings is seen as 'feminine'. My interpretation of this, is that it is evidently rooted in gender-biased assumptions that men cannot have an emotional journey for fear of being seen as 'lesser', and women being not strong enough to have a physical one. Even Maureen Murdock, who focused on *The Heroine's Journey* (2020), wrote her ten-step heroine's journey as the heroine needing to find and accept the more masculine aspects of herself to succeed in her quest.

Breaking down these stereotypes is important, because traits are universal characteristics; it is just as important to show that heroes of any gender whether they are heteronormative, cisgendered, or queer, can be as vulnerable as much as demonstrate they can be strong. Showing softness and vulnerability as strengths and not flaws is a step towards more positive representation for female characters, and especially queer characters, but the same vulnerabilities need to be shown as positive traits in male characters as well; vulnerability, empathy, and compassion



are important traits that communities need to thrive. The edited collection *A Story of Her Own* (Campbell, 2014) investigates the qualities of female heroes and discusses how heroism is portrayed in women in fantasy fiction. In concluding the volume Lori Campbell (p284) states that: ‘defining the female hero involves rescuing stereotypically feminine traits from the negative connotations that might have previously compromised perceptions of her heroism’. She suggests that the female hero both complicates and problematises the tropes of heroism. While this does not excuse the lack of female queer protagonists in urban fantasy, it goes some way towards explaining their absence.

## **3.2 Queer Theory and Representation**

### **3.2.1 What is Queer Theory?**

Queer is deliberately ambiguous; it rejects definitions or terms that are set by the dominant culture (Giffney, 2016, p57). It is a way of naming, describing, doing, and being (Monaghan, 2016, p7), and how people think about queerness (Bradway and McCallum, 2019, p4). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993, p9) stated that that there are senses that the term queer could only signify once it was attached to the first person, which would make it a personal and subjective term. Similarly, queer theory is something that is difficult to define, because it can mean different things depending on what it is applied to, whether the historical or current socio-political climate, or queer representation in media. In other settings, queer theory can be a mode of literary reading (Ohi, 2015, p219). I draw on these aspects, some of which I discuss within this section of the research, and others within *Chapter 4: Contextualising Sisters in Arms*.

### **3.2.2 The History and Development of Queer Theory**

In the 1950s, there was a rise in activism for civil rights, human rights, and anti-colonisation; in the UK in 1954, the Wolfenden Committee was organised to reconsider the laws on homosexuality to avoid a scandal with a junior member of parliament, and then in 1967 a limited decriminalisation of homosexual acts was

passed under the provisions that it was between two consenting men over the age of 21, in a private setting (Todd, 2021). It was the work of this committee that started people organising and campaigning for the law to be changed.

In 1969, the Stonewall Inn in New York City was the centre of an uprising after it was raided by police; some of the key people involved were lesbians, and transgender women of colour like Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson (Todd, 2021). The Gay Liberation Front was one of the main movements created in the wake of the Stonewall Uprising in 1969 to fight for rights with ‘tactics inspired by the Vietnam protests and the Black Panthers’ (p80), as there was a unanimous agreement at the time, those were the measures that were needed. The Gay Liberation Front came to the UK in 1970, and the first pride event was held in London in 1972 (Todd, 2021). Early pride marches and coming outs were political statements because it was moving away from the associations of repression and persecutions that was attached to homosexuality; people wanted to break away from the traditional understandings of sex and achieve both political and sexual freedoms. ACT UP was formed in 1987 in the wake of the HIV/AIDS crisis to increase pressure on governments to invest in solving the crisis. They had 140 chapters globally (ACT UP, 2024).

From this group, Queer Nation grew in 1990 and became a more prominent activist movement, though ACT UP still exists. Theorist Slegle (1995) notes that queer movements were joining together around this time, rather than being based on a single identity, but they emphasise that they are similar because they are all marginalised groups.

### **3.2.3 Founding Works in Queer Theory**

The foundational work in queer theory is Michael Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (1976), which suggests that sexuality is a social construct. From this book, many activists and scholars have been raising awareness of queer issues. Gayle Rubin (1984) published an influential essay ‘Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality’, which examines how much value societies attribute to sexual practices and sexuality. It, alongside the work of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have been fundamental to the field.

### 3.2.3a Judith Butler

Queer and feminist theorist Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) examines the concepts of gender and sexuality. She posits that gender is an identity stylised through the performative repetition of acts in a predetermined social context, which become natural and innate over time (1990, pxv). Butler is influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche (2010, p45), who stated that "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming". Butler suggests that identity is performatively constructed by the expressions that it creates, and that gender is retroactively formed through this. This doing rather than being is a very broad stroke, and I think that it could open the way for philosophical debates on existence and what constitutes as a sense of self regarding *who* one is vs *how* one is, and how much an individual considers themselves to 'be', rather than someone who is always performative. There are certainly other critics of Butler like Prosser (1998, p31) who argues that in terms of gender performativity, regarding transgender individuals, there are those who simply want to 'be' rather than be enlisted in 'doing'. John Champagne (1995) is another critic of Butler's early work, believing that it does not sufficiently consider the lived experience of queer individuals.

In 2004 Butler published *Undoing Gender*, where she addresses these criticisms by framing her work as an ethical theoretical framework as a dialogue between politics and lived experience. However, Butler yet again fails to adequately consider the transgender place within these frameworks, and this is something that critic Vivian Namaste (2009) notices. Namaste challenges the extent that transexual women are excluded from feminist academic projects, and accuses theorists like Butler of using transgender bodies to formulate questions on gender while omitting their thoughts on the lived experience. While there are scholars like Jay Prosser and Judith Halberstam who have focused on transgender theory, it is less widely explored; however with the contemporary sociopolitical debates highlighting the transgender community, it can be expected that these theorists are reexamined, and new works are published in response, much like what happened with the queer movement in both academia and activism through the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 80s and 90s. Butler herself has published *Who is Afraid of Gender?* (2024) which explores the current state of gender, its complexities, and how it has become a phantasm in 'anti-gender' rhetoric.

### **3.2.3b Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick**

*Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) is one of Sedgwick's most influential works in queer theory. This book explores the social and political ideas of queer theorists and writers by examining the works of Foucault, Proust, Nietzsche, Melville, and Wilde. Her book deconstructs Western ideas of nineteenth century homo and heterosexuality, with how binary and male-centred they are in a minoritising view i.e., that homosexuality only belongs to that small group of people and makes the case that that a more universalising approach toward modern culture in that homosexuality is a desire that has the potential to mark everyone, including heterosexual people.

The closet itself is a central feature of the queer experience in the language around sexual and gender identity, as people are said to 'come out' when they disclose their identity, and this is something that happens over and over as they meet new people and enter different social situations. There is a performative act around the decision to out oneself or remain silent; this stems from observing your social surroundings and discerning whether it is safe or not. Being 'out', does not necessarily mean that you are announcing your identity verbally, is just as much about feeling safe and able to be yourself and present yourself authentically; for some this might be wearing binders to give them a flatter chest, or a padded bra for a fuller one, others might use contour make up techniques to give them a more masculine or feminine facial appearance, as well as the choice of clothing that they wear, and whether they conform to the typically socially accepted appearance that is expected of them, or reject it for what is more comfortable and feels more true for themselves. Sedgwick (1990, p11) also discusses binary structures with examples like masculine/feminine, secrecy/disclosure, private/public, majority/minority, knowledge/ignorance, stating that one can only exist because of the other. While this is true, and works with Butler's and other theorists' ideas of gender binaries, it ignores the existence of those who feel like they exist outside of the strict norms that are dictated by typical man/woman social constructs.

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick (1990) formulated seven axioms which both underpin her work, and act as starting points for her later works. While she goes into greater detail, these concepts can be summed up: the first axiom states that no two people were the same, even if they cross the same

intersections; the second claims that gender and sexuality represented two separate issues; the third states that assumptions cannot be made about the relevance or irrelevance of gay and lesbian identities in relation to each other, and the fourth axiom is in a similar vein stating that there is a need to rethink commonly recounted essentialist vs constructivist debates on sexuality and identity. The fifth axiom states that those who try to expose a homosexual past often impose modern concepts of homosexuality that have no place in historical contexts; the sixth axiom states that minority principles that are relevant to lesbian and gay studies can be found in any context. The seventh and final axiom notes that the assumption of homosexuality is a desire for the same sex, but it may be tied into more complicated identities.

It is not until the book *Tendencies* (1993) that she starts using the term queer. This collection of essays became the first in Duke University Press' Series Q, which became influential; Series Q combined gender, sexuality, and cultural studies to examine the intersectionality of race, class, gender, sex, sexuality, and culture. In *Tendencies*, Sedgwick describes queer reading, and writing as a method of challenging representations, and 'make invisible possibilities and desires visible', by making inferred relations more overt, and 'smuggling' queerness into texts (Sedgwick, 1993, p3). This was the first definition of queering both reading and writing, and the core of it remains little changed; however, there is always going to be subjectivity and bias when it comes to interpreting inferred relationships in a text, because a reader will take meaning as they want to view it, if they are not reading from an objective literary critic's perspective.

Like Butler, Sedgwick's lack of connection to the lived experience had been critiqued, as she remained apart from the Gay Liberation and activist movements, however also like Butler, who is a professor at Berkley, Sedgwick was a professor at Duke University, where both have inspired new generations of queer theorists through their teachings and their works. Both writers established queer as destabilising, subverting, and questioning the recognised 'normal' regarding sexuality, gender, and identity; however, the key differences between Sedgwick and Butler is that Butler's work focuses on the deconstruction of gender and sexuality, and Sedgwick was more interested in the relationship between gender and sexuality.

### 3.2.4 Homonormativity, Anti-social and No Future Theories

Heteronormativity emphasises the social and cultural norms of ‘typical’ expected heterosexual lifestyles, which include ‘monogamy, marriage, procreation, and productivity’ (Connell, 2014, p145). Homonormativity is a view that does not challenge the dominant assumptions of heteronormativity; instead, it sustains those ideals and assumes the position of assimilating queer people into a ‘typical’ heterosexual-adjacent lifestyle (Duggan, 2003, p50). As theoretical frameworks, both the hetero- and homonormativity concepts, are excluding by their very definitions; heteronormativity is bound to the idea of marriage, procreation, productivity, all of which feed into the capitalist ideals of the ‘typical’ nuclear family, and homonormativity, by its association of *wanting* to assimilate to the heteronormative standard, wishes to attain these ideals as well, but they are both very narrow and constrictive by the very essence of what they are, and so exclude so many ideals and other walks of life, and life experiences (something which draws a lot of criticism toward homonormativity), and this is something that I discuss in more detail in 4.1.3 and offer a new concept of thought that is based on coexistence and acceptance, conormativity.

Both the hetero- and homonormative frameworks are commonly discussed or alluded to when the conversation turns to other theoretical aspects such as anti-social, and no future theories. In response to the HIV/AIDS crisis Leo Bersani (1987) wrote ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’ discusses homosexuality and death regarding the crisis and tracks homophobic responses in the media and how white heterosexual families were being observed as endangered by media outlets. However, a contemporary critic of Bersani, Watney (1987), noted that he was not focusing on the racism in the responses to the AIDS crisis, but to the threat that the crisis was to white heterosexual families. The AIDS discourse, as Bersani noted, constructed it as a homosexual disease, and marked homosexuality in opposition to the family unit, and Bersani leaned into this by advocating an ‘anti-social’ stance. His work inspired concepts of queer unbelonging, and influenced later theorists. In *Homos*, Bersani (1996) furthers his earlier work by opposing the rage for respectability that is found in the values of activism, and the sanitisation of gay sex.

One of the theorists influenced by Bersani is Lee Edelman. Their defining contribution to queer theory is his 2004 book on futurity *No Future*. Edelman states that there's a need to shatter societal expectations, particularly around reproduction and the future of social lives. He takes Bersani's view that queerness is a threat to the future because of the reproductive failure of homosexuality. He states that the Child is a symbolic figure in both politics and culture and has been adopted in works that attempt to eliminate queerness, and alternative kinds of families. James Bliss (2015), a critic of Edelman, challenged the assumed whiteness of the 'anti-social' theses, arguing that *No Future* failed to consider Black subjectivity and alternative modes of reproduction that are not 'future-orientated' (p86) and instead put forward an alternative concept of queer negativity that was based in Black feminist theory.

J Halberstam (2008) is another critic of Edelman; he argued that Edelman was in danger of getting too caught up in the symbolic aspects of The Child, at the expense of the political facets. The political aspect of The Child, in real terms can be seen in the 'think of the children' rhetoric that is found in relation to queerness, and the 'threat' that queer people and the queer lifestyle poses to children, i.e., the active bans on teaching children about anything to do with gender identity or sexual orientation, with the intention to stop them from learning about queerness (for example, Section 28 in the UK from 1988–2003, and the 'Don't Say Gay' Bills that have recently been passed in some States North America, like Florida and Texas in 2023).

### **3.2.5 From Public to Private Lives and the Internet**

From the late 90s, there was a period where advocacy for equality and inclusion shifted from the collective public arena to focus on the private rights of individuals that include aspects like employment, education, housing, (Seidman, 2002) and this encouraged a push toward homonormativity in domestic spheres for those who were not so politically inclined.

The internet has also enabled a forum for ongoing discourse where ideas are kept alive through being shared and discussed repeatedly, and even older archives that have been digitised can find a new life as they are rediscovered and brought to new audiences and influence newer generations. The wider use of

computers in the home, and subsequent access to the internet from the late 1990s, has meant that individuals have been able to find out information, and connect with each other to share their experiences in ways it was not possible to before (Monaghan and McCann, 2020). Online communities have grown over the last decade and evolved from message boards and forums to Discord communities, WhatsApp chat groups, and even communities in online gaming spaces.

### **3.2.6 Transgender Theory**

While there were developments on queer theory in general, transgender theory has developed into its own field. Transgender activist Stryker (2008) believes that trans identities were often marginalised in homonormative political discourse; this can be seen in the early distinctions between gender queer and orientation queer identities; those who identify as male, female, or are resistant to the binary categorisation queer the dominant relationships of sex and gender. An influential work in transgender literature that was popular among activists is Leslie Feinberg's pamphlet 'Trans Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come' (1992), which stated that there was often an overlap in communities that needed to be acknowledged, and that there were shared points between the trans community and the rest of the queer movement (for example the transgender people who also identified as lesbian, or gay). However, there were early critics like Sandy Stone (1991) who argued that trans theory often fails to authentically represent the complexity and ambiguity of the lived experiences of transgender people. This is because no two transgender people are the same, and what the identity means to one, and how the journey to being completely themselves looks will be very different to someone else, which is an example of where the first axiom of Sedgwick's (1990) becomes relevant.

Austin H. Johnson (2016) draws on previous research on idea of transnormativity, to delineate ideas of that are underpinned by fixed binary modes of thought that could harm the more transformative concepts of gender identity. They also challenge the medical pathways and assumptions that every transgender person will want to undergo medical transition at some point in their lives: not everyone will feel dysphoric in their bodies and want to undergo a medical transition, some may for most of their lives cope with socially transitioning and



presenting as their true gender without hormones or surgery. There are also barriers when it comes to adults receiving gender affirming care in the UK (Wright et al, 2021). These include the need to have socially transitioned for at least two years, have at least one mental health diagnosis of gender dysphoria disorder, and then being referred to a long waiting lists in the NHS, or having to consider expensive private healthcare costs.

There are critics of those who want to just ‘be’ within society and not take on activist roles like Califia (1997), however the advent of social media has made it both easier and harder for people to speak out and speak up on issues that the transgender community face, and it is an individual choice on whether people feel safe enough to do so, which plays a pivotal factor. As awareness of such issues has spread, often through the visibility of public figures like Caitlyn Jenner and Laverne Cox, transgender identities and discourse has become more mainstream, which is both beneficial, and has, over the last five years in particular, caused a lot of transphobia toward the community to spread, and with the reach of the internet, it is easier for both the positive and negative to reach more people, and this is an issue which I discuss more at length in 4.2.2.

### **3.2.7 Chosen and Found Family**

Before beginning the exploration of what chosen and found families are, it is useful to consider what the definition of a family is, and how it fits into these, and later discussions. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2024) describes a family as:

A group of people living as a household, traditionally consisting of parents and their children, and also (chiefly in early use) any servants, boarders, etc.; any household consisting of people who have long-term commitments to each other and are (usually) raising children; such a group as a fundamental social unit or institution.

The dictionary definition of ‘family 1.2.a’ gives a description of both a ‘typical’ family, but interestingly early use also included boarders, and with the prevalence of house sharing, and room renting becoming a common alternative to single-home occupancy, as I discuss later, such situations can become a familial support network. Comparably, it also mentions a group as a fundamental social unit,

which is essentially the type of family support network that a chosen or found family becomes for many people.

‘Friends are the family you choose’, and ‘you can choose your friends but not your family’ are two very common sayings that have been in use for a long time, and they both lead to the idea that friends and family are separate entities, and that family is a static idea which cannot change over time, however both notions are far from the case. The idea of chosen family is not a new term, it was coined by academic Katie Weston in her book *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* in 1991, however it has become more popularised in recent years as the term ‘found family’, however the concept remains the same – it is the people around us that we choose to be our family, regardless of blood relations. Weston’s concept of the chosen family encompasses ‘lovers, coparents, adopted children, children from previous heterosexual relationships, and children conceived through alternative insemination’ (Weston, 1993, p3). However, chosen or found families can go beyond that, not only in the realm of step parent/child/sibling relationships, or polyamorous relationships, but there is also the bond that friends have that are as close as siblings, or the family unit and support network that evolves from a group of people living together for any amount of time; the lattermost has become increasingly more common as more people have taken co-living as the cheaper alternative to renting a property alone, as many cannot afford the expense of a full rent, or mortgage.

In queer spaces, as I have discussed, what can be considered a family unit becomes even more complex; this is particularly true when people start being rejected by their biological relations for being themselves that is still incredibly common. It is these people who often seek out the aforementioned support networks and stability of other people within the community, and with the internet, it is easier to find and connect with the wider community than it has ever been.

### **3.2.8 Queer People in the UK Today**

The Sexual Orientation UK 2020 survey estimates that 6.4% of the population (over 4.3 million people) identify as being non-heterosexual (Office of National Statistics, 2022), though this number could be higher because it cannot account for those who opt for 'prefer not to say'. For more extensive information on the queer community the 2018 LGBT National Survey Research Report (Office of National Statistics 2020) is the most up to date; however, it has many limitations. The main issue is that there were only 108,100 valid responses to the questionnaire, which was only open for twelve weeks. This report has a section that focuses on the experience of queer people living in the UK and it was both surprising and concerning at how many did not feel safe; 68% of participants reported not even feeling safe holding hands with a same-sex partner in the street (Government Equalities Office, 2018). Intersectionality is incredibly important when it comes to considering the queer lived experience, because the experiences of queer people vary greatly according to ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, even if they have the same sexual orientation or gender identity.

### **3.2.9 Queer Reading and Subtext**

Fantasy is determined by its social context and cannot be understood in isolation from the contemporary socio-political background (Jackson, 1981, p3; Betz, 2011, p35). If this is the case for fantasy, then taking it one step further, urban fantasy needs to reflect these issues or acknowledge them in some way, because it is a genre that is based in the contemporary world, and these are matters that will be ingrained in the world either through the wider worldbuilding, or individual characters' understanding. Even the absence of specific issues in an urban fantasy world can be a powerful statement.

Fantasy, by its nature, is a disruption of the status quo. This is evident in its removal from the real world, where the laws of nature, physics, and even morality as we know them do not apply; fantasy proposes to subvert and challenge a reader's world view (Jackson, 1981, p69). Through this, a subgenre like urban fantasy which typically takes place in a contemporary Earth setting has the capacity to hold up a mirror to the world and reflect current issues in a unique

way. So, if this is the case, any work within the genre has the potential to be understood as a form of academic and political praxis as urban fantasy cannot exist in isolation of its current socio-political climate (as per 3.1.2), then queer issues within this context may be addressed<sup>11</sup>. Within creative writing, there are two methods to consider when it comes to showing queerness; representation through characters via queer reading and subtext.

To read a text with a queer lens is to engage in a close reading of a text, considering the characters and themes, for example, and interpreting them to be queer, whether this is apparent or not (Stockton, 2022, pxiii). There is some ambiguity here, and one way to read into queerness and judge a novel as such is through authorial intent, though this can be a very complex and subjective method (Keneally, 2016, p9). Queer aspects can be hidden in subtext and coy phrasing that is overlooked by anyone who is not open to interpreting a certain action, or piece of dialogue in a specific way (Keneally, 2016, p12).

This room for interpretation is important for readers; while some things can be explicitly stated through authorial intent, there are some things that a reader should be able to take away and develop themselves. Meaning is created by readers, which makes both queer identity and subtext incredibly important to include so that a spectrum of identities and orientations are present. Novels create a bond with readers, who form communities in online spaces that engage with other readers, long after they have put the book down (Betz, 2011, p8).

This positive representation whether it is through actual characters, found in queer reading, or implied in subtext, is important for the queer community, because even if we do not personally experience hate and intolerance, we can empathise with those who do. People who are feeling isolated and uncertain might just need to see themselves in a non-heteronormative character to feel like they have been recognised and think they are not alone. Monaghan (2016) has written about media representation in relation to viewing queerness as a phase. Often in cinema and television, there will be an older woman who has a memory of ‘experimenting’ with her sexuality in her youth; this introduction of bisexuality is played as the character’s teenage boredom is associated with rebelling against

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<sup>11</sup> In the case of my research, the current socio-political climate is very volatile and has become increasingly hostile toward the transgender community, which is something that I discuss at length in *Contextualising Sisters in Arms*.

heteronormativity. However, in many cases any sense of queerness is framed as fleeting, something that needs to be overcome so the heterosexual 'normal' can be restored. This only perpetuates the 'just a phase' stereotype that queer people face every time their sexuality comes into conversation with people who do not approve. This 'phase' way of thinking causes further harm by not only invalidating and erasing bisexuality but reaffirming that anything other than heterosexuality is just a passing fancy that will go away; it also suggests that sometimes the queer person in question needs 'help' to get back to 'normal' (p2). This societal pressure to perform to a heteronormative standard and reject any deviation from that creates an othering experience because the people who are affected most by this are marginalised, and then seek solace and validation through other means.

In literature, fantasy in particular allows people who have been marginalised to rethink what it is to be different or other (Betz, 2011, p174) and has become a genre which readers turn to in order to find queer representation, either overtly, or through subtext as discussed in 3.2.9 Queer Reading and Subtext. Supernatural beings, and creatures that are seen as other are resonant with many people; the vampire in particular is a beacon for queerness, with *Carmilla* (Sheridan Le Fanu, 1872) being an early portrayal of two women being in a very close relationship which is now read and interpreted as a lesbian relationship. The vampire has been a queer-coded archetype since its earliest incarnations. This is seen in the story of *Dracula* (Stoker, 1897) itself. Stoker began writing *Dracula* in the months following Oscar Wilde's trial and conviction of sodomy, and so an anxious balance exists within the novel between the known acceptable society and the fear of the monstrous 'Other' (Schaffer, 1994, p381). The early vampires of the nineteenth century enabled writers to explore sexuality in ways that were otherwise impossible, and *Dracula* itself was a yellowback novel in the time when it was published, which had gained the reputation of being sensationalist and lowbrow fiction (Manghani, 2023). However, even the absence of explicit descriptions of transgressive acts, offered authors of the time the opportunity to hint at, or even revel in them (Nakagawa 2011).

The vampire has always been a socio-cultural lens through which we can examine issues contemporary to the time that they are written, and explore ideas of identity. It is a being that we can recognise clearly; the vampire presents as

human, making it the perfect mirror for us and our issues (Hobson, 2016, p1). As vampires are immortal, they are able to change and blend into the cultures they inhabit (Auerbach, 1995, pp5-6). The contemporary vampire that has risen over the last fifty years is even more overt in their queerness. The most prevalent example being Anne Rice's vampires, who have dominated the species since the late 1970s. In the early days, Rice refused to confirm or deny the status of her characters, but finally conceded in a 2012 interview that Louis and Lestat were the first vampire same-sex parents, as they parented Claudia, (who Louis turned while she was still a child), as a couple (Hale-Stern, 2012).

The connection between the vampirism and queerness is in no small part due to the vampire always living on the fringes of society, being viewed as an outsider or a monster, and this sense of being seen as the Other marginalised from 'normal' society is something which queer people have always had to deal with. It would be no surprise then that many queer people on an individual level find themselves able to identify with a monster's plight (Benshoff, 2001, p98). To take this one step further, not only would many queer people identify with a monster's misery, as critic Harry Benshoff suggests, but many also embrace the monster, and the other. People often find redeemable qualities within them, feeling that if someone can find something to love about these othered beings, then these people, who society have also shunned (for not performing to the heteronormative standard), have something within themselves that is loveable<sup>12</sup>. Phyllis Betz concurs that fantasy is a genre that marginalised groups can explore these ideas and reconsider what it is to be different and other (Betz, 2011, p171).

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<sup>12</sup> This is particularly true of people who grew up in strict religious organisations. A close friend and has spoken to me at length about growing up in such an environment. Coming to terms with their own sexuality as a teenager was very traumatic, they believed that they were abnormal, perverse, going to hell, and their mental health suffered a lot as they had to unlearn that indoctrination. (Jones, 2023).

### **3.3 Understanding Intersectionality**

Intersectionality plays a significant role in practice-based research because it is a critical practice-based discipline in itself. An understanding of intersectionality means that we cannot separate an issue such as gender identity from socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and the social, political, and historical contexts that go hand in hand with such discourses. These factors played a part in forming and informing my theoretical research and practical work.

It was the feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) who first used intersectionality in an essay to describe anti-discrimination law, feminist theory, and anti-racism policy discourse as a single-axis framework that often only highlights privileged groups' experience. She argued that discrimination faced by Black women was not adequately portrayed in law and described intersectionality as a method of accounting for multiple oppressions. While Crenshaw's essay focuses on a legal perspective, it highlighted how easy it could be to distort and even erase the experiences of marginalised people. As critical theory has evolved, so has the understanding and application of intersectionality, which encompasses other facets of identity such as sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, class, and ability.

In a 2001 study on intersectionality, Bonnie Thornton Dill found two distinct frameworks, one formed in academic circles, driving education and research, while the second was 'broadening and deepening the understanding of human life and behaviour rooted in the experiences and struggles of disenfranchised groups' (Dill, cited in Collins and Bilge, 2002, p6). Collins and Bilge explore this further and state that there is often a false disparity between the two fields on the theme of political praxis; in academic settings, it is often dismissed as having little influence on research or classroom practices, and activists who engage in the political debates may not feel that they have the time to engage in theoretical academic studies. They state that praxis as organisational principles and critical enquiry are rarely as clear-cut in reality as they are on paper, and it is possible to create more of a connection between the two areas in practice. Intersectionality will always have an aspect of political engagement due to the reason it was created and why it remains relevant.

Creative writing is a field that can merge the two practices together through research projects such as this one. As mentioned in 2.2, creative writing offers a method for wider audiences to connect with stories, characters, and themes which are best articulated through creative means, which in the case of this project, is a novel. It is the job of this critical analysis to explain, analyse and consider from an academic perspective, just what that novel is doing.

I have now completed my literature review and will now turn to how my novel makes its contribution to knowledge.



## **4. Contextualising Sisters in Arms**

In this chapter I contextualise my novel *Sisters in Arms* and elucidate the ways in which my practice-based research has impacted the writing. I start with a close examination of how queer theory has impacted and influenced my writing, and offer an alternative concept through which to examine and explore critical queer ideas. To fulfil the research aims I focus on two areas are connected by intersectionality: the representations of queer protagonists and the role of locality in gender identity. To consider the first I examine in detail how current events and socio-political climates have influenced my writing and the decisions that I have made, particularly in regard to gender identity. In terms of the second I explore what relationship location in fiction has to identity, and how important locality is in a setting.

### **4.1 Queer Theory Meets Queer Creativity**

#### **4.1.1 Queer Writing: Reimagining and Rethinking**

Writing affords the ability and freedom to reimagine ideas and present them in a different way; queer writing cultivates a desire to use writing to discover, encounter, and produce new forms of expression (Alexander, 2023). Throughout my planning and writing of *Sisters in Arms*, I was reimagining both the world at large, and what it would be like if the supernatural existed openly alongside humans, but also, as part of my research aims, I was reimagining what queerness would be like in this world, and how it could be presented in a non-problematic way. This presents something of a paradox: how to normalise queerness whilst reimagining its energy.

As I undertook further research, I explored further ideas about reimagining queerness in writing and began to see how my project was, in fact, queer in design. Much queer writing is drawn from reimagining futures and the different possibilities that can cultivate new ways of thinking and social relationships, including ‘alternate models of intimate relationality and citizenship’ (Alexander, 2023, p10). José Esteban Muñoz states that reimagining a future means seizing

queerness from the present and ‘the current political impasse that it is both dictated by and organized around’ (2009, p28). This is a double-edged sword depending on whether one is looking at it from the perspective of exploring the concept of imagining the future from the current present, or reimagining the future as a writer. From a present perspective, it would be impossible to remove queerness from the current social and political climate it is built around, without first untangling it from the past which it is built on, and to erase the past is to dishonour the sacrifices and lives lost that have brought us to the point we have reached. However, to reimagine future queerness through writing, the writer must understand the past and present contexts they are removing when they choose strip back the political, historical, or social issues that are connected with real-world queerness. Mari Ruti (2017, 38) believes that theory’s task is to critique the present rather than try to define the future. While this may be a pragmatic view (as the present needs to be critiqued to initiate change), it is also a limited, and bleak view, because if one does not believe that their critiques will have any impact in their field; what is the point in critiquing the present, if they do not hope to challenge it and redefine the future?

Reimagining an approach to queerness opens up the possibilities for rethinking what we know when it comes to exploring different kinds of knowledge. Rather than sticking to one defined disciplinary path (Alexander, 2023), investigating different disciplines can lead to unanticipated encounters, connotations, confrontations, and criticisms, but these outcomes also offer the opportunity to develop a new way of thinking, and reimagining.

I used this sense of reimagining queerness as I played with the genre. There is little doubt that I could have told a similar story about twin sisters, one who works in her community, and one who works in law enforcement, and a case about a missing girl, that was set in the ‘real world’, but it would have been a lot flatter without all of the nuances that I was able to play with by utilising the urban fantasy genre. Using conflict within the supernatural community, for example, adds layers of an imperfect world, even though everything seems to be all harmonious on the surface. At the same time, I am removing direct conflict about queerness and homophobia, and transphobia (both internal and external); doing this allows the characters to exist on the page with their own identities being

incidental to who they are and takes a step forward in the direction that representation now needs to be looking toward.

#### **4.1.2 How Queer Theory has influenced my research and writing**

Writing is not only a means of communicating ideas, but it is also a means for representation, expression, and identity to be exhibited and challenged. Roz Ivanič (1998) states that through writing, individuals align themselves with sociological, cultural and politically shaped ideas, and through the act of writing individuals contribute to the replication or resistance of the dominant practices and values that these contexts embody. This is especially true when it comes to queer writing, which is often working to undermine the heteronormative standard by either exposing how non-normative genders and sexualities are shaped around discourse, or else how they contest, or transcend the normative notions of gender and sexuality (Baker and Thompson, 2015).

Throughout my own research and writing I have been considering how I can reimagine what should be considered normal by taking queer identities and applying the same standards and privileges that heteronormativity holds. Through doing this, queer theory has had an influence on every aspect of my thesis because the central question to come from my aims was ‘how do I make this novel queer without making the characters’ gender identity or sexual orientation a central plot point, or character trait that becomes a stereotype?’ This is something that I considered throughout my research, reading, and writing, and I kept returning to this question throughout to make sure that I was following this aim.

The most important step for me was to create characters whose identities were incidental to who they were, which is discussed in more detail in 4.2.3. Secondly, despite there being no one set definition of queer theory (see 3.2.1), I reached a consensus on two common threads: that queer theory is about how people think about queerness, (McCallum and Bradway (2019), and also how queerness is a subversion of the dominant culture, (Giffney, 2016). By reflecting on this, I considered the practical aspects of my novel such as the characterisation of queerness and how I wanted that to be represented on the page, not only in the characters, but in the wider society of the world as well.

I wanted to reimagine the world where the supernatural and magical were part of the normal every day, and that there weren't the boundaries or barriers that people face in real life for so many things, and social constructs are not as rigid as we know them to be. At the same time, I wanted to balance it out and not make magic an easy go-to answer for any solution. An example of this is that gender-affirming care is readily accessible to everyone, whether they are just questioning their identity, i.e. Max (p183), and they are just trying something in the short term to see if it is what they want in the long term. Then there is someone like Issy who decided to fully transition through a medical procedure, because early magical procedures for the same were deemed too unethical due to the magical reshaping of the body causing more harm than good.

In a similar vein, there has never been any inequalities for marriage; Maggie's brother (who is only mentioned in passing in this novel, but did feature more prominently in the earlier versions) have been married to his husband for over sixty years, and Louise and Medora were married as women over thirty years ago, with Medora (who is a natural shape shifter) living as a woman except for when they were trying to conceive a child which resulted in having Issy and Rose. These are only small details, but they are important, especially when same-sex marriage equalities are still not globally recognised in many parts of the world and has barely been legal for a decade in the United Kingdom (since 2014), and not quite a decade in the United States (since 2015) (Pew Research Centre, 2023).

#### **4.1.3 Conormativity**

Throughout my research I gained a deeper understanding of the theories of hetero- and homonormativity, how they work in relation to each other (and how homonormativity can only work in relation to heteronormativity). As I discussed in 3.2.4 Heteronormativity emphasises the social and cultural norms of 'typical' expected heterosexual lifestyles, which include 'monogamy, marriage, procreation, and productivity' (Connell, 2014, p145) and homonormativity sustains those ideals and assumes the position of assimilating queer people into a 'typical' heterosexual-adjacent lifestyle. (Duggan, 2003).

When taking into account theorists like Bersani's 'anti-social' theory, and Edelman's 'No future', the idea of homonormativity and queer people

assimilating to a more heteronormative lifestyle is something to be looked down on, if not avoided completely; this is only compounded by Guy Hocquenghem (2022, p28) who states that ‘the critique of the family is an unambiguous obligation’. I have been considering the inherent issue, and disdain that they seem to hold toward the notion of family; these theorists were very anti-family, anti-procreation, and anti-productivity in a push against capitalist ideas, however, when you take a look at the sponsorships that pride events have, all of the rainbow merchandise, and the ways that charities have to push fundraising and earn money to stay afloat to help those in need, it appears as though contemporary queerness is as enmeshed in capitalism as every other aspect of the world.

There has been a more nihilistic trend that leans toward ideas like: ‘procreation is feeding the machine’, and ‘you don't have to do any of the family thing at all’, views which found more in the everyday, rather than constructed from the more condemning theorists like Edelman, Hocquenghem, and Bersani, but are very much part of the anti-capitalist ideas that these theorists were working in. There is a sense that humans have a natural need for community and solidarity, and that part of rejecting social and cultural gender roles based in these capitalist ideas, also means rejecting the atomised worker individualism and the mindset that devalues the notion of community sharing, for example: caring for others if one has the time or growing vegetables and sharing the excess for free with friends. This community-forming is creating a positive, non-gender-specific, and non-relationship-type specific type of shared-resource living, and support network is a break away from the traditional capitalist ideal of the nuclear family that is blueprinted in the heteronormative lifestyle.

There is a condescension toward the notion of family and homonormativity could be assumed to also be aimed at queer people who *do* want a family, because the homonormative, through its relation to the heteronormative emphasises the ideals of ‘normal’ procreation, because that is not typically possible with a couple who are of the same sex, monogamy excludes polyamorous relationships, and marriage, until a decade ago in most of the Western world, was not legal for couples of the same gender. While it is clear that there is still a need for the political drive that activism directs, and as a community we should never become fully complacent, or forget the struggle that we’ve had to face to achieve what we’ve got, but perhaps it is also time to start considering alternative methods

of approaching family and the future; as Foucault stated: 'maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and build what we can become', (Foucault, 1982, p785). Perhaps a new normativity needs to be considered where the principles of which are not constrained by rigid definitions that have excluding parameters.

The heteronormative model is built on idealising the typical nuclear family, and can be seen as excluding toward other heterosexual proclivities. This can include single parents, parents who are co-parenting either through a divorce, or do not want to be married, those who cannot or do not want to have children, and the emphasis on procreation can be seen as excluding couples who have children through alternative methods like IVF, or adoption, and it does not take into account for the kinship and familial type of bonds and support networks that people find through shared lived experiences when they have known each other a long time. These are all very much valid forms of families that make up the heterosexual narrative.

Similarly, in the queer community, homonormativity is constrained by and measured against what heteronormativity is; however, because there is a 'failure of procreation' – which is a fundamental heteronormative caveat – it means that homonormativity can never truly be equal to its heteronormative counterpart. Much like with heteronormativity, the homonormative framework, by its definition, is excluding to the majority of the queer lived experience, which is why there are so many who are so critical of it as a concept. With the lack of marriage equality until the last ten years, and the inequalities and prejudices that often accompany a queer person existing from someone being outed at work, to trying to acquire anything from a home, or children, depending on the people that they are dealing with, which are only compounded if there are other intersections involved, like racism, or socio-economic status, the 'traditional' family that many queer people want is still a struggle. Homonormativity, also does not account for people, either individually, or couples, who want to remain childless, those who are in polyamorous relationships, those who enjoy moving from partner to partner, and single people or asexuals who might only be interested in platonic relationships and have a family and support network in those that they choose to live with.

Normativity has, to now, been concerned with adhering to what was considered 'normal' by societal and cultural standards; however, perhaps as times and attitudes have evolved, it is time for normativity to break down the walls against what it excludes, and embrace normalising everything that it can encompass rather than continuing to reject it. I propose that there is a potential for these lifestyles to coexist, and to be normalised; conormativity is a model concerned with normalising all lived experiences to reduce prejudices, stigma, and create a more accepting future. While this might seem like an idealistic view to have, there has to be a grounded starting point from which people can start unlearning the biases that they might have absorbed over the years.

Conormativity encompasses both the heterosexual and the queer, but it does not differentiate between them; a family is a family, it does not matter if it is made up of heterosexual or queer people, a couple in a long-term relationship, married, in a polyamorous relationship, a platonic relationship, or another form of social living situation where they feel like they are a family with, and it is not dependent on if there are children or not. It also does not discriminate against other intersectional differences, because everyone is human and deserves the dignity and respect to live comfortably and safely in whatever type of life they want, and one person's private life is really no concern to anyone else. As a theoretical framework, it is a lens through which to explore concepts with an open-minded approach and challenge any biases, particularly in socio-political contexts both in heterosocial and queer studies. It is particularly useful in queer studies, as theorists are beginning to turn to look at what is next, and how we build on the past to move into the future. Conormativity is about normalisation and acceptance, which leads to further normalisation and acceptance. It's not about holding up a mirror to the present, but a portal to the future.

#### 4.1.4 Conormativity in *Sisters in Arms*

If conormativity is a model of normalizing all lifestyle choices, and by extension all aspects of life to form a unified and accepting coexistence, then the aim of my thesis (to showcase how the queerness of characters can be an incidental element of their being, rather than being a plot point that needs drawing attention to) is an application of how conormativity can be exercised creatively. This can be seen by the way the characters themselves exist on the page and interact with each other, there is no point where it is their queerness that is brought to the forefront as an issue that needs to be discussed or made an issue of, as I deliberate in 4.2.3.1, and 4.1.1, where I discuss reimagining what queerness could be like in a world where it is not seen as a problem, and there are no societal or medical barriers for people to be who they want.

For example, in Chapter Three when Issy takes Maggie home, Maggie is looking at the wall of photos, she sees a brother and sister in a photo as children, and asks Issy about it, Issy tells her that the boy was her before she transitioned; Issy is very matter of fact about it, and not concerned about Maggie's possible reaction, and sees who she was is just part of her past (p113); similarly for Max (p183), who goes to Issy for help, they are more uncertain because it is a new exploration for them and they do not know exactly what they are looking for, or how much it is going to cost, rather than concerned about any judgement they might receive.

Similarly, same gendered couples are not questioned, Medora and Louise have twin daughters, and no one would ever think to question the family structure or the twins' parentage. In the same manner, Rose's only protest against Issy and Galene's former relationship is because she doesn't like Galene as a person and thinks her sister has a terrible taste in women, rather than the fact that Galene is a woman herself, much like how Issy does not like Rose's on again/off again fling with Ant, who she thinks is no good for Rose – siblings often have strong opinions about their siblings partners, especially if they take against them. These instances are all very telling of the society and the world that the novel is set in.

The critical application of conormativity can be read throughout *Chapter 4. Contextualising Sisters in Arms*. In 4.1.3, I discuss how conormativity was formed and applied through my research and writing about queer theory, and



how it has influenced my writing. I also discuss how for a large part of my work I didn't have access to a shared phrasing, with which would come a solid definition, that matched the theories I had formed while working. Conormativity encompasses what that I have been articulating throughout this contextualization with the normalisation of queerness through representation. The application of conormativity is also seen throughout in 4.3 where I discuss the different family situations through the novel, though this also references deeper analyses that can be found in other sections, where I am discussing characters and queerness (in 4.2.1), or focusing on a close reading of Ellie Jameson in 4.4.

As a method of critiquing the current sociocultural climate, I examined the concept of queer spaces and how they have been 'sanitised' to be more palatable to both a broader community, and capitalist ventures 4.2.1. This 'sanitisation' is also a reflection of what is happening online, more frequently websites are being restricted by what they are able to show, and it is the queer content that is being deemed as 'unsafe', even if it is nothing even remotely explicit, this has been repeatedly done through archival purges. In the online spaces there have been many different sites that have felt the effects of content purges, many of which host a large number of fandoms, and within those fandoms, a lot of people find a safe space to explore queerness through art and writing, so it is those people who feel the effects of these efforts the most. I remember the 'NC-17' purges of Fanfiction.net (both in 2002, and 2012); the strikethrough/boldthrough that blacklisted many members of Livejournal for their content in certain popular fandoms (2007), which ultimately led to the site's diminishing use in those spaces; the shutdown of Geocities in 2009 because of guidelines; Tumblr's NSFW (not-safe-for-work) purge of 2018 targeted a lot of queer blogs (though Tumblr is inconsistent with what it allows, and often targets queer content even if it is deemed as 'safe-for-work'), being some of the most notable instances of sanitisation. This is all in an attempt to make the internet more 'family-friendly' and 'safe for kids', but if the people who really wanted to put child-safety first, they would be spending the time and energy focusing more important things like helping the millions of children who live in poverty, improving education system, improving social care and support, healthcare, and mental health support services for children and young adults. These online sanitisation efforts are to make online spaces a more palatable atmosphere for companies to advertise their products in

all corners of the internet, without worrying about being associated with anything they deem as ‘unseemly’, much in the same way they do with queer spaces in the physical world.

I also interrogate the current sociopolitical climate around queerness, particularly the rampant transphobia that has been growing since I began my research, and examine how that has driven my work, and guided some of the choices that I have made both creatively, and in where my research has taken me, which is to say, has driven my stubborn need to find my voice in the most effective way I know how – through writing to engage with ideas, and this thesis, as I discussed in 2.2, will allow me to disseminate my writing to the broadest audience possible with the creative novel showing a world where current socio-political issues are not problems, and the critical aspects can engage with the more academically inclined readership, to foster further exploration and interrogation of these issues and how, looking at them through a lens of coexistence and acceptance, we can start to move forward.

#### **4.2.1 Queer Protagonists**

Over the last three years, while I have been developing this novel and completing my research, there has been an increasing spotlight on the transgender community. This has particularly stemmed from online social media platforms, and the encouragement of engagement and interaction on sites like Twitter and TikTok. It has a negative aspect as much as it does a positive. Indeed, it is very difficult to look anywhere online within the queer community from either its members or allies without seeing messages prefaced with ‘trans rights are human rights, trans men are men, trans women are women’. This message is usually to let the transgender community know that they are ‘safe’ people, and to counter the rising number of transphobic people who are getting too comfortable with being vocal in public forums, particularly in the UK where there is a lot of hate against the transgender community from few but loud pockets of people.

The use of social media has given gender critics and this new wave of radical feminists a new and louder platform with a broader audience to speak to, but their sentiments remain the same. A key historical example, noted by Susan Stryker (2017) was in 1973, at the West Coast Lesbian Conference where Elliot, a

transgender woman and one of the organisers was driven out of her own event when she was attacked by women who were in attendance, after an accusation of sexual harassment was made. The keynote speaker at this event was Robin Morgan who criticised transgender women, including Elliot, denouncing them as men wanting to invade women's spaces (Stryker, 2017). Even now, these gender critical feminists argue that men are invading women's only safe spaces, under the guise of being women, so they can prey on women, and the use of toilets has been a focal point for these debates (McClean, 2021). These arguments are boiling down to the misguided belief that transgender people's rights come at the expense of cisgender women's rights (Jones and Slater, 2020).

More recently, in a keynote speech at the 2023 Conservative Party Conference, the Prime Minister himself states that 'we shouldn't get bullied into believing that people can be any sex they want to be, they can't, a man is a man, and a woman is a woman' (Sunak, 2023). This government has gone so far as to put proposals forward to remove trans rights from the Equalities Act 2010 by redefining 'sex' to mean gender assigned at birth, and removing any gender protections, such as self-identification, which is what many transgender people rely on, because not everyone has the means or resources to seek gender-affirming care<sup>13</sup>, and follow the lengthy procedure to legally change their gender markers (Allegretti, 2023).

This lack of care from the very people who are supposed to help, can leave people feeling dejected, and hopeless. Many turn to all forms of media for an escape, searching for the positive representations of themselves anywhere they can find it, just to feel validated and seen, and know they are not alone.

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<sup>13</sup> This has also been made increasingly more difficult by the government with the cutbacks on the NHS, which has led to a lack of funding and availability for gender-affirming care, leaving wait times for first appointment being five years at a minimum. (Gender Identity Clinic 2023, Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust 2023, Devon Partnership NHS Trust 2023, Sheffield Health and Social Care NHS Trust 2023)

#### **4.2.2 The Importance of Representation**

These reasons are why it is more important than ever to expand the urban fantasy genre by representing the community, being vocal, and visible, to show that we are a united front, and that we are not going anywhere. As per 3.1, urban fantasy is a socially and politically responsive genre and an appropriate place to hold up a mirror as a commentary on current social and political issues. When I started planning this project, I did not want to make queerness a central plot issue, or a problem that needed to be solved through romantic relationships, or a character finding themselves, as is often a feature of queer novels, particularly those that are aimed at a young and new adult audience. As Wendy Pearson (1999, p4) noted, characters alone do not necessarily make a text queer. While there is an element of subjectivity and ambiguity in relation to pinning down what it is to define 'queer' (as noted in 3.2.1), queerness has always been about standing out and subverting norms and standard expectations, which is what I have done throughout my novel, as I am demonstrating throughout this chapter.

#### **4.2.3 Queer Identities in *Sisters in Arms***

Rather than using a larger city, I have set the novel in a smaller town in the Midlands, a region in England, part of the United Kingdom. The two main characters whose perspective the story follows are women in their mid-30s from a stable family, rather than younger women barely in their twenties, with one or both parents dead; the characters are aware of their supernatural heritage, as this is something that typically comes as a revelation part way through the story, or even later in the series. Similarly, in many novels, it is a standard that the supernatural elements are hidden from the wider world, and even sometimes from the protagonists themselves at the start; however, I wanted to integrate the magical and the mundane to imply that they had always been living side by side, and that any characters' supernatural lineages or traits were normal parts of their identity.

Identity is something that plays a significant role in queerness, and while the protagonists do not have any issues with their own queer identities, the sisters also do not have any issues with their identities as half-human half-demons. Issy is fully accepted as a leader in the supernatural community. She has minor gripes

about the unfairness of genetic distributions of attributes compared to her sister, but that is the same as one sibling having a different hair texture or eye colour to another, or one having a health condition that the other does not rather than any reaction to (internalised or external) prejudices. Similarly, Rose's reluctance to lean into her abilities comes from accidentally hurting people in the past rather than any discomfort with her devilish heritage.

While the supernatural is not a cipher for queer, and there is no authorial intent for it to be so, I do acknowledge that some readers might interpret it in that way. This is in part because there is a history of othering queerness, and so many of the queer community have embraced that otherness (Benshoff, 2001). There is also scope for the reader to interpret the characters' sexual identities; for example, where one reader may see bisexuality in Rose, another might find pansexuality, someone else might read Issy as a demisexual, another might see a lesbian. I wanted to avoid the stereotypical representations of queer people that are often portrayed within the media such as the butch lesbian, and feminine gay man, and the 'just a phase', or even invisible bisexual (Mackay, 2019).

Including and portraying transgender characters was very important for me, both personally, and because of my supposition of urban fantasy being responsive to the socio-political climate. There is a growing hostility, particularly in the UK toward the trans community, with the rise in volume of influential gender critical voices that attempt to invalidate the experience and existence of both transwomen and transmen. Urban fantasy has an opportunity to create spaces where there are no such issues, to reimagine what could be. In my novel, I use the supernatural as a means of softening the directness of such messages, as a device to engage reader attention, to create a space where the supernatural is no longer 'super', but natural, part of the contemporary world around it. Queer identities similarly exist in this space without challenge, as just another aspect of characterisation. In both a straightforward fantasy (where more elements of the setting might be thought of as fantastic) and in non-fantastic contemporary fiction, my queer identities might otherwise feel disingenuous. An absence of an issue in an echo of this world can be more powerful than placing it as the focal point, because how a character does not react can make a reader pause to think about their own reactions, and possibly reevaluate their thoughts. Again, I did not want this aspect of identity to be a focal point for the narrative of any character, or the

plot, and I have tried to include it authentically. For example, Issy's identity is mentioned off-hand when Maggie sees a photo in Issy's family home and innocently asks about her brother in the photos, and Issy says, 'that was me', and there is photographic evidence of her transition over the years in the family photos (p113).

Similarly, though magic is prevalent in the world, I did not want it to be something that could solve every problem, because that wouldn't feel authentic; in 3.1, I stated that the mechanics of the fantastical elements have to feel genuine and convincing for the reader to feel immersed in the story. The presence of magic did, however, lead me to consider how certain situations like gender expression and identity would be viewed and approached. This was not to treat gender identity as a problem to be solved by magic, but to consider what how transgender and other issues would manifest in a magical world. I concluded this would be partially down to accessibility and what is available. In the case of gender identity and expression magic is not always seen as a permanent solution, but it can be a temporary one alongside mundane options<sup>14</sup>, but each option has its own caveats and drawbacks: enchantments are expensive and need constant recharging and illusions need to be maintained, which takes energy and concentration; these are both services that Issy offers to help with for a heavy discount, or free, because it is important to her, as is demonstrated through her interaction with the customer Max (pp183-185).

There are instances where some beings do not have natural human forms, or are natural-born shapeshifters, as in the case of Medora, Issy and Rose's non-human parent, who can choose how their human form appears, a trait that can be passed on to their children. Rose therefore has the ability to change between a human and demon form, and possibly could alter her human form if she were inclined to try it. Issy on the other hand, did not inherit this ability, and there is some resentment toward Rose, and to an extent her human heritage, because she does not have the same capability. In Issy's eyes, Rose denies and suppresses that side of herself because she has hurt someone in the past by underestimating her own strength. Issy views that as dishonouring both their non-human mother, their

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<sup>14</sup> It would be particularly useful for someone who was not sure if they wanted to permanently transition, or were more genderfluid, non-binary, or otherwise gender-nonconforming and liked to switch between how they presented.

community, and themselves. This is an example of normalising the supernatural, so that queer supernatural identities can similarly exist in this space without challenge.

#### **4.2.4 The Queer Protagonists' Journey in *Sisters in Arms***

In 3.1.5, I discussed the archetypal journeys for the male and female heroes according to critics like Lori Campbell and Jennifer K. Stuller. I also discussed how it was important to break down this binary gendered mode of thinking because, as I discussed, traditional hero and heroine traits are universal characteristics, and it is important to show that heroes of any gender can be as vulnerable, just as much as it is to demonstrate they can be strong with material objectives. Simple as it may seem, this insight was hard won; as mentioned, I wrote three novels during this research project. The first centred around a more material, masculine objective, whilst the second novel was emotionally motivated and plotted. Both of these novels felt like they were lacking something, even though I could not put my finger on what that was. In the third novel I combined both aspects – the material and more emotionally motivated objectives, and the completed novel was more balanced and whole. While it is entirely possible for novels to successfully revolve around one or the other with equal amounts of depth and growth, *Sisters in Arms*, as it is presented in Part Two of this research project worked better when the material and the emotional journeys were combined.

Issy's story in particular is one of collaboration, and her motivations are initiated out of love for her family, even though she has a longer journey before she can reach any redemption for her actions within this novel. Indeed, feminist critic Marleen Barr (1987, p80) believes that the 'womanist speculative hero' is someone who can encompass both feminine and masculine attributes, and Phyllis Betz (2011, p113) agrees that a female-centred story goes beyond the mere addition of a single woman as a protagonist, and that it is women who take up the majority of the dominant roles. This is something that I had set in place in the initial drafting of the cast, as men, even the queer ones, take up the more minor roles of friends and work colleagues, while the women are the protagonists, the victim in the case and the suspect. This is all to summarise that, in the mechanics

of the protagonist's story, I have followed a queer narrative model and created a woman-led story.

Writing a queer story that does not make the characters' queerness a central issue comes with some interesting challenges, and it has made me critically think about other queer issues and how they can be creatively layered into a novel so it can be read queerly, while also considering ideas that are intrinsic to the queer community like struggling with identity, and family relationships, and how to work with those ideas sensitively, because every reader is different, and will take something away from the characters and the story.

There are many layers to this novel that readers might be able to take away; whether a reader is queer or not, it is possible to find a relatable common ground with the characters, because the experience of being made to feel different and 'othered' can be more nuanced and multifaceted than being othered in the way that I have discussed in this chapter. Moreover, individuals can face bullying and exclusion by their peers for various reasons beyond their sexual orientation, i.e., poverty, appearance, or their hobbies, and the familiarity of being ostracised could elicit an empathetic understanding for other marginalised people.

It is likely that readers will discover themselves relating to certain characters at specific points in the novel and might find that changes upon revisiting the book for a second or even third time. Readers may find their identification shifting and evolving, allowing them to connect with different characters on a deeper level. For instance, one might initially identify with Issy, empathising with her decisions. However, upon further reflection, they might reevaluate their perspective and resonate more with Rose, particularly in her response to Issy's actions.

Rereading a novel allows readers to find nuances and subtle details that might have been missed during the initial read. As they go deeper into the story, they develop a more comprehensive understanding of the characters and their relationships. This newfound knowledge enhances readers' ability to empathise with and relate to the characters in new ways.

I have also created strong family relationships for Issy and Rose because I wanted to show positive and accepting relationships. I also wanted to acknowledge that all relationships that have ended do not always end badly. Looking at Issy and Galene for instance, while Issy was hurt because Galene used



her, and she is still hurting, and will not roll over to Galene's demands in the moot scene, she is able to remain civil, and even turn to her when there are problems, she knows that Galene is better equipped to deal with. Even one of the side characters and a friend of the sisters, Nial has a good relationship with his ex-partner and the mother of his children, even if he does not like the person she has started seeing. Rose's on-again-off-again relationship with Ant, much to Issy's dismay, also works for her; they may fall out for short periods, but their 'break ups' never last long.

In each instance, these characters are able to accept each other for who they are and retain respect and civility after the relationship has ended. This representation of relationships is incredibly important to show because there are many people who might not know what a healthy or safe and accepting family environment is like. It also challenges the common notion that the conclusion of a relationship inevitably leads to hostility and animosity. By showing that characters remain civil toward each other, especially when they continue to cross paths in their daily lives, it emphasises that individuals can navigate post-relationship interactions with grace and maturity. This portrayal is a powerful reminder that relationships can end for various reasons without sacrificing mutual respect and the potential for an amicable coexistence.

#### **4.3.1 Setting the Midlands: Time and Place**

The location is an important aspect to establish as early as possible because it grounds both the reader and the characters in the setting where the story will take place. If there is too little in a setting, then it can make the whole story feel flimsy, but if there is too much exposition on place, then it can be overwhelming for the reader, and the story struggles to take off. The setting is especially important in fantasy or science-fiction stories as it must establish a coherent wider world, or universe that may deviate from this world in even the smallest way. Immersing the reader in a fully realised setting will make characters feel more three-dimensional. This all draws boundaries and rules for what is possible within the story, how characters can act, and react to events. For example, in a fantasy setting, this would include the rules of magic, how society functions, its customs and laws; in science-fiction, it could include how technology has developed, what

it is capable of, and its limitations. In fantasy it offers the same structure for the capabilities and limitations of magic.

A sense of time is key to establishing setting. Not only is this important from the reader's perspective (in terms of pacing and a narrative device), but it is particularly important in urban fantasy (or indeed any work set in a contemporary setting), where people are generally more observant of, and concerned with the passage of time. Throughout the novel, there are moments that play with time in both individual instances and as a whole. Each chapter has a date and time heading, while these were first included as a means for me to keep track of events, I realised this would also be useful for readers. It is also a way of setting the overall pace of the novel, especially as a lot of events happen in a relatively short space of time or overlap, as with Issy and Rose in their first chapters, where the same phone conversation is shown from both perspectives with Issy trying to toy with Rose and get a reaction out of her, and Rose realising that she must be up to something. Playing with time like this, opens a lot of opportunities for experimenting with narratives, and the order of a novel, in future projects.

The majority of urban fantasy novels are set in larger American capital cities. It was only after spending a week in New York in 2019, that I was finally able to start understanding the concept of the American cityscape. Even then, reading a novel set in New York still felt impossibly immense. This vast Americanness has a different feel to the busyness of Birmingham, or the more laid-back atmosphere of Derby and the crowds that seem to be everywhere in London. The atmosphere of a place lends to how it is perceived and depicted in fiction, which also influences how characters act and the attitudes that they have. A city's atmosphere is also likely to affect the types of queer spaces that are available, and the general attitude of a population will be indicative on how welcoming it is to that community.

Sociologist Mark Casey (2007) states that the commercialisation of queer spaces within the urban landscape has commodified them as desexualised spaces, to make them more 'respectable' (pp128-129); for example, in areas where 'notorious gay haunts' were removed from public view with a plan to be redeveloped into more respectable luxury flats project (Young, 2003). Similarly, in places where cruising (i.e. finding partners for casual hook-ups) was common, like parks, many cities started putting up gates and fences to keep people out after

certain hours to make the areas more reputable (Casey, 2007 p128). Dr Phillip A Bernhardt-House (2016) suggests this desexualisation of queer spaces is often part of the terms for the acceptance of queer people into the mainstream. This is something that is not seen in smaller locales; small towns often do not have the space, resources, or business capacity to create similar spaces for queer people. This means communities are more intermingled as there are no specific gay bars or lesbian clubs, or queer bookshops, but equally, it also implies a lack of visibility and openness; queer people might feel like they need to be more careful with how they approach people.

In the novel, I wanted to create an archetypal everyday small town because they are the second most common<sup>15</sup> type of settlement in the UK with 674 small towns, compared to twelve core cities<sup>16</sup> and twenty-four other cities with populations of over 175,000 (Baker, 2018). As I mentioned in 3.1.2, there has been a shift in urban fantasy branching out to American towns, possibly due to more people moving out of the cities, and with a similar trend of people wanting to move out of cities in the UK<sup>17</sup>, it is only natural for fantasy stories that can take place within the urban landscape to follow them. I wanted to use the Midlands as the setting, because it is the heart of the country with rich layers of history and influence that all feed into local identities, something that I leaned on in the creation of my setting. To do this I took aspects of the three areas that have influenced me throughout my life to create an everyman town: the more open ethnically diverse aspects of Burton on Trent, the beauty spots from Lichfield parks, and the general compact layout of Tamworth, and similar landmarks that could be found around these areas as well. There are also polarising differences between affluence in these areas.

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<sup>15</sup> There are 6,116 villages and small communities with populations of less than 7,499, which are most numerous throughout the UK.

<sup>16</sup> These core cities are London, Belfast, Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, and Sheffield.

<sup>17</sup> Following a limited study completed by the London Assembly Housing Committee, a removal company conducted their own research with data gathered from over 300,000 removal request locations <https://www.getamover.co.uk/blog/two-out-of-three-uk-citizens-leave-town-data-study/>

### **4.3.2 Intersectionality in *Sisters in Arms***

Intersectionality is strongly associated with locality. The demographic of a place is tied to everything: diversity in ethnicity, education and economics and the patterns that arise from social class, all of this has a bearing on how a person develops. Anyone who has experienced a term of poverty, might have an insecurity around their security and stability, while someone who grew up with money will have different values and outlooks. These are all things that I have considered in my characters.

Louise, the protagonist's mother, grew up poor, but managed to get through school and into university, and eventually qualified as a social worker, working, and saving up as she did. While Medora, Louise's immortal wife, gained a lot of wealth over an extremely long life, she learned very quickly it was not something that would impress Louise, or that Louise wanted hanging over their relationship, but Medora made sure they were never without, e.g., if an appliance stopped working, or a car broke down, they always were able to replace it, though Medora, paying off Louise's mortgage for her almost ended their relationship just after they got engaged, she thought she was being helpful while Louise felt it was something that could be held against her at some point in their relationship.

Louise never wanted her children to grow up with all that money, or getting used to relying on it, and she instilled in her daughters the same hard work ethic that she'd grown up with. Issy and Rose, at this stage are not even aware that Medora has all of this hidden wealth, even though Issy suspects that someone who has been around for so long must have a stash of antiques that would be worth quite a lot of money.

Issy and Rose are twin sisters, so they had the same childhood and experiences in their younger years; they were both quite rebellious and would push the boundaries of their capabilities. However, an incident in their teens changed them both dramatically; Issy became more ambitious by playing with illegal magic on the sly, while Rose became very strait-laced and tried to humanise herself as much as possible. Their education is another aspect where they differed, they were both given the same opportunities, however Rose was not as academically ambitious as her sister, and hated being compared to her, so she left school at the first chance she had, going into an apprenticeship with the

agency straight after her GCSEs. Issy, on the other hand, decided to complete her A Levels and go into higher education studying magic, both practically and theoretically.

These divergences in their lives cause them to have very different outlooks. Rose has a more insular world view which typifies this small-town mindset, and to her, partly because of her job, everything has a definitive right or wrong, there is little to no room for a ‘yes but’ in a grey area. She has only really travelled for a holiday once a year, or the odd weekend getaway, so she has never really seen much of life beyond her hometown and assumes that everywhere is much the same as what she knows.

Issy, on the other hand, has travelled the world, learning from humans and other supernatural beings, making her more open-minded about everything, and it is this open mindedness that makes her appear to make more questionable choices like using highly questionable magics to save Louise’s life rather than consider that she is mortal and that it might be her time to die, but in the heat of the moment, it is the only option for someone who might not be thinking clearly and will save someone they love at any cost.

#### **4.3.3 Where Theory and Experience meet: Crafting A sense of Community**

One way that queer theory impacted my writing (seen between earlier and later drafts), was the realisation of how entrenched queer movements were rooted in a sense of community. This had a significant impact on some of the main places that exist within the novel.

In the earlier two drafts the idea of the shop, the place where the moots were held, and the concept of the Bastion were three separate locations that functioned very independently of one-another, and I was struggling to understand why they weren’t working. After some reflection and rethinking of my ideas, I began to understand that these aspects were failing because they needed to be combined as a unit working for the community, rather than existing as separate entities. As discussed in 2.1 the research and the writing are enmeshed in a messy way that creates many feedback loops in an iterative process. This is one of the clearest examples of how that has worked in action.

Once I realised what the problem was, and I understood that the community needed to have a central hub for these fictional places to work as cohesively as they do in the real world. Community hubs and social spaces in general have always been areas where social, cultural, and economic exchanges can take place, networks can grow, and residents can gain a stronger sense of community. This can be seen in places like the Birmingham LGBT and the Derbyshire LGBT+ organisations, which are charities who have spaces to host a range of services like individual advice and support, support groups, as well as a variety of social events and activities for both younger people and adults (Birmingham LGBT, 2023; Derbyshire LGBT+, 2023).

As I reflected on the queer community, I also considered the queer community that I have come from, and the one that, on reflection, I realised I built up around myself when I worked in a plus sized clothing shop from the day it opened in 2015, until I left in December 2019. Over the course of four years, I built a relationship with customers all over the gender spectrum who would come to see me, because one person came in and realised they would have a fun and judgment free shopping experience, and spread the word, and bring a friend along, who would then bring another friend another time. Sometimes it would be people who had been transitioned for years and were happy to finally have a local shop to come in and try clothes on in person, while other customers were just starting their journey and learning how to be comfortable with themselves. I was also the main bra-fitter in the shop, and I would take the time with anyone, even if they were not a typical customer to help them find a shape that they were comfortable and happy with, especially those who wanted to be more masculine-presenting but had larger chests (binders are not generally made for larger sizes nor do they come cheap) and from my own experience of finding what works best when I want a flatter, more masculine look, I was able to offer suggestions on the best combinations of bra types, shapewear, and vests that could help to achieve the look they wanted.

While I was with these customers, I would hear about the latest inclusive places that had opened up in the wider area because I did not always have easy access to transport to travel myself. One of them introduced me to the activities that Birmingham LGBT had to offer, and as things moved more online with the

pandemic, some of the groups have as well, making it easier to be connected to the wider community in the Midlands again.

Translating this community feel into the novel has cumulated in the creation of the Bastion as the hub of the supernatural community; it is a multifunctional place that acts as a sanctuary if someone is in trouble and they need a safe space, a social hangout for people to meet up and socialise, but it is also where the local monthly moots happen where everyone in the community can come to share news, air grievances, and if anything major has happened, get in-person updates, and ask questions. Issy has also started using message boards and forums for less important news, or to pass on updates, but not everyone in the community likes rely on the internet and prefers to attend the monthly moots, as is tradition.

Much like with every other sub-sect of the community, with Galene's ruling over vampires as an example, there are specific members of the magic user community who deal with any incidents themselves, rather than letting outsiders in. Issy, being an active member of the community in the Midlands is the immediate go-to for magical issues, but any more serious concerns, or magical threats to the realm, then she would involve the Ward family (Maggie's own, who she is currently in hiding from), who are the duty-bound magic guardians of the mortal realm, just as she and Rose are duty-bound to follow Medora's charge of protecting the realm from the physical threat of invasion from other realms.

#### **4.3.4 Queerness and Place in *Sisters in Arms***

Queerness is very much tied to place, which is something that I had not really considered until I went to my first pride festival in Milton Keynes in 2022 with my partner. It was in its tenth year of running a pride-related event, while my smaller hometown had only hosted its second<sup>18</sup> earlier in the year. Even this is in stark contrast to what both me and my partner (who is also from a small town) were used to. The experience of queer people from small towns is typically different from those who have grown up in or around cities, particularly if they are from a generation before the internet, or there was a lack of access to it. A small

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<sup>18</sup> I had not even been aware that they had started an event in Tamworth in 2021.

town historically was less likely to have a sense of community, or support around queerness, whereas a city is more populated, so naturally it is more likely to have a higher number of queer people, so it is logical to conclude that there would be a sense of community, support, and resources more readily available. It would also mean that people living in a city are more used to the queer community, and are open to them, however in a small town not everyone is as open minded.<sup>19</sup> All of these factors, as well as their homelife, affect how a young queer person grows up, how they present themselves, and how confident and comfortable they are with their own identity.

Because urban fantasy novels are predominantly set in North America, there are some novels that are set, or at least start out in in small American towns. This is so for the Southern Vampire mysteries set in Bon Temps, Louisiana (Harris, 2001–2013), the Midnight Texas trilogy (Harris, 2014-2016), the Bright Falls Mysteries set in Michigan (Phipps and Suttkus, 2017) and the Jane True series set in Rockabill, Maine (Peeler, 2009–present). While these all provided models in their appeal to an everyman, everyday location, there were no examples of urban fantasy novels set in small UK towns, let alone the Midlands.

The town in *Sisters in Arms* draws on the stories told by my great-grandmother, all of which were connected with the local area. Bringing them into a contemporary setting allowed me to depict the sense of familiarity and generational inhabitation that people have with their locales. Not only does this make the story more imaginable and relatable, but it also allowed me to establish a depth and width of queerness, embedded in place. For example, Issy is so connected with her community, she is familiar with all her neighbours, often doing favours for Mrs Henderson who lives a floor below – even going so far as to offend her by disagreeing about another neighbour who is mentioned in passing as being a coping single dad.

Similarly, Rose knows where a lot of the teenagers and young adults go to hang out; she draws on comparisons from her youth at the park (p196), or how she reflects on how the place to skip school has changed (pp235-236). Similarly, on page 177, when Issy is being taken home with Maggie and they ask to go to the

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<sup>19</sup> I was incredibly lucky that I was accepted by those who mattered when I came out, and I have never had to hide who I am, however there was a certain person no longer in my life who had always been a homophobic bigot.



chippy round the corner because it is not out of the way, and it her favourite, it is also a regular quick meal for them because of its close proximity to home. These are all little instances that everyone unconsciously knows and thinks about when they are familiar with their environments, so it makes sense to enrich both the setting and the characters to have considered these aspects, and have the characters deliberate when they are making decisions as well.

The moot is another aspect that I wanted to draw on to bring the community together as a space to discuss issues and share news on a regular basis, and showcase that there was a deeper community within the world that was old and very set in tradition, i.e., how Issy muses on half of the crowd preferring formality and tradition, and how the other half aren't bothered by it, and the sort of issues that other everyday people faced, like a family moving in on a territorial being's road, or something out of their control that Issy can't do anything about like Ethan's ongoing frustration that his workplace has been turned into a tourist trap.

The Bastion is the heart of the community; it is a supernatural community hub where people can hang out, where monthly moots take place, somewhere for magic users to practice their craft, a library, a sanctuary, all fronted with and funded by a magic shop that Issy runs, with the help of friends and members of the wider community.

The concept of bringing everyone together across all species, rather than having them at war in opposing factions is an important part of the world that I have created. This sense of wanting unity (even if there are external forces that have their own ideas and agendas) is part of the queer contextualisation of the novel. Whilst queer theory was a place to disrupt the status quo by bringing new ideas and theories and to make sure that the community is considered, Rebekah Sheldon (2019, p171) suggests that 'queer studies has shifted away from positions that seek to disturb the norms, and toward positions that advocate for ways to build a shared world'.

### 4.3 The Role of Family in Sisters in Arms

Throughout *Sisters in Arms* I have tried to show different types of families and family circumstances because family is important, no matter what form it comes in, whether it is two best friends of twenty years who are as close as siblings, a single parent trying their best, or a family of four. Issy and Rose were raised by Louise and Medora, and as the latter was able to alter her appearance and her gender, she was able to father the twins naturally. However, from the age of fifteen, Louise raised her daughters as a single parent because Medora disappeared, so the family dynamic shifted, and this had a lasting impact on both Issy and Rose throughout their lives into adulthood. I discuss Issy, Rose, and Louise in more detail in 4.2, and 4.3 where I explore them as characters and the impact their family, and history has had on their development leading up to the novel, and how it influences them throughout.

The Jamesons are a typical heterosexual couple with two children, they are concerned with keeping up appearances and not drawing attention to themselves or anything that could be considered ‘unusual’ in the eyes of their peers. This is made difficult when their daughter disappears, because she is trying to help someone in need and doesn’t feel safe in telling her family about it. I discuss the Jamesons and their family dynamic in more detail in 4.5.

Nial is a divorcee with two children, and he shares custody of them with his ex-wife, their relationship is amicable. He is in a relationship with Leon who is a colleague, and while their relationship is going well, Leon does try to have a grumble to Rose about how things are going with the kids (p200). Nial and Leon will eventually get married and the children will see him as a second dad. I felt that this was an important addition because, even though he is a side character, all too often parents splitting up is portrayed as a hostile thing, but it can be an amicable situation, and sometimes a new step-parent is the best thing to happen to a child.

Maggie has the most disruptive family life within the novel, though this is shown in earlier drafts that I discussed in 2.1, more than in the novel presented, because this did not feel the place to tell her story. However, by the end of the novel, it is known that she has run away from home some thirty years previously because she was not safe there. She was expecting to find her brother in his shop,

the one person she knew she could rely on for safety, but being a step out of time, she meets Issy instead, a friend of her brother, and she decides that keeping her anonymity is the safest option, and gives up one of her middle names 'Maggie', and a false surname. This proves to be the best move, because even Rose, who is not as knowledgeable about everyone in the supernatural community, realises her family connection the moment she learns her true family name, (p274). If Issy were to call her brother, Maggie knows that it might alert those who she'd been running away from all those years ago, and the hunt would be back on. Her desire to hide is made more difficult with getting entangled with vampires who are after her for her specific magical skills, and it is vampires that she is primarily concerned with at the beginning of the novel (p98), although she is not sure if they are working for her family.

While the reader doesn't see much of what is going on, there are implications to the darker side of Maggie's family situation, that she was afraid of someone within her family home, enough to make a dangerous escape through the Apeira, and when she resurfaces, she is still afraid of them catching up to her, no matter how much time has passed. She is a very bright personality, and it is often those who have been through the worst that try to shine the brightest and alleviate everyone else around them.

Louise's background as a social worker helps her to recognise fairly quickly that Maggie is out of place in some way, and does what she can to make her feel welcome and at home in Chapter Three, because Louise knows that some people need a little stability and sense of belonging, even if it is only for a little while. Although Maggie might be closer to Louise's age chronologically, as her time in the Apeira would have only been a short time, she is physically and mentally younger than Issy and Rose, and on learning that Maggie is in trouble and needs protecting, Louise wants to protect her, because she does see someone who is younger than her own children who needs to be protected, and in the end, she gives her own life trying to stop Maggie from being kidnapped (p209).

Throughout the novel Issy finds herself drawn into the intrigue of Maggie, who is a little odd and out of place, but seems quite comfortable in making herself at home, and the cat approves of her. Issy comes to view her as less someone she is protecting, and more someone who has just fallen into her life, and Louise is so fond of her they have a duvet day watching films together – something Louise

never does with Issy or Rose these days (p178). Issy just accepts her presence, and even after realising that Maggie was withholding important information, Issy doesn't reject her – not even when she's the reason Louise was killed.

Maggie was ready to go back on the run once they reached the hospital, feeling guilty for everything that had happened, and Rose had made sure she knew it was her fault, but then Issy being injured needed some help around the house, and having no one else, Maggie offered to stay around to help, mentally moving herself in a little bit at a time, making herself comfortable, thinking that if she could keep a low profile, she could find peace there. Her, Issy, and their cat.

This relationship between Maggie and Issy is an interesting one, because it's one that is formed out of necessity at first: guardian and ward, then it slowly starts to shift to investigator and suspect, before pivoting to shared captivity and the kind of bond that can only be formed in those life or death moments when neither one's safety is guaranteed, and their wellbeing is being played against each other, and there is a comfort in having each other around in recovery. Issy might well be trying to replace the hole that Rose cutting her off has left, but Maggie is also trying to fill the void of her brother's absence, and so they will lean on each other becoming a little family of their own.

#### **4.4 A Close Reading of Ellie Jameson**

While the reader meets Ellie through Rose's eyes and investigation, her story is an important one, designed to resonate for different reasons. She serves as a bridge that brings people together by embodying the inquisitive and probing nature that many individuals encounter in various aspects of their lives. Whether it's exploring their sexual or gender identity, navigating their religious beliefs, or even contemplating alternative career paths, she demonstrates the universal human inclination to question and seek new possibilities and experiences.

Ellie, like most people, tries something new – in her case practicing magic – in secret, because it is common for people to try and learn new things in a very private way, it is human nature to hide things from people while we're trying to discover something, or perfect it, because we don't know how the people around us will react. In the story, Rose learns that Ellie's parents are disapproving of the magical arts, which is what drove her to hiding her practice. This is the first

connection. A lot of people did not have good parental role models, and their homes were not safe spaces; their hobbies, and friends would have been met with disapproval, and possibly abuse. They could have been stopped from doing things or seeing people that their parents did not approve of. That element of insecurity and masking will be familiar to those readers – they will see the struggles they went through in Ellie’s circumstances, and why she had to hide what she was doing, which forms a second bridge. As discussed in 2.2, creative writing is good at creating connections with readers through the identification and re-evaluation of pre-existing assumptions about a person or character from an excluded or ‘other’ group (Sklar, 2013, p59).

Ellie’s disappearance continues this connection with the reader. Her parents are elusive at first and try to hide what has been going on in order to maintain a public image because the appearance of them as people, and their social standing was seen as more important than being parents, to David Jameson at least, who seems to carry on with business as usual. It is Ellie’s younger brother who, in spite of the trouble he knows it will put him in with his parents, was willing to tell the truth about his sister, because he knows it was important information and might help to bring her home. He does not condemn her (though he does not make indications of support either), but he knows that she is not safe wherever she is, and he is the first person that is encountered who seems to care about what has happened to Ellie for Ellie’s sake.

Ellie has a fleeting connection with Maggie, who is at the time another lost soul that has escaped family troubles and got into worse problems. It is Ellie’s newfound openness to magic that allows this connection to happen in the first place, and her desire to help out someone in trouble that leads to her ultimate downfall. Through Maggie’s later admission, the reader finds out that she talks Ellie through a complex and dangerous ritual to open a rift, which helps to bring Maggie back to safety, but at the cost of her own safety, and possibly life<sup>20</sup>.

That Ellie is never found at any point in the novel, despite this connection is something that may also resonates with many readers. The realisation that she is

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<sup>20</sup> It is never confirmed that Ellie died, but both Issy and Rose have their own assumptions that the realm she fell into would be too dangerous for her to survive for long. It could pose an interesting plot some time in the future, if she did survive, how did that happen, just what of her humanity will she have sacrificed to do so, and how much of an enemy would she view Maggie to be?

gone and cannot be found is a symbol of both loss and regret for both the characters and readers alike. This loss, for Rose shows that she cannot save everyone and bring them home safely and whole. For the reader, it may evoke a sense of being incomplete, like losing a significant aspect of oneself or a moment in life that can never be reclaimed. It may also allude to the decision that people make when they release part of their life that is no longer healthy to maintain, like a friendship, romantic relationship, or even familial ties; yet this decision can still leave a lingering sadness, and a yearning to know what could have been.

Ellie exemplifies the typical person who is trying to live their lives, despite those around her disapproving of her interests in the magical arts, and having to hide something which is natural for her. This is a very generalised experience, and it can in no way encompass all the difficulties and trauma of the closeted queer experience. However, by attributing normal human reactions, particularly normal parental reactions, to teenagers doing things they do not approve of, it does help to normalise the supernatural elements within the story which in turn are a way of normalising queerness.

By creating the archetypal everyday town in the Central Midlands, I have encapsulated the normal and brought both the supernatural and queerness into every day. By focusing on locality and intersectionality, I have created a place that can feel very much like home for both characters and readers alike, and this is normalcy, and the acceptance of Otherness starts to take root.

Through the characters, I have created queer people who are both relatable and resonant with readers, without drawing on their queer identities as major points of contention or as issues that need to be fixed. There is a lot of tension between Issy and Galene, but many who have what surmounts to a workplace romance have to then continue working in the same environment as their ex-partner. Similarly, Rose is having to remain professional in a work environment after being passed over for a promotion, and a boss who she feels 'has it in' for her. Then there is Louise, a single mother of two adult daughters who is starting to look toward her retirement with a hint of sadness, still feeling the absence of her missing wife eighteen years later. Maggie is a witch who tried to get away from family drama and ends up in steadily worse trouble, first at the cost of Ellie's safety, and later on Louise, and Issy; she doesn't even realise she has her own strengths or resourcefulness when she continually rescues herself, because of a

lack of confidence, and always being told she'd never be good enough. Similarly, Ellie realises that she has an affinity for magic, and is having to hide wanting to learn more from her parents who do not want her to explore the potentially dangerous side that magic has to it, which is what causes her disappearance.

These are all very normal human experiences, which form the backbone of the narrative and allow the supernatural elements to seem more natural and part of the everyday. In the same way, queerness is neither highlighted nor overlooked to show how it can be a part of normal everyday life, away from the politicisation that insists it can never exist peacefully alongside heterosexuality.

## **5. Conclusion**

The aim of this research project has always intended to draw attention to underrepresented voices within urban fantasy fiction, particularly those of queer women. Because it was practice based research, the writing quickly expanded my remit, and it encompassed more than just that singular aim. As per 2.2, creative writing research can mobilise certain kinds of knowledge, particularly in the emotional and psychological experiences of a character, which offers a route to empathy and a rethinking of pre-existing assumptions about a person or character from an excluded or 'other' group. It has the ability to build connections with readers through representation. One of the key objectives of my novel was representing queer women as protagonists, without romantic relationships or their queer identities being a focal plot issue. Through creating a sense of normalcy around the supernatural and blending the fantastical with the everyday, I enabled the characters to exist as themselves on the page without their identities or romantic lives (or lack of) feeling like a problem that needed to be resolved in some way.

As I began both writing the first novel and researching my literature review, in an often messy, non-linear way, I discovered that the location played a significant role, not only in the development of the story, but in depicting the normalcy of the character's queerness. I also started to understand the role that place has in intersectionality, particularly in the formation of queer identities in small towns, which as discussed, differ vastly from those in cities. The stark differences between going from a small town which is quite closed and in the closet to a more open city can feel like a culture shock, particularly when visiting the 'gay districts' that many cities are starting to form. This openness and sense of community is something that I wanted to bring into a small-town setting through using a singular place that was a major community hub where people could gather, and have meetings about community concerns, which manifests in the Bastion.

Through writing the different versions of the novel, I have endeavoured to allow the queer characters to exist on the page without their queerness being a central plot issue. In doing so I have nevertheless developed a queer narrative



structure, from cojoining the female hero's story of collaboration, redemption, and love, with the male counterpart of materialistic objectives (p24). This was achieved through successive drafts. The first novel was focused more on an item or object that needed to be recovered, and the second was purely about actions that a character was taking. The novel in part two of this thesis is a combination of the two, with a material objective of a missing person, grounded in Rose's arc, with emotional aspects from Issy's story, and queer women are the central focus of the novel.

My novel has expanded the genre of urban fantasy. It is the first urban fantasy novel to be set in an everyday Midlands town, which is used to normalise the supernatural, a strategy deployed to normalise queerness, exemplified in the queerness of its female protagonists, whose story never problematises queerness.

In 3.1.5, I discussed the archetypal journeys for the male and female heroes according to critics like Joseph Campbell, Lori Campbell, Jennifer K. Stuller, and how the attributes of each were very binary in nature, with rigid structures and features of physical or material journeys vs emotional ones. However, feminist critic Marleen Barr supported the idea that a protagonist can encompass both feminine and masculine attributes, and through my drafting and rewriting, I found that both the characters and the story as a whole worked better when I started consciously thinking about how to break down these binary concepts and blend them.

Taking Phylis M. Betz's idea that a female-centred story goes beyond the mere addition of a single woman as a protagonist, and that women should take up the majority of the dominant roles, is something that I had set in place in the initial planning of the cast, to create a queer woman-centred narrative.

All of this is done in the name of representation. Despite this, the inclusion and representation of queer female protagonists is still in its formative years, there is much progress to be made, with scope for the field to grow considerably. As such I plan to continue to explore the relationship between the urban fantasy genre and queer characters and narratives, particularly looking at the roles and representation of protagonists and side characters within queer narratives.

Through my research, and understanding the impact that it has had on my writing, I have interrogated the concepts of hetero- and homonormativity, and examined how they operate, and why they are so excluding by their very

definitions. I have taken the idea of 'normativity', and turned it from meaning keeping everything normal, as is the current status-quo, to normalising all kinds of lifestyles and aspects of life that are not currently seen as being 'normal', because there is no reason that there should not be a coexistence and acceptance of these differences, we are all human after all. This thesis, as I summarised in 4.1.4, will allow me to disseminate my writing to the broadest audience possible with the creative novel showing a world where current socio-political issues are not problems, and as I discussed, the absence of a problem and a lack of character reaction gives the reader pause to consider their own thoughts and reactions, and possibly reevaluate why they think and react the way they do. The critical aspects can engage with the more academically inclined readership, to foster further exploration and interrogation of these issues by other scholars and how, looking at different issues and concepts through a lens of coexistence and acceptance, we can start to move forward to a future where everything is just seen as normal and every day.

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### **Movies and TV Shows**

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## **Part Two: *Sisters in Arms***

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## **Chapter One: 5.15pm**

**Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> October 2012**

‘Welcome to the Magic Mirror –’ The words died on Issy’s lips as the door slammed shut and the lock clicked into place.

Issy turned from her perched position on the stool further along the back wall to look at the person who’d burst in like the armies of the underworld were on their tail. There wasn’t anything particularly odd about that for a Tuesday evening, but the stranger was covered in mud, smelled of blood and burned electricity, and had presence of something distinctly not human about them, deeper than their magic aura.

‘You alright?’ Issy asked, stepping off the stool.

She appraised the other over the rim of her glasses; they were wearing mud-caked flared jeans, and a faded hoodie, taking in their surroundings. The shelves on the far wall were stacked with books, and those at the back were filled with boxes and jars of ingredients, and the tools filled the space around the window wall. The crystal display started behind the door, spreading over several tables in the middle of the floor.

The stranger pulled her hood down, eyes finally falling on Issy, ‘Is Shay here?’

The shop owner frowned and tilted her head, wondering who’d be coming here asking after her friend. ‘How do you know him?’

She opened her mouth, but whatever she was going to say died in hesitation, and instead said, ‘He’s helped me before.’

‘I’m sorry, he’s not been here for a few years, is there something I can help you with?’

She didn’t reply, moving to the wall of ingredients, scanning over everything, muttering under her breath, too quiet for Issy to hear.

Issy moved to the window and peered outside; there was no one obviously lurking out there, but then again, the Magic Mirror was in an alcove down an alley, it didn’t have the best street view, anything could be lurking in the dark of the night.

‘I can get hold of him if you want?’

‘No,’ she said, a little too quickly, ‘I wouldn’t want to disturb him.’ She didn’t spare Issy a glance, grubby hands pawing through the bottles and boxes along the shelf, with urgency.

‘Hey.’ Issy grunted as she was knocked aside. ‘If you tell me what you want, I’ll be able to put my hands on it a lot faster.’ The last thing that she wanted was to strongarm anyone out of the shop – that’d involve things being broken, insurance claims, and paperwork; it was a headache she didn’t want to deal with.

The stranger made no acknowledgement and moved toward the stool. Issy kicked it aside and stepped in the way, determined not to be ignored in her own shop.

Deep brown eyes flecked with a faint molten shimmer and a fist clenched as it lingered near the shelf.

Issy drew on her full six feet of intimidating presence to stare down the intruder who was a good several inches shorter, but they stood unflinching, lifting their head, and squaring their broad shoulders trying to puff up at the challenge.

‘Shall we try this again?’ Issy asked. ‘How can I help you?’

The woman took a breath and sighed. ‘I need protection.’

Issy glanced across the shelf and considered all of her stock, most of which was catalogued in her memory; she could think of a hundred ways to protect someone with any of them, for almost any occasion.

‘Right, how about we start from the beginning?’ She said, ‘I’m Issy Winters – If you’re in trouble, I’m the best person that can help you out, okay?’

Those deep brown eyes looked her up and down for a long moment. ‘You Medora’s daughter?’

‘How could you know that?’

‘Same eyes, same presence,’ she said, ‘I met her once, she saved my life.’

‘Ma was good at that,’ Issy managed a small smile.

‘I’m sorry,’ she frowned, lowering her eyes briefly.

‘So, who are you and why do you need help now?’

‘I’m Maggie,’ she said, ‘I’ve got vampires after me.’

Vampires? There was only so much she could do to help; their Matron hated anyone on the outside interfering with her affairs. Still, Issy wanted to get to know why they’d be after her, and how she’d ended up at the shop in her current state.

‘Let’s go somewhere private to talk,’ Issy said, unlocking the back door that adjoined the Bastion. This was the heart of the supernatural community in the area; the community hub that always had some activity going on; people meeting in the common room, browsing the basement library, practicing magic in one of the warded rooms, or lodging in one of the rooms on the top floor.

Issy paused as they passed through the common room and saw Nettie lounging on a sofa with a magazine, waiting to start her shift in the shop. ‘Hey Nettie?’

The half dragon looked up, absently scratching the patch of scales on her cheek. ‘Mm?’

‘Mind starting work now? Shop’s currently locked, but I’ve got something to deal with.’

Nettie looked from Maggie to Issy and nodded. ‘Sure thing hon.’

Issy took Maggie to one of the smaller rooms upstairs that she used for consultations, it was a comfortable space with big chairs; people were more open to talk when they were comfortable. She had an office with a desk that was reserved for people she wanted to intimidate or didn’t want lingering too long.

‘So,’ Issy said, picking a bottle of water out of the mini fridge in the corner, offering it to Maggie before sitting down. ‘Let’s start from the beginning, why are vampires after you?’

Maggie took the bottle and started to pick at the label, her eyes focusing on a spot just beyond Issy’s shoulder as she mumbled an answer.

‘Can you repeat that?’

Maggie rolled the bottle between her hands. ‘They want me to perform specific magic for them.’

Issy looked at her and exhaled slowly, there was only one reason why vampires would be after a magic user for a specific reason, and it wasn’t exactly a legal one; unfortunately, the Matron was a law unto herself, and the last person who’d tried to take her down over the legitimacy of her operations had gone on a very long holiday, never to be heard from again.

‘Why do they think you can help them?’ Issy asked, tilting her head to try and catch Maggie’s eyes to look at her properly.

Maggie shrugged and peeled the label off the bottle, letting it fall to the floor. The silence stretched and Issy was about to press her for a response when

the witch finally spoke. ‘I think they were tracking my magic,’ she said, ‘and I didn’t exactly deny it.’

‘Why not?’

‘They weren’t taking no for an answer.’

Issy nodded slowly as she watched the other woman, considering how lucky she was to have escaped with her life; if they believed she was capable of blood magic – of passing on the vampirism curse – they’d not stop until they found her. ‘What were you doing when they found you?’

Maggie fixed her eyes on the floor, as she huddled up more, her voice quiet. ‘Escaping.’

‘Vampires, or something else?’

She shook her head a little, twisting the bottle in her hands, as her mouth opened and closed several times, but her bottom lip just wobbled.

‘It’s okay,’ Issy said, glancing down and she noticed the marks around her wrists. ‘How did this happen?’ she asked, reaching over to gently roll the sleeve of her left arm up, her eyes catching sight of a thicker scar a little further up, but Maggie pulled her arm away.

‘I was wiped out, no energy at all, they tied me up and tossed me in the back of a van.’

‘But you managed to get away.’

‘They were waiting for someone to arrive – didn’t hear who,’ she said, ‘I played dead over night until I had a bit more energy and managed to escape.’

‘Do you know where you were being held?’

Maggie shook her head. ‘A warehouse maybe? Lots of buildings around, I just kept running till I hit the town.’

‘And you knew to come here.’

‘Grew up round here,’ Maggie said, ‘knew where I was when I hit the church square.’

‘Where were you taken from?’

‘An abandoned building,’ she said, ‘not gonna nark on me, are you?’

Issy watched her for a moment; it didn’t seem like she was being anything other than truthful, but how much of truth she was telling was a concern. ‘You could report it.’

Maggie shook her head. ‘Would it do any good?’

‘Likely not, but it would be on record...’

‘Then I’d be on record and there’s certain people I don’t want to find me.’

‘Who?’

‘My family.’

‘They who you were escaping from?’

Maggie nodded, wrapping her arms around herself.

‘I can keep you safe and protected, if that’s your concern.’

She shook her head. ‘It was a mistake coming here,’ she murmured and stood, taking a few steps toward the door.

‘Wait,’ Issy jumped to her feet, blocking her path, ‘it wasn’t a mistake, I will help you, okay, if you will trust me to.’

Maggie watched her for several moments in silence but eventually relaxed and sat down again. ‘Okay.’

‘Okay,’ Issy echoed. How was she going to help this witch who’d stumbled into her shop looking like she’d been through the wringer? Deal with the vampire mess today, that’s what Maggie was trusting her with – anything else could come later.

‘Right, I’ll see if I can call the Matron and get this straightened out,’ Issy said, digging her phone out of her pocket.

Maggie swallowed, watching her with wide doe-eyes, which flickered to the phone.

‘Relax, I’m just going to talk to her.’

Maggie sniffed a little and nodded, tucking her legs under herself as she gnawed on the lid of the bottle.

Issy scrolled down to Galene’s number; her sister had changed the name to *Bloodsucking Bitch* after they’d broken up, and Issy kept forgetting to change it back; it was slightly unprofessional, but she’d been hurt.

‘Issy pet,’ Galene’s voice lilted a purr; she answered the call so fast she must have been sat on her phone. ‘What a lovely surprise this is.’

Issy looked out of the window and exhaled. ‘It’s a business call, not a social one.’

‘Oh, my darling, I can hear your heart beating from here,’ she said, ‘something has you all worked up.’

Issy closed her eyes and lowered the phone for a moment looking at the end call button but mentally shook herself. She wasn't going to play Galene's games, and she certainly wasn't going to let her get under her skin. 'Did you send your people out to look for a magic user?'

'Why would I do that when I have you so close to hand, pet?'

'I had one come by about an hour ago, said vampires attempted to kidnap them but they wouldn't stick around to give me details.'

'Oh really? That is not something that I have sanctioned,' Galene said, 'if I hear anything I will let you know.'

'Thank you.' Issy managed through gritted teeth, though she knew that the vampire matriarch would see it as a favour to be collected later.

'Of course, my pet, you know that you can call on me at any time.'

She'd be better off bargaining her soul away than taking any offer from the vampire matriarch. 'Yeah.'

'So,' Galene said, 'a new magic user has come onto one of my people's radar? Whatever for?'

'A misunderstanding.'

'Is that so? Oh, my pet, you always were a terrible liar.'

'Exactly,' Issy said, 'I wouldn't lie to you.'

Galene laughed, though it was a dark and alluring sound, it also promised ruin. 'My dear, you wouldn't want to face the consequences if you did.'

'Are you threatening me?'

'Not at all,' she said, 'consider it a friendly warning.'

'We are not friends and I'm not a lackey you can push around and threaten with your laws.'

'Of course, you were always so much more.'

Issy bit her tongue before she said something she'd end up regretting.

'Well, this has been a delight, I hope I don't have to repeat it too soon.'

'Do send my regards to your mother.'

'Goodbye Galene.' She hung up before either of them could say anything else, stuffing her phone back into her pocket. Looking out of the window, she let out a breath she hadn't realised she'd been holding through the whole conversation.

'You good?'

Issy jumped hearing the quiet voice beside her, and she looked to see Maggie standing there, touching her arm. She nodded, offering a small smile. 'Just great.'

'What now? I stay here and hope they don't find me?'

Issy regarded her; ordinarily she'd agree that was the best option, but there were too many unknown factors, including Maggie herself, she wanted to keep a closer eye on her. 'For now, you're safer staying with me until we can get to the bottom of this.'

'I can? Thank you!' Maggie trapped her in a hug that made Issy wonder if she was part boa-constrictor.

Issy smiled and patted her on the back. 'Bet you'd feel better if you had a nice hot shower, hm?' she suggested.

Maggie's eyes lit up and she nodded. 'Totally would.'

Issy led her upstairs to the communal showers, showing her where the towels, toiletries and spare clothes were kept. 'I'll hang around outside waiting for you,' she said.

'Thank you.'

Issy sighed to herself, taking one of the chairs that were dotted around the corridor that led to the Bastion's living spaces. She'd been sat for about five minutes before her phone started ringing.

*Rose* flashed across the screen when she looked at it, hitting the green button.

'Yes, sister mine?' She answered the phone with the sweetest tone that she could muster.

'What's up with you?'

Issy could almost see Rose scowling at the phone, trying to figure out what she was up to. 'Nothing. What you want?'

'I'm gonna be late for dinner, you need to be on time for once.'

Issy scoffed. 'I have no idea what you're talking about.'

'Just finish whatever you're doing and stall dinner, I'm stuck at work a little longer.'

Issy glanced toward the shower room and smiled. 'I think I have the perfect solution,' she said, 'just don't take too long,'

'I owe you.'

‘You always do.’ Issy hung up.

Maggie came out of the shower about ten minutes later, looking a little brighter, even if she was dressed in a similar hoodie, though this one was baby pink with a navy lining, and black skinny jeans.

‘Better?’ Issy asked, and she received an enthusiastic nod in response.

‘Thank you.’

‘Good,’ she smiled, ‘now how do you feel about averting some sibling drama over a pasta dinner?’

Maggie tilted her head, a briefly sorrowing expression fleeting across her soulful eyes, but it vanished with her smile. ‘I can try.’

‘I’ll just pop back to the shop and pick something up to block anyone from tracking you.’

Issy unlocked the door and peered inside; Nettie was alone, leaning against the counter, leafing through her magazine.

‘Everything okay?’ Issy asked, nodding for Maggie to follow.

‘Just peachy,’ Nettie said.

Issy nudged Nettie’s legs aside to get to the lockbox, setting it on the counter. It was a small wooden box that had sigils carved into it, warding its contents against detection. Inside were several crystals that had powerful enchantments attached to them, everything from visual and hearing enhancements, to changing one’s appearance. She started looking through the labelled bags that were neatly organised. Issy picked the tracking prevention pouch out and pulled one of the black obsidian crystals from it, pushing the box in Nettie’s direction to secure and put away while she popped the crystal in a cage and slipped it onto some waxed cord to make a necklace.

‘Here you are, if anyone was using magic to track you, this will cut them off as long as you keep it on.’

‘Cheers,’ Maggie said, putting the water bottle into her bag before taking and examining the crystal, holding it up to the light to see the sigils that were etched into the stone to amplify the shielding properties. ‘Who enchanted this?’

‘Shay,’ Issy said.

Maggie put it on, and a shudder ran through her. ‘That feels spicy.’

Issy smiled slightly, an interesting way to describe it. ‘Yeah, his enchantments can be intense, even for other magic users, but it will fry any links



that were tracking you.’ She picked her bag up from under the counter. ‘We’re off, Jinx is taking you off at midnight.’

Nettie was already back in her magazine. ‘Yeah they are, see you tomorrow,’ she said.

Issy shook her head to herself, some days she’d hate to see what it’d be like if they had a rush on when Nettie was there, but to be fair most of their custom came from people passing through the Bastion, and that could be any time day or night.

As they stepped out of the shop, Issy pressed the side of her glasses, activating an enchantment that shimmered over the lenses briefly giving her better outdoor vision with the streetlights.

‘What’s that for?’ Maggie asked.

Issy lifted her glasses so the witch could see the three pupils in her amber eyes more clearly. ‘My twin sister, Rose, she inherited the abilities that our Ma had, I just got her devilish eyes, which don’t translate well on an otherwise human body. It has to be bright daylight or pitch black for me to see clearly.’

‘That sucks,’ Maggie said.

‘It is what it is.’ Issy shrugged, as they started the walk to her Mom’s house.

It was only twenty-minutes, but Issy was quick to realise that Maggie wasn’t the fastest, she’d have been better walking home and getting the car.

If Rose still got there first, she wouldn’t hear the end of it.

## **Chapter Two: 6.15pm**

Rose entered her signature at the bottom of the latest document she'd finished typing and just stared at it for a moment.

Rose Winters

Senior Special Officer

Supernatural & Human Affairs Agency

The placating promotion still stung a year later; if she hadn't been there seventeen years, she'd have told them where to shove the job. Her friends agreed that she'd been cheated, but her sister immediately saw a conspiracy, especially after meeting the new director. Just because he looked and acted like a dickhead, didn't necessarily make him a bad guy, just made his presence intolerable in large doses.

The agency was a decent place in all, one of the better things their non-human mother had established; it had been set up as a mediatory network between the supernatural and human communities centuries ago, but, like everything else in the last century, it had expanded and evolved.

Rose often wondered what Medora would think of her being passed over for the directorship, would she be disappointed? Would she have pulled strings to get her the job? Perhaps if she was around, Rose would've cared.

She was jolted from her thoughts by a sudden movement in front of her eyes.

'Sign this off for me.'

Rose looked down at the folder that'd just been dumped on top of the paperwork she was working through and lifted her head to her partner. 'You what?'

She watched five different confused expressions fleet across Sean's face before he registered what he'd done wrong and had the grace to look a little sheepish. 'Would you sign that off for me?' he repeated in a less demanding tone. 'Please?'

Rose narrowed her eyes at him for a moment longer, biting back a comment about being his personal secretary, especially as her indentured desk-

duty sentence was over in fifteen minutes. ‘What’s this for?’ she asked, opening the folder, and jotting down the case number in her records.

‘Vampire attack,’ he said.

‘A vampire was attacked or did the attacking?’ She looked up. He was just looming over her desk, and their shared office space was cramped enough without his hulking body lurking.

‘Something wrong with my reporting?’ he asked, retreating over to his own desk.

‘I never said that,’ she said and set the file down, spinning her chair to look at him. ‘Why do you keep getting involved with these things anyway?’ Everyone knew that Queen Bitch liked to deal with things herself, and she especially hated the agency getting involved with her affairs.

‘I’m just doing my part for my people,’ he said, ‘it’s why the Good Matron placed me in the agency after all.’

Rose snorted. ‘I thought she strongarmed you a position to make sure we stayed out of her business.’

‘Can’t I be doing both?’

‘So what business is this? This is the third case in the last three weeks,’ she said, ‘what is she doing about the frequency of them?’

‘The Matron is taking care of matters,’ he said, ‘I just need to fill in the paperwork because I was on the scene.’

Rose narrowed her eyes at him a moment, which was the kind of brush off she gave her Mom when she said she was on top of the housework. ‘Are you even reporting these to her?’ She might not like the vampire matriarch but could appreciate that leaving her out of the loop was not going to end well.

‘She knows everything that is happening,’ Sean assured her, ‘if you are that concerned, send your sister to clear things up, she’s a liaison, so let her liaise.’

Rose snorted, like she’d put Issy in that bitch’s firing line for any reason. ‘Just know, when *she* senses someone demanding to know why she wasn’t informed about what’s going on, I’m pointing them straight in your direction,’ Rose warned, pointing her pen.

‘Duly noted,’ he said, ‘now are you going to sign that off or what?’

Rose turned back to the report. ‘You’ve not snuck anything in here that’s gonna bite me in the arse later, right?’ She asked, signing, and dating in the empty space beside his signature.

‘I’d never do that to you,’ he said and took the folder back, flicking through it once more.

Rose folded her arms as she watched him, she didn’t know what he thought she’d miss, she could do the paperwork in her sleep, and sometimes she did if she was being honest.

Once he was satisfied, Sean placed it in the pile that was ready to be archived, and he sat, watching Rose as she returned to her typing for a moment.

‘Do you want a hand with any of that?’

‘I’m just typing up the minutes of a mediation meeting I was in earlier,’ she said, knowing it was enough to put him off – he’d never understood her shorthand. ‘It’s not gonna take much longer.’

Her phone vibrated somewhere under the papers on her desk, but by the time she found it, it had fallen silent.

*Missed call: Mom.*

Rose glanced at the clock and realised it was probably a ‘where are you’ kind of call.

Their mortal Mom hated it when her daughters were late for family night. She could hear the guilt trip now. ‘*All I ask is for one night a week where we have dinner as a family, is that too much for you two?*’

There was only one thing that she could do – make sure her sister got there first.

‘What’s up?’ Sean asked.

‘Just going to ask Is to run interference on dinner.’

Sean looked at the door and pointed at it as she put the phone to her ear; Rose shrugged, not caring if he was there or not.

‘Yes, sister mine?’ Issy answered the phone in a too-sweet voice after it nearly rang out.

Rose pulled the phone away and eyed it for a moment, not liking that tone, one that often meant trouble. ‘What’s up with you?’

‘Nothing,’ Issy said, ‘what you want?’

Rose looked at the pile of paperwork that was still on her desk, jamming the phone between her shoulder and ear, she pulled the next lot over. 'I'm gonna be late for dinner, you need to be on time for once,' she said, though she might as well be asking for the moon.

Issy had the audacity to scoff at that. 'I have no idea what you're talking about.'

It wasn't worth getting baited into an argument. 'Just finish whatever you're doing and stall dinner, I'm stuck at work.'

Issy was silent for a few seconds, and Rose thought she was going to be told to get screwed. 'I think I have the perfect solution,' she said, 'just don't take too long.'

No argument? No conditions? Issy was definitely up to something, or getting into something she shouldn't be. 'I owe you.'

'You always do.'

Rose hung up before she could start anything they'd regret over dinner and looked to see Sean smirking at her.

'Are you her sister or her mother?'

'Depends on the day and the stupid decisions she's made,' Rose said.

Rose loved Issy dearly and was the first to get into a fight over her, but she was enough to try the patience of all the saints when she was in one. Rose blamed her questionable choice in friends and her airy-fairy vocation. She was a 'consultant' for magical issues and worked in the supernatural community, running the Bastion and that little shop that was attached to it; Rose thought it was a useful place, but she didn't see how either paid her bills. Issy never seemed to do any work, while Rose never stopped.

Rose jolted as a paperclip hit her in the face and she looked over at Sean.

'What are you pouting over?' he asked.

'I'm not pouting,' Rose said, 'and it's just life issues.'

'Ah,' he nodded, 'life, anything I can help with?'

She looked at her partner and considered offering her sister up, but then again, having her entangled with one vampire was more than enough drama for one lifetime. 'Nah, it's nothing major.'

Sean nodded. 'You going to be here much longer?'

Rose looked through what she had left and sighed, it was a good couple of hours work, she doubted that she'd be forgiven for being that late home. 'Sod it, it's not going to make a difference if it's done tonight or first thing,' she said, and started organising everything to at least make it look like her desk hadn't just been abandoned. 'Not like I'll be put on a case as soon as I walk through the door.'

'I'll remind the boss you're back on active duty again in the morning,' Sean said.

'Thanks.' Rose shoved the half empty pack of biscuits into her top drawer, found her keys hiding in there, and shrugged her jacket on as her computer shut down.

They headed out of the office and met Nial at the lift. He'd been Rose's partner since they'd started training, until the new director decided everyone was too comfortable working together and assigned new partners. Even Issy liked Nial, and she didn't seem to have many mundane human friends.

'Hey Rose, you okay?' Nial smiled in a disarmingly sweet way that managed to deescalate any tense situation, not even batting an eye at Sean who was looming behind both of them. 'Alright?'

Sean just grunted and walked around them, opting for the stairs.

'Pleasure as always Sean,' Nial called after him.

Rose snickered and smacked his arm lightly. 'I don't know why you don't get on.'

'It completely baffles me, I get on with everyone, it's all part of my charm.' Nial said with as straight a face as he could manage.

They both laughed, and Rose shook her head. 'You heading home, or working the night shift?'

'Heading home, Rach is dropping the kids off in a bit so I can't stop and chat long,' he said as they got into the lift. 'But everyone's doing okay?'

'Yeah,' Rose nodded, 'finally back on active duty tomorrow, so hopefully I'll get something thrown at me that doesn't make me feel like a glorified secretary.'

'Just think, if you'd got the director's post, you'd be doing paperwork all day.'

'But it'd be a whole new load of paperwork to hate,' she said, 'besides, if I was running things I'd be into everything, so I'd get more variety.'

‘Just think,’ Nial said, ‘in about fifty years, no one will be able to pass you over for a human on the basis of experience.’

‘No, I’ll just be contending with every other immortal who wants to dabble in bureaucracy.’ Like that was a better option; Rose didn’t know if she’d even stay in the Agency that long, they didn’t know if they were immortal like their mother, or they just had extended lifespans as some hybrid species did.

‘It’ll all work out,’ Nial said, giving her shoulder a gentle squeeze as they stepped out onto the ground floor, moving aside for someone else to hurry in.

‘We’ll try and catch up properly for a drink soon.’

‘Sure, that’d be good, then you can tell me all about the rumours I’ve been hearing.’

‘What rumours?’

‘You and Leon from the info centre.’

‘Oh, those rumours, totally true.’ Nial grinned. ‘Right, I’ve got to run and meet Rach to take the kids,’ he said before she could grill him anymore on his new relationship, ‘see you round.’

‘Yeah, have a good one,’ Rose nodded, following him out to the car, at least the post-work traffic should have died down a bit.

Getting out of the estate the offices were in could be a nightmare around rush hour.

### Chapter Three: 6.35pm

It took thirty minutes to walk to the outskirts of town where Issy and Rose's parents had moved in together. Rose still lived with their Mom, she didn't like the thought of leaving their human parent on her own; their Ma had gained a lot of powerful enemies over her very long lifetime and it was always a worry that someone would always come breaking down the door looking for revenge, despite the fact that Medora had been gone for so long.

They reached the drive, Issy glanced to Maggie who'd been quiet for most of the walk, just trying to keep up. Her eyes turned to the house, narrowing slightly, Issy could see her face scrunching beneath her hood, and she eyed the home.

'Is everything okay?'

'Yeah,' Maggie said as she slowly got out, 'what're you keeping outta that house?'

Issy frowned and glanced to the building and then back at Maggie as she was approaching as if it were a cornered animal. 'What do you mean?'

'The warding, I could see it three streets away, like a house that's on fire, but with magic.'

Issy tilted her head. 'Huh,' she muttered, trying to get a sense of Maggie's magic, and the extent of it – and how much of a headache she was likely to cause. Being able to see magic was right up there in the weird stakes. 'Is it all magic you can see or...?'

Maggie just shrugged, 'It's hard to not see powerful warding,' she said.

Issy just nodded, and unlocked the door to let them inside, 'come on in,' she said. 'Mom? I brought a guest.' She called, kicking off her trainers.

'Iris Vicente Winters get in here now.' Came a call from the kitchen at the end of the hall.

Issy smiled at Maggie. 'I'll just be a minute, make yourself comfortable,' she said, ducking into the kitchen, only to be met with her mother's steely green-eyed glare. Louise might only have just about reached Issy's shoulders, but she was the fiercest person in a room at any given time, and she was currently armed with a tea towel.



‘What have I told you about inviting people without calling ahead first?’ Louise whispered, not wanting her guest to overhear and feel unwelcome.

‘In my defence, that was to Rose.’ Issy held up her hands apologetically and took a step backwards as the tea towel snapped in her direction. ‘Maggie is in a spot of trouble, so I’m putting her up for a couple of days until I know she’s not being tracked by anyone else.’

Louise glanced around the kitchen door and looked at Maggie, who was obviously inspecting the family photos on the wall. ‘I suppose it doesn’t hurt that she’s pretty, huh?’

‘Mom!’

‘Only saying...’

‘You’re old enough to be her mother.’

Louise smacked her with the tea towel again. ‘Cheeky swine. You know what I meant.’

‘No idea what you’re talking about.’ Issy shook her head with a fond smile; Louise wanted grandkids, but Issy wasn’t interested and Rose, well Issy wasn’t going to say she thought that her sister was incapable of raising children, but she didn’t think she’d be mature enough for the job if she was a hundred.

‘Know where your sister is?’

‘On her way,’ Issy said, getting another placemat and cutlery out of the drawer, ‘she said she wasn’t going to be long.’

She went through to the lounge to set a place for Maggie before finding her still looking at the wall of photos.

‘You have a brother too?’ Maggie asked, drawing Issy’s attention to an old photo.

Issy smiled at it fondly, they’d been about seven years old, posing very nicely on the beach in Tenby, hair matted with sand and seawater about ten minutes after trying to drown each other. Rose had a frilly green swimming costume on and Issy wearing yellow trunks.

‘No, that’s my sister Rose and me, before.’

‘Oh,’ she said, looking at some of the other photos that mapped Issy’s gradual transition. ‘Must be nice having a twin?’

‘Sometimes, no more annoying than having any other sibling I’m sure,’ Issy said, ‘only child?’

‘No, two older brothers, one’s a ghost.’

Issy wished she could say that was the strangest thing she’d heard all day, but it wasn’t even close. ‘That’s...nice? They magic users too?’

‘Yeah, family kinda takes it seriously,’ she said.

Issy was about to answer when her Mom breezed through to the table carrying bowls. ‘You alright there, Maggie, is it? I’m Louise.’ She smiled pleasantly, not one to make anyone feel less than welcome in her home.

Maggie followed her through, hovering between the sofa and the dinner table, not sitting at either. ‘I’m sorry about dropping by unannounced.’

‘Don’t worry about it bab,’ she waved a dismissive hand, ‘there’s always plenty to go round.’

Issy nodded in agreement; there was always enough to feed half the street on family dinner night, she often thought that her Mom expected Ma to walk through the door at any time and wanted to be prepared.

The front door banged open with the force of someone trying to announce they were breaking in, making Maggie jump, her hands coming up in a defensive position as her fingers started weaving magic, but Issy quickly put a hand on her arm to lower it.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ Rose announced, the door rebounding off the wall.

‘Rose. Door.’ Louise snapped as she went back through to the kitchen.

‘Sorry,’ Rose said in the most insincere tone she could muster as she shed her jacket before going through to the lounge. She looked from the table to Issy. ‘Not out yet?’

‘Wouldn’t if I were you,’ Issy warned, ‘why were you late anyway?’

Rose shrugged, ‘I got this thing called a job, unlike whatever con you’re pulling.’

Issy was in Rose’s face, nose to nose, despite the fact that her sister would always surpass her in an outright brawl, it never stopped her from a challenge. ‘What was that?’

Rose flicked the bottom of Issy’s glasses enough to lift them. ‘You heard.’

‘Girls!’ Louise’s voice separated them faster than anything physically could. ‘Company behaviour,’ she looked apologetically at Maggie, who just smiled, looking more amused at the twins than concerned by them.

Medora had always said it was only natural that the sisters had spats that wanted to turn into fights, and would then go into one of her 'growing up in the Underworld' stories that were always just on the wrong side of age appropriate, no matter how old the twins were, the stories probably still would be.

'Who's that?' Rose asked, realising that Maggie was in the room, still lingering without sitting anywhere properly.

'A friend,' Issy said before either their Mom or Maggie could say anything, she didn't want to tip Rose off that Maggie was tangled up in vampire trouble, it would only make her want to get the agency involved.

Rose eyed them both for a moment before going into the kitchen. 'How come she gets to bring a date?'

'It's not a date bab,' Louise said as she transferred the pasta into a bowl. 'Maggie is a friend, and I said it was okay.'

'Does this mean I can call Ant?'

'No,' Issy shouted through from the lounge. 'Please tell me you're not seeing him again.'

Rose took the steaming bowl to the table and looked at Issy. 'What if I was?'

'I'll open a rift and chuck him through it.'

Rose narrowed her eyes for a moment before shaking her head. 'It's not serious.'

'It never is.' Issy said, though she was sure that's what Rose said last time, and it lasted for months before he broke her heart and dumped her.

'One of you mind getting the other pot off the side?' Louise called as she came in with the plate of garlic bread.

'Sure,' Rose said and ducked into the kitchen to fetch the large pot of sauce.

Issy moved to the table and pulled the seat by her out for Maggie. 'You're by me,' she said. She and Rose always sat opposite each other, Louise at one end with Medora's spot left open for her to come back and fill it.

Issy got to the bread first, before Rose could take it all, and then she offered the plate to Maggie. 'There are 'snooze you lose' rules in effect in this house when it comes to food.'

Maggie smiled and nodded. 'Used to that one,' she said, taking a couple of slices.

'So, how was work?' Louise asked Rose.

Rose glanced at Maggie, then looked at Issy. 'Fine,' she said, as bowls were filled and passed around, 'just mostly doing paperwork, nothing interesting going on really.'

Issy narrowed her eyes, trying to figure out what Rose wasn't saying, something had definitely got her back up, and she didn't think it was just the unexpected guest. 'But?' She prompted.

'But what?'

'You tell me.'

'Oh, I dunno, it's probably nothing,' she said, 'you've got your ear to the ground more than me.'

'Is this something I'm going to be invoicing your department for?' Issy asked.

Rose looked at her Mom, who gave Issy one of her *looks*, and Issy rolled her eyes. Every time they walked through the doors, it felt like they were teenagers again.

'What's on your mind?' Issy asked.

Rose cast a quick glance at Maggie and gave a subtle shake of her head.

'She'll be coming to the moot with me tomorrow, so if it's anything I need to bring up there, she'll know about it anyway,' Issy said, Rose could be so precious about the agency and its *secrets*.

'Are there any vampire issues that you're aware of?'

Issy glanced at Maggie who dropped her fork hearing vampires, but she contemplated the question over a piece of bread. 'Why? Has something happened?'

'I dunno, maybe.' She huffed, the corner of her right eye pinching in the way it did when she got frustrated.

'Why do you think something's up?'

Rose shrugged and sagged back into her seat, viciously stabbing at some penne. 'There've been three incidents involving vampires in the last three weeks.'

'Well, that's not concerning,' Issy muttered, 'doesn't Galene have someone in the on the inside?'

‘Yeah, he’s my partner, remember?’

What Issy remembered about Rose’s daily life wouldn’t fill a sheet of paper. ‘What happened to Nial? I liked him.’

‘He’s fine, just got assigned to work with someone else for a while,’ Rose said, ‘Don’t you remember, Reynold’s threw his weight around and reassigned everyone with new partners when he first started?’

‘Were keys and a fishbowl involved?’ Issy asked and Maggie nearly choked on her last bite.

Rose snorted. ‘He’s not that bad.’

Issy knew they’d just go around in circles until Louise throttled both of them, so she ended it with an, ‘if you say so.’

‘Anyway,’ Rose went for the last piece of bread, but Louise was faster, and no one at the table was going to challenge her over it. ‘He’s been dealing with these incidents, but it’s odd that Bitch Face is letting it go on.’

‘Are the vampires victims, suspects, or both?’ Issy asked, if it was both then she was likely keeping her house in order, same could be said if they were the victims, but if they were the suspects, then there was no telling how much trouble they could anticipate.

Rose rested her chin on her palm, elbowing the empty dish away as she considered the question. ‘You know what? I assumed victim when he said, but I can’t remember what I actually read.’

Issy’s hand dropped against the table with a thud. ‘Rose.’

‘He said it was taken care of, and I trust my colleagues.’

‘Unbelievable,’ Issy huffed and leaned back as Louise got up and started gathering the plates; Maggie all too happy to volunteer her assistance in clearing the table. Issy moved into her Mom’s seat next to Rose. ‘Has he been reporting back to Gal at least?’ she asked.

Rose hesitated for a second before nodding. ‘Yeah, well he said she’s aware of everything that goes on.’

‘That’s what they all say,’ Issy said. In fairness, it was usually the line she used whenever she wanted to keep her out of what was going on. Still, did she want to get into it with Galene over something she might already know about?

‘I trust him.’

‘You need to be certain before I start pointing fingers in the wrong places,’ Issy said, ‘but as it stands, I’ve not heard anything out of the ordinary going on.’

Rose nodded, running a hand through her hair, pulling it out of its ridiculously tight ponytail; her red hair only just brushed her shoulders, she preferred it shorter and straightened within an inch of its life, compared to Issy’s which was longer, and on the wild side of wavy thanks to Louise.

‘Yeah,’ Rose agreed, ‘I just hate going behind his back.’

‘Scared you’ll get a taste for it?’

‘Shut up,’ Rose nudged her.

‘There’s always a chance he’s hiding something, does he often distract you when you’re reading?’

Rose frowned. ‘Shut up, he’s not like that.’

Issy pushed herself to her feet. ‘I’m sure it will be fine, no use worrying until there’s something to worry about, huh?’

‘That doesn’t work for everything you know.’

‘You’d be surprised,’ she said and looked at the DVD collection, more than ready to change the subject and divert everyone’s attention, before she slipped and said something she didn’t want Rose knowing yet. ‘Who’s turn is it to pick?’

‘Maggie is the guest,’ Louise called through, ‘she gets to choose.’

Issy and Rose exchanged glances as Maggie came in, to have a look at the stack.

‘Wow, movies on discs?’ Maggie opened the first box she pulled off the shelf. ‘What happened to tapes?’

The sisters exchanged glances, ‘you’ve heard of DVDs, right?’

Maggie blinked. ‘Oh yeah, DVDs, we still use tapes at home, family’s really old that way.’ She gasped pulling one off the shelf. ‘No way, I couldn’t wait to see this – my brother...’ she frowned and trailed off.

Issy looked at Rose and she leaned in. ‘There’s family issues,’ she whispered.

‘Ah.’ Rose nodded.

Issy smiled and went over, seeing that Maggie was getting overwhelmed in her decision. She figured that she could influence the selection for the

evening's entertainment. It had to be better than whatever action film Rose wanted to watch for the hundredth time, or Mom's thrillers.

**Chapter Four: 7.38am**  
**Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> October 2012**

Rose had spent most of the night awake because Issy had got into her head, and Rose had let her. She trusted Sean, he wasn't someone who'd go behind anyone's back, let alone hers – but then she kept replaying the conversation. He'd not answered her questions, and she couldn't remember what she'd read in the report.

It was just her though, right?

Still, Rose found herself getting out of bed before her alarm, intending on getting to work before Sean so she could take another look at the file and double check it, just to put her mind at ease. She hated that she was even questioning his reliability, if she found he was doing the same to her, she'd be furious.

The Supernatural and Human Affairs Agency office stuck out as a grey eyesore in the old industrial estate, sandwiched between two abandoned buildings – one had been a factory that was long out of business, and the other one of the many warehouses that wasn't currently in use. There'd been talk for years that they were moving the office to a new building on the other side of the town, in an up-and-coming development off the A38, but so far there was no sign of them making a move.

Rose sighed as she pulled into the car park, seeing that news crews were starting to set themselves up. There were several major networks including Central Vampire News, Midlands Mortal TV, Supernatural News Network. She turned on the radio station to see if she could find what she missed, but every channel had just finished their bulletins and were either on the weather or traffic updates.

Not wanting to get caught up in any of that out front, she decided to walk further around the side of the building, hoping that the side entrance by the smoking hut would be open. Fortunately for her, she was right, and the door that was supposed to be locked 'at all times' was wedged open from whoever had used it last; she closed it behind her, not wanting a rogue reporter to sneak in after her.

She walked around to reception to see who was at the front desk, and if they knew what she'd missed.



‘Morning,’ Tilly greeted as soon as she heard the door open, but seeing it was Rose, her cheeriness dropped, and she looked up at the clock. ‘What are you doing here at this time?’

Rose ignored the suspicious accusation in the receptionist’s tone; she nodded toward the front door. ‘What’s the circus in town for?’

Tilly sighed. ‘I can’t say anything yet,’ she said, ‘and I certainly can’t tell you about the meeting that Reynolds is holding in 304 about what has happened over night that certain people – not including you – were called in early to attend.’

‘So, what didn’t happen last night?’

Tilly smiled and beckoned her in closer; while they didn’t particularly get on, they shared a mutual dislike for the boss, and if Tilly thought she could ruin his day by cluing Rose in on things he apparently didn’t want her to know about, then it was a win for both of them.

‘Three bodies were found, two humans drained of blood, one vampire,’ she said, ‘our teams have already cleared up the scene, but it wasn’t pretty by all accounts.’

‘Who was called out?’

Tilly looked at Rose like she’d asked a deeply existential question, but returned to her computer and tapped the mouse with increasing annoyance. ‘I can’t get that info, sorry.’

‘Who was called into the meeting?’

Tilly narrowed her eyes and looked at her screen again, hitting enter unnecessarily hard before reeling off a list of fifteen names. Both Nial and Sean were on that list, so Rose could at least ask them, it would be easier than trying to sneak into the meeting room.

‘Thank you.’

‘I take thank yous in strawberry cupcakes and bottles of vodka,’ Tilly said.

‘Got it,’ Rose nodded, at least with Sean in a meeting, he couldn’t catch her going back over the file.

Once she was back in her office, she took it from on top of the pile and started reading. A report of two vampires fighting came from a concerned human, Sean was in the area on an unrelated matter, so he went to deal with it; he diffused the situation and waited on the scene until they could be picked up for disturbing the peace, damage to property, assault.

There was nothing unusual there, just Issy being paranoid. Rose returned it to the pile and sat back at her desk, setting herself up for the day and picking up where she'd left off.

Was the attack in Sean's report related to what happened last night? Rose frowned as the question made her pause. It seemed unlikely, but then again, three vampires caught in two different incidents in the same day. Was Queen Bitch really losing that much control of her people? Rose mentally shook herself; it wasn't really her place to get involved, she needed to keep her head down and get on with work now she was officially off desk duty. That was six months of admin hell she didn't want to repeat.

Still, there was a creeping feeling in the back of her head that she was missing something that she needed to be aware of. She tried logging into the system to review the case notes so far, but it was behind a restricted access login that she couldn't get through.

Nial had been called into the meeting... she wondered if he had access to the case.

She sighed. It wouldn't be the first time. They had to change their passwords every six months so she knew his old log wouldn't work. He went for obscure movie quotes. She tried one from the next in the series, and that failed. She tried a couple of others and nothing. Then she thought about the prequel. Success.

He wasn't restricted, so she had to wonder if it was a 'Rose keep out' thing, or if he was actually being assigned to whatever was going on.

The initial report said that the owner of the Ruby Inn was putting the rubbish out after close at around 1am, and they heard a sound around the corner. They found a vampire feeding on a struggling human – and rather than risking getting attacked themselves, they went back inside and phoned the police, who then called the agency as it was a non-human assault. Chrissy in dispatch picked up the call and she sent Phil and Tracy out.

In the fifteen minutes this all took place, a second human was killed, as well as the initial attacker, fangs ripped out.

Rose rubbed her face and sat back; that was a common punishment if someone was caught overfeeding or killing humans, but usually they'd be left alive to suffer the consequences. She groaned, she needed to know who was on

the case and give them a head's up. If Queen Bitch's enforcers were responsible for the vampire's death, then there were no hopes of ever pinning it on anyone. It would have already been covered up by now.

The last guy who'd tried to pin anything on her had cleared his desk and left a note saying he was going on an extended trip abroad, but no one had heard from him since. Rose doubted that he'd survived.

Rose had to wonder what the vampire matriarch did with all the bodies. Sometimes she considered going to check out the pig farm down the road but was sure that Galene had to be more creative than that. She had to wonder if the bitch even knew; just letting her people deal with it without telling her details would give her plausible deniability.

'What are you up to?'

Rose jumped hearing Sean's voice at the door, and she quickly closed the window. 'I'm just getting the work from last night finished,' she said, 'everything okay?'

'Yes,' he said, and lifted a folder for her to see, 'Spoke to Reynolds on the way in, we've got a case.'

'Really?' Rose tilted her head as she regarded her partner. 'Has this got anything to do with what happened last night?'

Sean sat down, eyeing her, 'What do you know about that?'

She shrugged. 'I've got my sources,' she said, 'so what happened?'

'What did your sources tell you?'

Rose considered how much to tell him, but wanted to know if he'd be honest with her. 'Tell me what you know, and I'll decide if my sources were right.'

'A vampire got overzealous feeding on two humans,' he said, 'one of them must have put up a fight and killed him before bleeding out.'

Rose frowned, wondering if that's what they'd all been told to say, or if there was something else going on. Damn it, Issy's paranoia was rubbing off on her. 'What's the word from your evil overlord.'

Sean rolled his eyes. 'The Matron is not evil,' he said, 'I've not spoken to her yet. Someone is going to go over this morning.'

'Not you?'

'No. The boss wanted someone more impartial than me on the case.'

‘So being her glove puppet does have its downsides.’

‘I am not – forget it.’ He all but threw the folder at her. ‘Read that and get yourself caught up. I’m going to take these files down to the archives, got anything that needs to go?’

‘Just these.’ She nudged a pile of papers closer to the edge of the desk, and waited until she heard him walking far enough away from the door before calling Nial.

‘You’re starting early,’ he said, answering his phone almost immediately, ‘S’up?’

‘Sean’s acting shifty, what’s going on with last night’s case? I know there was a meeting this morning.’

Nial sighed, his chair creaking as he leaned back. ‘I’m on it,’ he said, ‘going to go and talk to Galene in a short while.’

‘About what?’

‘Reynolds wants to shut her business down until this has blown over.’

‘Well, that’s not going to end well,’ she said, ‘you do know the vampire’s fangs were ripped out, right?’

‘And?’

‘It’s a classic punishment for severely harming a human,’ she said, ‘so it would seem like her enforcers already dealt with the human murder.’

‘I get the feeling there’s a but lurking in there.’

‘A defanging wouldn’t necessarily kill someone.’

‘So, it could just be made to look like it’s one of hers?’

‘Maybe. Best thing to do might be to go to the bar, have a couple of drinks and let it blow over, don’t antagonise the one person who could make things very difficult for you.’

‘You don’t even like her.’

‘Not even a little, but I respect her influence, and she has the ability to make people disappear without getting her hands dirty.’

‘You been watching mafia movies again?’

‘Where do you think they got their business model from?’

Nial laughed. ‘I’m sure she’s not that bad.’

‘And a tank of starved piranhas just tickles people with their teeth,’ Rose said, ‘just be careful.’

‘I will,’ he said, ‘I’ve got to go, I’ll catch up with you later.’

He hung up before Rose could offer any other warning and she sighed. Maybe she should give Issy a head’s up about what was going on – but then again, she’d find out what was happening at the moot if people in the community weren’t blowing up her phone already.

No, it wasn’t her case to get any more involved with, not when she actually had something that needed her attention.

She opened the new file and a photo of a teenager smiled back at her. This girl didn’t look like someone who’d stand out in a crowd; mousy hair framed a soft face with brown eyes and an awkward lopsided smile. She was wearing a uniform, and the cloudy grey-blue background signalled it was likely a recent school photo.

Ellie Jameson turned eighteen a month ago, human. Found missing from her home on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October 2012. Three days ago. Police had passed it onto the agency after speaking to the parents, concerned that there were supernatural factors involved.

Rose slammed the file shut. Of all the cases, why did Reynolds think that this was a good idea? She stood and started toward the door, but Sean came back and blocked her way.

‘What’s wrong?’ he asked.

‘Have you seen that case?’

‘We talked about it, and I thought that you’d be okay with it,’ Sean said, ‘I know the last one messed you up.’

‘The *parents* messed me up when they didn’t accept what we had to tell them,’ she said; it hadn’t been her fault that she couldn’t actually do anything, but fairy law was clear.

Sean reached out and gently squeezed her shoulder. ‘It will be okay, he wouldn’t have put you on this case if he didn’t think you were capable of it,’ he said.

‘Or he might have put me on it knowing that I wouldn’t be able to handle it and quit.’

‘Will you quit?’

‘And prove him right? Not a chance.’ She turned and sat back down. ‘I’ll start looking online and see what I can find through her social media pages, you

get on the phone to her parents see when a good time would be to do a house visit, then get the background checks run while I finish this lot off.' She patted yesterday's paperwork.

Sean inclined his head. 'Very well.'

Rose huffed turning to her computer. Was she going to quit because of one case? What sort of a question was that?

## **Chapter Five: 9.25am**

Issy poked her head into the spare room to see that Maggie was still asleep; she decided to leave her a little longer while she showered, it had likely been a while since she'd had a comfy bed and a good night's rest. The witch hadn't said much more about herself, evading questions and changing the conversation with a sweetly innocent expression that made Issy wonder if she even realised what she was doing. She had to know of course, but it begged the question: what was she trying to hide? Misha had taken to her – but the cat liked anyone that offered her attention, so Issy couldn't count on her as an impartial judge of character.

Still, Issy wasn't overly concerned about bringing trouble to her door, her flat was as warded as well as her parents' home, and Maggie was protected against whoever might be trying to find her. How much of a problem could she be, really? She seemed relatively harmless.

After her shower, Issy poked her head around the door again, and saw her guest starting to stir. 'Bathroom's free,' she said, 'towels are in the cupboard next to the sink.' She heard Maggie mutter a thanks around a yawn as she returned to her own room and opened her wardrobe.

Her clothes mostly consisted of everything from jeans to dresses – completely different to her sister – Rose'd had the same old worn jeans and tired red and black shirts that she'd bought ten years ago; spending a lot of time in a suit for work, she didn't see the point in spending money on clothes like Issy did; Issy had tried to style her once, and it had ended in arguments.

Issy had to manage the monthly moot, so she had to look semi-professional and authoritative; she decided to go with one of her favourite black polo-necks and jeans. The only reason they'd elected her as informal head of the local 'community' was because of her Ma. Though she suspected that was just an excuse and no one else wanted the hassle or responsibility of trying to make order out of that chaos. All it took was one person to say the wrong thing and a duel could break out in a confined space – a more common occurrence than people might think.

Heading to the kitchen, she turned on the Supernatural News Network, as usual, for some background noise, tossing the cobs and bacon on the side, then filled Misha's food bowl, hoping it would distract the cat from the bacon.

'...quite a sombre air about this morning,' Ricky, one of the presenters was saying, 'as we return to the news that we all woke up with, about three deaths that occurred last night in Alderwais town centre, and we go live to Helen Groves who is in the town.'

Issy dropped the last rasher into the pan and turned her attention to the television.

'Good morning, Ricky,' Helen said, her perfectly done hair and makeup looking a little too bright against the grey backdrop of the high street. 'This town is usually a cultural centre for our community, and it is known for its wonderful Halloween festivities and magical displays, but the death of a vampire and two humans in the early hours of this morning will no doubt have left everyone in this town shocked and concerned for everyone's safety.'

'Morni-' Maggie breezed into the kitchen wearing a black skirt with a deep orange trim, and a long sleeve top that matched, but Issy was too distracted to wonder how she'd pulled that out of the sized bag she'd been carrying.

'Sh,' Issy held up a hand and turned the sound up when she heard the bacon sizzling as Maggie turned it.

'...just fifteen minutes ago the Director of the Midlands Supernatural and Human Affairs Agency held a press conference stating that the Agency were dealing with the vampire attack as a top priority. We have reached out to Matron Galene's office for her response, but have yet to have a reply...'

Issy pinched the bridge of her nose, this was not the kind of thing she wanted to be going into a moot with – did Rose know what was happening. She glanced at Maggie who'd happily taken over breakfast, she'd even found the eggs, so she left her to it and went to find her phone. Fortunately, no one had blown her messages up yet.

Issy:

What the hell is going on?

Have you seen the news?

Did you know about this?

I've got the moot this morning.



Rose:

Chill out. No, I didn't know. I only found out this morning. I'm trying to find out more, but Sean isn't talking, and we've got a new case. Nial is on it but hasn't got much to go on yet.

Issy:

Nial knows? I'll try and catch up with him.

Rose:

Can't you just leave it to me?

Issy:

Has Galene said anything yet?

Rose:

Surprised she's not gone bitching to you.

Issy:

We're not that close these days.

Rose:

I've not heard anything yet.

Reynolds wants to shut her down.

Issy:

Seriously?

Rose:

Yep.

Issy threw her phone onto the bed and walked away from it. Of all the stupid things, she knew that Reynolds was capable of this was a whole new low. She was surprised that Gal wasn't already breaking down her door demanding that she did something about it.

Maybe she was planning on dealing with the agency herself, which could end in a bloodbath. She sighed and checked the time and realised it was getting close to ten – she wouldn't have time to deal with Galene or whatever mood this had put her in before the moot, she could only hope that the Matron wouldn't do anything before Issy had a chance to talk to Reynolds and make him back down.

She paused in the hall as she laced up her trainers and glanced toward the kitchen; she couldn't leave Maggie in the flat on her own, she didn't trust her that much, and wanted to keep an eye on her.

Maggie came out with a bag she'd found and two of Issy's travel mugs steaming in her hands. 'Didn't look like you'd had a drink yet and you looked stressed,' she said, offering one of them to her, 'it's tea.'

'Thanks,' Issy said, wishing she'd made a strong coffee, but it was the thought that counted. She retrieved her phone, then spent five minutes looking for the keys that had been abandoned on the coffee table. 'You mind coming with me?'

'Oh no, not at all.'

Issy nodded to herself as they headed out of the flat. She took the stairs three at a time, nearly taking out Mrs Henshaw and her shopping at the front door.

'Oh Iris, you wouldn't be a dear and carry these heavy bags up the stairs for me, would you?'

'Sure.' She gave the old lady the most genuine smile she could muster, which, when she caught her reflection in the window, she saw was only slightly better than a sneer; thankfully, Mrs H had already turned her back to scowl at Maggie.

'I'll only be a second,' Issy said, picking up the other bags that had been abandoned at the door and ran them all upstairs, declining the cuppa that Mrs H wanted to offer; she'd catch her another time, when she didn't have an excuse to get out of it. The old bat was nice enough if she liked someone, and she seemed to cycle through her neighbours to fall out with.

Currently out of favour was Evan who lived above her and opposite Issy; he was a single dad and Issy thought he was doing a fantastic job with his young baba. Mrs H didn't like being woken up by him pacing around trying to settle the baby. She'd tried to get Issy to agree it was an annoyance, but Issy's logic of 'that's what babies need' didn't sit well; Issy'd had a fortnight's peace while she was also ignored by the old neighbour. Unfortunately, it seemed like that was over now her help was required.

Issy got back to the entrance to find Maggie had wandered outside and was looking around – not that there was much for her to look at. It was an estate of four blocks of flats, each was only four floors high, with a small car part outside

each one, and there were minimal decorative potted plants scattered around that the council took care of; in the winter they were empty, but someone had put a series of pumpkins in the ones along the wall that faced the street, and covered it in fake webbing.

‘Maggie,’ Issy called her over, ‘When you’re worried about someone following you, maybe don’t go sticking your head out in open spaces where those people could grab you if they saw you on your own?’

‘Oh right, sorry,’ she nodded sipping her drink.

Issy took hers back and downed it, trying to not pull a face, how many sugars had she put in there? She turned up the path it was only a two-minute walk to the town centre, though with Maggie, it might be five.

‘Have you ever been to a moot before?’ Issy asked, though after the morning news, there was no way to prepare either of them for what might be going on.

Maggie shook her head. ‘No, the family encouraged me to stay out of local politics, I’ve got a head for causing trouble.’

‘I can see that,’ Issy said, earning a laugh from the witch, ‘well, you heard the news this morning, right?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I’ve got no idea how that’s going to go down, Galene never comes to these things herself, but I’m sure she’ll send someone to make her displeasure known about certain things the agency has done. What the wider community have to say about it is another matter.’

‘They pretty much ‘not one of ours, not our business’ here too?’

‘Usually, but there were human victims, and when humans get scared we all get painted with the same brush,’ she said, ‘all it takes is one group of humans to get loud enough, and things become difficult for us very quickly, next thing you know we have less rights than ever.’

Maggie nodded as she considered the information; she seemed to be so lost in thought she didn’t even pause at the main road, and Issy had to yank her back before a bus could run her over. She looked at Issy sheepishly and glanced down the road before crossing.

Carrying straight on would have led them directly onto the high street; instead, Issy nudged Maggie to the left and headed down the road, passing the

alleyway that led to the Magic Mirror's alcove, along with a nice little café that Issy was sure she single-handedly kept in business, and an old haberdashery that was closed on Wednesdays and Sundays.

The Bastion car park was full as they crossed it to get inside, usually it was only local clan and species leaders that attended these meetings, but Issy could understand more people being curious and wanting answers, which unfortunately she didn't have. She considered calling Nial in but didn't want to put him on the spot, especially as he likely didn't know anything either – poor guy wouldn't last five minutes with this lot.

The moot was held in the common room, which conveniently had the most comfortable seats for everyone, and a licensed bar. Issy grabbed one of the last chairs for Maggie and positioned it within her line of sight. Not that she was expecting trouble there, but she'd rather be cautious.

She took her cob out of the bag and unwrapped it, and they ate together. Issy looked around the room to see who was there, and it was mostly the usual crowd, local fairy cynn leaders, the heads of the major were-families, a few magic users. No vampires. Issy didn't know whether to be relieved or concerned by their absence. Everyone was talking among themselves, giving her a chance to down her breakfast without getting indigestion.

When she was done, she looked at the clock. Five past ten, unlikely that any more stragglers would be coming in now; she moved to the bell on the end of the bar and rang it; most people in the room had sensitive enough hearing that the pitch made them flinch and shut up – more effective than shouting over their voices.

'Sooner we get this started, sooner we can be done,' she said and groaned inwardly at the offended looks she received; half of this crowd liked formality and ritual, while the other half didn't care. She needed to follow polite protocols before they started complaining. 'Most of you know me, but for those who do not, welcome, I am Iris Winters, daughter of Medora.' Her Ma preferred to not use her long shopping list of titles, and it would take a good few minutes to get through them all, so Issy refused to get started on that one. 'Welcome to the monthly moot, so –'

‘I have something to discuss.’ An older woman stood up before Issy could finish her sentence. A few scoffs from around the room agreed that her lack of etiquette was not on. ‘A cat from the south has moved into my street.’

Were-family rivalries, while harmless, could get ridiculous if no one intervened. There was an ongoing issue on Livery Street where two werewolf families had lived in next to each other for years and the competition had steadily got worse; they’d divided the street and adopted everyone in their half, throwing lavish garden parties in the summer, and the brightest light shows and best decorations for every single holiday that anyone celebrated. School functions were just as much of a nightmare. At the same time, they were the first to knock on the door and offer help if they heard the other family was having a problem.

‘I’ll make sure a neutral party is sent to mediate between your families and set boundaries that you can both agree on, if you give me the details after this session, or send them to me via the message board.’

The woman narrowed her serpentine eyes at Issy and blinked slowly but nodded and sat back down.

‘So,’ Issy said before anyone else could jump in, ‘I don’t know who had a chance to see the news this morning.’

There was a mix of shaking and bobbing heads as a murmur rippled through the room.

‘I don’t have all of the details yet, I will go and speak to Matron Galene after the meeting, and then go to the agency,’ she said, ‘when I have an update, I will post it on the message board, and for those of you who don’t know, the details of that can be found on the notice board over there.’ She pointed it out. ‘In the meantime, watch out for yourselves, and each other, and be careful. I know it’s everyone’s favourite night, but I’d really advise you all to reconsider your plans to go out.’ Issy bit back a sigh as the room erupted.

‘Seriously?’

‘You expect us to stay in tonight?’

‘Humans try to spoil everything.’

‘Oi, humans in the room.’

‘Magic users don’t count.’

‘Enough,’ Issy’s voice cut through the arguments. ‘It is a suggestion for everyone’s safety, one of our own was murdered last night and we don’t know the

full, true story. All I am asking is for a little caution, compassion, and respect, is that too much?’

Those who had started the protests bowed their heads and shook them slightly, no one else quite meeting Issy’s gaze.

‘Right, if that is all on that, we can move on,’ Issy said, mentally preparing herself for the minotaur, who looked like he wanted to say something. It was going to be about the National Trust opening the grounds where he tended to visitors, she just knew it; no matter how many times she’d told him that she couldn’t do anything about that, he kept bringing it up.

‘Yes, Ethan?’

‘I want to discuss Tamehill Hall...’

Issy sighed counting back from ten, lips straining to smile as she tried to not let her flat expression slip onto her face.

It was going to be a long morning.

## Chapter Six: 1.30pm

The Jamesons lived in one of the older estates on the far side of town; Rose considered that they either had money or were lucky to get one of the rare council houses in the area.

‘Nice place,’ Sean commented as they got out of the car, adjusting the wide brimmed hat that protected him from direct sun, even though it was nowhere in sight; he looked at Rose, and then glanced down the street.

Rose followed his gaze and frowned. It was a quiet afternoon considering it was half term, and the street was not overly festive, unlike most other places that they’d driven past that offered displays of haunted houses, or a twisted sweet-inspired wonderland. There were no kids running riot in the streets, and no signs of life except for the odd twitching curtain. She loved nosey neighbours; they’d always tell her all the goings on that a respectable family wouldn’t want her to know. Of course, there was always a chance they were just filled with conspiracy theories, or wanting to frame someone for their own misdeeds, but it was all part of the job.

As they walked up the drive that was fully lined with winter pansies; she glanced over the fence at next-door and saw the curtain twitching. ‘We’re being watched.’

‘The street has eyes.’ Sean nodded as he knocked on the door and they both made sure their ID lanyards were on display.

A squat man with a neat brown combover opened the door, his deep-set eyes peering at both of them like they were about to mug him. ‘Yes?’

‘David Jameson? I’m Sean Taylor, from the Supernatural and Human Affairs Agency, this is my partner Rose Winters, I spoke to you earlier this morning?’ He lifted his badge to show him, and the other man examined both of them for a few moments.

‘Come on in,’ David said and stepped aside, ‘Can I get you a drink?’

Sean took the offer as he removed his hat, but Rose politely declined, distracted as she stepped into the hall and immediately identified a crime. It was a murder scene, and the victims were colour and style.

Magnolia and pine had infected every inch of the décor right down to the pine floor and cream rug, creating a bland atmosphere. It even bled through to the lounge, contaminating the cream leather sofa. Somewhere in the house an air freshener squirted one of those ‘fresh’ scents that didn’t smell of anything in particular, but it was the only sound, apart from the hum of the electronics that were on standby, and a monotonously ticking clock on the mantle; Rose’s hearing could pick up a TV somewhere upstairs, but the immediate quiet was almost deafening.

She turned her attention to the mass that was huddled on the sofa, wrapped in a fluffy cream dressing gown, even though it felt like a sauna in there. ‘Mrs Jameson?’

A head of greasy limp hair bobbed in answer. ‘Jill,’ she said.

‘I’m Rose Winters, this is my partner Sean Taylor, we’re from the Agency, here to look into Ellie’s disappearance.’

‘She’s a good girl, she wouldn’t just run away from home, something must have happened to her,’ Jill said.

‘It is why we requested your involvement,’ David said, ‘and given the news this morning – well – could it be connected?’

‘We will conduct a thorough investigation,’ Sean said.

Rose nodded in agreement, looking at the photos that were scattered over the coffee table. ‘This a recent photo?’

She picked up a picture of the teenager, her hair was scraped back in a ponytail, eyes vibrant and filled with excitement; she’d got hold of a lad who looked a little younger than her, holding him in a headlock, pinning him to her side – though he didn’t look too happy to be in front of the camera.

‘Yes, that’s her brother Terry, we were on holiday over the summer,’ she said.

Rose nodded and took a quick picture of the photo on her phone, sitting on the sofa beside her while David came in with drinks.

‘So, take us back, when did you notice that she was missing?’ Rose asked.

‘The morning of the twenty-eighth,’ David said, ‘she didn’t come down to breakfast, so Jill went to wake her up and she wasn’t in her room – her bed hadn’t even been slept in.’



Rose glanced to Sean who had a notepad out and was making notes, it saved her the job. 'What did she do the day before? Where did she go? Who was she with?'

'She went out around lunchtime to meet her friends; she's taking her A Levels this year, she has a lot of study sessions with her friends. They always walk to and from school together, been inseparable since second year.'

'Year Eight?'

'Oh yes, sorry.' He nodded.

'Which friends are these?'

David looked at Jill like it was her responsibility to keep track of those kind of details, Rose wondered if he was one of those people who didn't remember their anniversary until it was too late.

'Zoe Powell, Abby Hammond, and Dan Cordell,' Jill said, 'they're all good friends, they come from good families.'

Rose nodded along, though she got the feeling these were the kind of parents who vetted everything Ellie did and everyone she ever met. 'Did anything seem off with her at all?'

'No, she was her usual self, maybe a little quieter, but she's under a lot of stress with her studying,' David said, 'she's just finished applying to her universities of choice for next year. She's predicted to get all As.'

'You must be really proud,' Rose managed a smile. At least Ellie didn't have a twin that she was always being compared to academically; Rose wondered if the pressure was getting to Ellie, and she'd just gone somewhere to clear her head.

'It's why we know she's not run away, she's doing so well, and has everything planned out.'

'And you've checked with other family members? Grandparents, uncles, aunts?'

'Yes, she's not been in contact with anyone.'

'Okay,' Rose nodded, 'if you give Sean the details of everyone else, family, friends, anyone she might go to, we can follow up with them as well.'

Jill nodded. 'Of course.'

'So, there was nothing out of the ordinary?' Rose asked, and David shook his head. She considered her next question, but there was no gentle way to ask it,

and last time, it hadn't ended so well. 'Did either of you ever make a deal to give up your firstborn at any time? When you were younger maybe?'

David's sunken eyes narrowed until they were almost closed, and his mouth opened then pressed into a thin line; his face repeating that expression as he grew redder in the space of two seconds before managing to sputter a response. 'What? No! How dare you –'

Rose held up her hands defensively to stop his tirade and he deflated instantly; so he had little spine in a confrontation, she noted. 'I did not mean to cause you distress,' she said, 'but I need to rule out all possibilities.'

'Yes, of course,' he muttered, fixing his gaze on his hands, 'sorry, no nothing like that.'

'Was she involved in the non-human community at all? Hang around with magic-users maybe?'

'No!' he snapped, chest puffing again. 'She'd never socialise with *them*.'

'David.' Jill's voice was quiet, and she muttered an apology that even Rose struggled to hear, and David wilted and mumbled an apology of his own.

'It's okay,' she assured, offering her a small smile. 'I know they're not easy questions to consider, but we want to find out what happened to her, and every little detail could help.'

'Of course, we appreciate it,' Jill said.

'Would you mind if I took a look around Ellie's room?'

'What for?' David looked at her.

Rose bit back a sigh. 'There might be something in there –'

'We have already looked.' He lifted his chin in an attempt to stare her down.

She pinned him with a stern look that would have made her Mom proud. 'This is my job – I know what to look for that is not obvious.'

'Please, do what you need to,' Jill said. 'It's upstairs, first door right in front of you.'

'Thank you,' Rose nodded to her, 'Is Terry in?'

'Course he is,' David said, 'always inside playing those damned games in his room.'

Rose gave him as much of a patient smile as she could muster but kept her attention on Jill. ‘Can I talk to him? Maybe he knows something he’s not told either of you?’

‘His room is next to Ellie’s,’ Jill said, ‘but he would have told us – he likes to get her into trouble, you know how siblings are.’

Rose nodded; that was true enough, she used to use any excuse to rat Issy out whenever she had the opportunity to save her own skin – she still would if it had any real effect.

She left Sean in the lounge with the parents, hoping that he’d keep them distracted while she looked around. Once upstairs she opened Ellie’s room and felt relieved seeing the colourless scheme had been broken up by beautiful shades of jade green and cream, Ellie had taste at least. She closed the door as she looked around; at a glance it was neat, and everything looked like it had its place.

She moved over to the dressing table that was near the window where there was a good amount of light. Several bottles of perfumes and body sprays lined up on one side of the mirror, she sniffed a couple of them; they were all quite fresh and fruity smelling.

Beside the dresser was a thin stack of drawers that contained beauty products; one drawer had skin care, her hair products spilled into two of them, then there was one for the little makeup she had, with neat little baskets dividing brushes, eyeshadows, and lip glosses. The last drawer contained neatly lined rows of nail varnishes. Everything was branded, Rose recognised them from what Issy used when she was preening herself.

She turned to the jewellery box on the dresser, and a ballerina started spinning to a tune when the lid was lifted – it must have been a childhood gift. Every ring was in a hole, earrings were paired together, necklaces hung so they couldn’t get tangled, and bracelets were kept in the small drawers. Ellie took care of her things.

Rose closed it up and took a few steps back; she could almost see her sat there, putting the last touches to her makeup, fixing her jewellery, and misting herself in spray before running out of the door. A teenager, a young woman with her whole life ahead of her. Was she someone who lost track of time while getting ready, experimenting with her look, wanting to be perfect? Did she get told off by

her parents if she wore too much? Was it all just for herself to practice with around the house?

Rose moved over to the desk that was neatly stacked with notebooks and revision guides, all marked with different coloured tabs. She carefully leafed through them to see if there were any notes hidden in the pages, but they seemed to be subject-related. Rose pulled a face, remembering Issy being the same, she thought her sister would get on great mentoring Ellie, probably give her tips on coordinating her pen collection or something.

Rose checked through her drawers, and under her bed, but there was nothing unusual, not even a speck of dust.

Going into her wardrobe, she didn't know what she expected to find; there was a neat row of footwear for every teenage occasion, and on the top shelf there were three handbags, a backpack, and a stack of boardgames. Just beyond them in the far corner though was some blankets that looked very square shaped.

She carefully pulled the box from its hiding place and sat on the bed with it. Three books inside: *Devils and Demons: the complete history of the Underrealms*, *How to Navigate the Apeira*, and *What Lurks Beyond: Denizens of the Apeira*. Rose frowned, why did Ellie have an interest in the Apeira? The place that existed between the realms; Issy knew more about it, but Rose at least understood that it was dangerous, and no mortal could hope to survive long there; she doubted that *she'd* survive long there if Medora's stories were anything to go by.

Rose leafed through all three, they'd been borrowed from the library in town; she quickly wished that she'd not seen the nightmare-fuel that were some of the illustrations, but none of the pages had been marked out, there were no notes hidden in the pages; she hoped it was just an academic interest, but ... this was something, a clue. Ellie was missing – what if she'd fallen into a rift, or worse, been lured by something?

No, a couple of books weren't hard evidence, if they were, Issy would have been in a lot more trouble at Ellie's age.

In the bottom was another box, this one small and wooden, only slightly bigger than her hand, covered in runic sigils. She had no clue what they meant, and she was not intending on opening it, how was it connected to the books? As

far as Rose could tell, it didn't have the demonic presence something that had passed through the Apeira should.

She tried all of her jacket pockets, just about fitting it into one of the inside ones, though it was snug, so she had to take it off, because it looked obvious she was smuggling something out of the house; at least it was a well-heated house; it wouldn't seem odd to be carrying it over her shoulder.

She put the books back in the box and covered it with blankets where she'd found it and made sure everything was as they had been left. Hearing the TV in the next room, Rose knocked before entering. The room was in darkness with curtains drawn, and the lone figure was sat on the bed, bathed in light from the television, *Z World* on the screen; zombies created by science spreading through the world.

Rose liked the thought of science being behind zombies, it made mundane humans seem less powerless if they could combat magic with scientific creations – they just needed to figure out how to control them. Issy would scoff at the idea and say that there were perfectly capable necromancers still around, providing one knew where to look; Rose never asked specific questions, because then she'd have to find out if her sister was involved with illegal magic, or at least in contact with those who were, and that was too much paperwork, and she didn't want to be forced to rat out her sister.

'Who're you?' Terry asked, barely glancing over as he blew up some limbs.

'I'm Rose, looking into Ellie's disappearance, it's Terry, right?'

'Oh fuuu...not again!' He ducked from a hail of gunfire from behind a fence that was losing its integrity. He peered around the corner. The firing stopped and screams started.

Rose watched for a moment; a metallic thump-drag was the only sound in the room. She'd cleared that area not long ago; he'd gone too far and triggered the next phase before getting the items he needed.

'See that shed to your right? Get your health up and make a run for the back of it, there's an aerosol can, armour upgrade, and extra health items.'

He shook his head, playing a game of duck and fire. 'I don't think I can make it. Can never get through this guy.'

‘It’s a tough fight to time, but it’s possible,’ she said, ‘want me to walk you through it?’ She wasn’t there to play games, but he wasn’t going to talk while he was distracted. She set her jacket on the desk and perched on the edge of the chair. After a quick inventory check, she changed his gear out and made her move.

‘So, what can you tell me about your sister?’ she asked, making short work of the mid-level boss. ‘How was she in the last few days you saw her?’

The teenager hesitated and looked over to the open door.

‘It’s okay, my partner is talking to your parents.’

Terry sighed and looked at Rose for the first time and eyed her a moment. ‘She was quieter than usual, acted weird at school,’ he said, ‘was off up a corner of the field on her own.’

‘Did anyone else notice?’

‘Her friends, maybe? They’d try talking to her but just walk away.’

‘How was she at home?’

‘She was her normal self,’ he said, dropping his gaze.

‘But?’ Rose prompted.

‘She snuck out of the house.’

Rose glanced at him; a teenager sneaking out at night, which was hardly anything new. ‘Do your parents know?’

He shook his head. ‘No, I never told them, she’ll be in enough trouble when she gets home.’

Rose paused the game and set the controller on the side. ‘Did she sneak out the night she went missing?’

Terry nodded.

‘Can you tell me about it?’

‘I was getting a drink from the kitchen, and she came downstairs, asked me to not tell, said she wouldn’t be long.’

Rose nodded, and gently probed him for more information, finding that it had been around one in the morning, that she’d been wearing black leggings, a green hoodie, and trainers, she hadn’t been carrying anything with her as far as he could see. Unfortunately, he’d had no idea where she was going, and didn’t hear the sound of a car, so she must have walked at least part way.

‘What’s the agency like?’ Terry asked.

‘We do what we can to protect humans that can’t protect themselves, mediate in matters within the supernatural community, and make sure that the peace treaties between all species and realms are being upheld.’

He sat back, considering the information quietly for a moment. ‘So, you’ve got a good chance of finding her?’

Rose smiled, passing the controller back to him. ‘We have the best resources available. I’m going to do everything I can to bring her home,’ she said and pulled her wallet out, taking one of her cards. ‘If you think of anything else, then you can contact me any time.’

‘Thanks.’

Rose gathered her jacket and left him to it, shutting the door behind. She poked around the rest of the upstairs, though the spare room had some creepy dolls that needed destroying before they woke up and started a murder spree – she was sure one winked at her. A problem for another day; one to fob off to Issy at that.

She made her way back downstairs and could hear Sean still talking to the parents, they’d moved on to Ellie’s friends by the sound of it, so Rose decided to take a look outside.

The kitchen was small for the size of the house, the island counter took up a lot of space, and it smelled almost clinically clean. The back door was unlocked, leading out to a small patio and neatly manicured garden. She checked around for any signs that something might have been dropped from the window, but nothing looked like it had been disturbed, or if it had it had been tidied over.

She followed the small slab path around to the gate separating the front and back, the latch was stiff, and she had to yank it up with some force; the gate scraped against the concrete and a dog barked somewhere up the street. There was no way that would go unnoticed, even in the early hours. The hedge separating the gardens wasn’t too high at the back, Rose considered the possibility of her climbing over, and she peered over trying to see if the border had been trampled.

‘Can I ‘elp ye, duck?’ A voice called from further down the hedge in the front garden, a small head of white hair poking over.

Rose leaned over to get a better look at the small older woman. ‘Hi, I’m Rose, I’m investigating Ellie’s disappearance.’

‘Well, she ain’t in my border,’ she said, squinting at Rose adjusting her glasses. ‘Poor girl, what happened can’t be right.’

‘What do you think happened?’ Rose asked.

‘Well, a girl like that don’t just up and leave without a word.’ She leaned in and beckoned Rose closer. ‘They’re a strange lot them Jamesons.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘Look how perfect those bloody pansies are, if that’s not some dark magic I don’t know what is.’

Rose looked over at the innocent looking plants that lined the drive, and wilted internally, sometimes neighbours were helpful, other times they were nuts, still, she’d run a flower by Issy, just in case. ‘I’ll definitely keep that in mind.’ She said and glanced over her shoulder hearing the front door open, Sean emerged with David and Jill, watching her. ‘Thank you for your help, Mrs...?’

‘Waite, Mary.’

Rose nodded and passed her a business card that was scrutinised before being stuffed in her apron. ‘If you think of anything else then give me a bell.’

‘Ta me duck, you watch how you go.’

Rose nodded, managing a ‘you too,’ before turning and hurrying away.

‘What did that nosey old hag have to say?’ David demanded as soon as Rose was close enough, though she was sure his voice carried enough for Mrs Waite to hear.

‘Nothing about Ellie,’ Rose said, ‘is there anything else that either of you can think of?’

The parents looked at each other and shook their heads. ‘No,’ David said, though Rose thought it was less convincing than the time she denied denting her Mom’s car.

‘Did you know she snuck out the night she disappeared?’ Rose asked.

Jill sighed and nodded. ‘I did,’ she said, ‘I’d caught her sneaking home on Saturday night, she said she wasn’t going to do it again.’

‘You never told me.’ David puffed up a little.

‘I didn’t think she’d do it again, not so soon after getting caught.’

‘Did she say what she was doing or where she was going.’ Rose asked.

‘No,’ Jill shook her head, ‘I was so tired I let it go – it wasn’t like her at all and she said she wouldn’t do it again – I should have asked more questions...’



‘You should have told me.’ David said.

‘It’s not your fault,’ Rose said, cutting off anything else David might have said, ‘her friends might know more, we will go and talk to them.’

Jill nodded and wrapped her dressing gown around herself more.

‘We will do what we can to find her,’ Sean said.

‘Thank you.’

Rose headed down the path and dropped her phone into one of the plant pots, picking it up, along with one of the pansies, just so Issy had something to check for magic.

‘You okay?’ Sean asked catching up to her.

‘Yeah, just being clumsy,’ she said, sliding the flower into her trouser pocket. ‘What do you think?’

Sean sighed and shook his head as he unlocked the car. ‘It’s really hard to say.’

‘Might be magic involved,’ she said settling into the car, ‘I need to run a couple of things by Issy.’

‘Alright, I’ll drive us back to the office, and you can go from there in your car.’

‘Sure, she’ll probably be in the moot a while longer anyway.’ Rose said, throwing her jacket onto the backseat, wincing as the box clonked against the side.

‘Do I want to know?’

‘Just something I found that she was hiding, it’s what I want Issy to check out.’

‘Magic?’

Rose nodded. ‘I think so.’

‘We do have our own department.’

Rose looked at him and laughed, the agency’s magic department couldn’t pull off a kid’s birthday party.

## Chapter Seven: 2.15pm

Issy had spent the last four hours keeping the moot on track; and while no one else was outright bringing up the vampire issue, people kept breaking off into whispers about it. Some were saying that it wasn't the first incident, others saying that there was a lot of in-fighting in Galene's ranks, and one theory that outside players were coming in. Issy didn't want to speculate, she preferred to deal with facts.

She was just drawing the meeting to a close when the door slammed open, and Issy almost groaned as Galene came striding in, dressed in white shirt and trousers with a black jacket, flanked by two of her black suited enforcers. She'd been a brunette for the last decade, with her hair barely grazing her shoulders. Her icy-blue eyes fixed on Issy, and she smiled, not in an amiable way, but in one that made every hair stand on end. Her instincts told her to defend herself or run.

Everyone in the room tried to avoid her stare, people started finding reasons not to be caught between the two figureheads; Issy glanced at Maggie, she needed to keep Galene's attention away from her, just in case she was the reason for the rare personal visit.

'Issy, pet,' Galene said in a tone that could only mock friendliness, 'you need to do something about that agency.'

'I was going to come and speak with you about the matter in private once the moot was over, Matron,' Issy said, 'I am sure you do not want your affairs brought to the attention of a public forum.'

Galene narrowed her eyes at the challenge. 'My business will remain private.'

'Then what cannot wait?'

'That human has dared to try and close my bar,' she said, 'I thought I would give you a chance to reason with him.'

There was a definite 'before I take action; lingering there, and if that happened Issy knew there would be a blood bath, and as much as she couldn't stand the current director, she did have one or two friends who deserved to be spared.

'I will look into this matter, Matron, and I will be in touch.'

'You will have it resolved by this afternoon.'

Issy lifted her head to meet Galene's icy stare. 'It will take as long as it does.'

'Watch yourself, Iris.'

Issy lifted her chin, despite every instinct telling her to back down before she met a bloody end. 'Of course, Matron,' she said, 'I meant no disrespect.'

Galene leaned in and smiled almost imperceptibly, and Issy could feel her heart hammering in her chest. She took a slow breath and inhaled the ginger and bergamot undertones of Galene's perfume. It had been a favourite that she wore on date nights. The vampire had her exactly where she wanted.

'Of course you did, pet,' Galene whispered, then stood back.

Issy slowly exhaled and glanced around the room; the few who'd remained were pretending to not watch intently from the safety of the bar. Even Maggie had scooted back to the crowd, though she was just quietly watching everyone else, and no one paid her any attention.

The two enforcers, Emma and Tiffany, stood at the door, expressions too close to scowls to be considered neutral, as people ducked and darted through them when they wanted to leave. Amusing under other circumstances.

Did you bring that witch with you?' Galene asked.

Issy tilted her head, turning her attention back to Galene. 'Which witch?'

'I do love it when you play cute,' Galene smiled, reaching over to tuck a loose strand of hair behind Issy's ear. 'Tell me where they are.'

'I don't know.'

'You are a terrible liar; you forget that I know you too well.'

'You flatter yourself,' Issy said and took a step back.

Galene smiled. 'I am merely concerned for their safety.'

'I'm sure they are safe wherever they are,' she said, 'what about the ones that were tracking them? Were they yours?'

Galene narrowed her eyes for a moment, watching Issy before moving over to the bar, and the few that lingered scattered. She poured herself a generous glass of whisky, then filled a second glass. 'Let's go somewhere a little more private,' she said, and her eyes fell on Maggie, who was leaning against the far end of the bar, twisting a pendant around her neck through her fingers.

Issy casually stepped into her line of sight. 'Head on up to the office, I'll just finish taking details here and I'll join you.'

‘Don’t keep me waiting, pet.’

Issy exhaled as she turned from Galene and heard the other walking away. Damn. She couldn’t leave Maggie there with those two, just in case the enforcers tried anything when her back was turned.

She got her phone out. ‘Right, you wanted some supplies from the shop,’ she said to Maggie loudly, ‘come this way and I’ll get you sorted.’

She led her through the back entrance to the shop, calling her Mom once they were in the Magic Mirror, smiling to Nettie.

‘Hello baba, y’alrite?’ Louise answered her phone.

‘Yeah...I don’t know – are you doing anything this afternoon?’

Issy could hear her Mom moving. ‘What’s wrong? Where are you? Are you hurt?’

‘No, no I’m fine,’ she assured her quickly, and heard Louise stop, ‘but can you come to the shop and pick up the... package I showed you last night at dinner?’

‘The pretty one? Is she hurt? Either of you in danger? Do I need to bring owt from the armoury?’

Issy laughed. ‘No, it’s fine. I’ve just got a couple of things I need to do, and I’d be happier if she was home with you.’

‘I’m leaving now, I’ll only be five minutes.’

‘Great thanks, I’ll come and pick her up when I’m done.’

‘Be careful, love you.’

‘I always am, you more.’ She hung up and looked to Nettie, who was in her usual position, leaning against the counter, flicking through a magazine.

‘What’s going on?’ The half dragon asked as she scratched at her dry patch.

Mom’s coming to pick Maggie up in a few minutes, would you walk them both to the car and make sure no one is following them?’ Issy said, ‘Galene’s here and her goons are on the Bastion’s door.’

‘Sure thing hon.’ Nettie eyed Maggie for a moment. ‘Leave her with me.’

‘Thanks,’ Issy said, ‘after I’ve dealt with Galene, I’m heading to the agency to see what they’ve got to say for themselves.’ She looked at Maggie.

‘When I’m done, I’ll be round to pick you up.’

‘Don’t worry about me,’ Maggie said, ‘your ma’s nice.’

Issy nodded, knowing that her Mom would take in anyone given half the chance. ‘Okay, I’ll try to not take too long,’ she said and headed back through to the Bastion, making sure the door was locked behind her.

When Issy reached the office upstairs, she found the blinds were closed and Galene was sat at the desk with her feet up, a glass of whisky in hand; the other glass was waiting on Issy’s side of the desk. She was tempted to leave the door open, but it wouldn’t make a difference; Galene was faster and could easily pin her against the wall before Issy realised she’d even moved – she gave herself a mental shake and swallowed.

She rounded the desk and sat down, pushing the glass away, ignoring Galene’s quirked eyebrow. Issy cleared her throat. ‘Are the vampires hunting for a witch on your orders?’

‘Straight to business is it, pet?’

‘We have nothing else to discuss.’

Galene smiled, sipping her drink. ‘No? I am interested in talking to that witch.’

‘Why?’

‘It is a business matter.’

‘You want to talk to a witch that your people targeted, it’s my business.’

‘They were not my people.’ Her lips pressed into a thin line as she finished her glass and picked up the rejected one.

It was hard to tell if she was annoyed at the fact someone outside of her dominion was trying to encroach, or that she’d let slip that there were people acting outside of her authority.

‘Whose were they?’

Icy eyes narrowed from beyond the rim of the glass as the silence stretched. Issy realised she was not going to get an answer.

‘Were they acting alone or part of a larger group?’

‘Give me the witch and I will give you information.’

That was hardly a fair trade. Issy leaned forward. ‘How about you give me information, and I will deal with the agency today.’

‘You were going to do that anyway.’

‘You came in and demanded that I deal with it today,’ Issy corrected with a perfectly polite smile, ‘I never actually agreed.’

She stared the vampire down, confident that she had her; Galene wasn't someone who did her own dirty work. Issy was sure the only reason that she'd personally made an appearance today was to get under her skin, or into her knickers. Fortunately, only the former was working.

'That was a request at the moot, within your remit as a liaison,' Galene said with a smile, watching as Issy's own smile falter.

'I've already said I don't know where she is, I can't just conjure people from thin air.'

'With some effort you could.'

'That's not my kind of spell craft, and you know it,' Issy said, 'can you stop playing games and tell me what is going on?'

'My information does not come free.' She let her feet fall to the floor and leaned in.

'I am not giving you the witch.'

'I know,' she said, reaching across the table for her hand, but Issy pulled away, 'I know when you are unyielding in a matter.'

'What's it going to take for you to tell me what I want to know and get you on your way?' Issy asked, 'I'm sure you've got more important matters to engage than indirect conversations with me.'

'As have you,' Galene said, and sat back as she savoured the last sip of whisky, 'very well, for the small price of an undetermined favour to collect at any time, without debate or refusal, I will answer your questions.'

Issy watched her for a moment, not liking the way her smile slowly widened. There was no way that would end well, but Galene was holding all the cards. 'The witch –'

'I will not ask you to hand them over, give me their location, or otherwise tell me how to contact them,' she said, 'will that suffice, or do we need to get a fairy lawyer in here to write a contract?'

Issy considered the option for five seconds, but she didn't want to waste more time. 'I'm sure we'll survive without one.'

'Someone else is trying to operate in the area,' Galene said, 'it is possible they have magic detectors similar to ours, though why that didn't point directly to you I don't know.'

'An easier target maybe?' Issy suggested.

Galene had been trying to encourage Issy to spread the vampirism curse for years; it was something that only some magic users could inflict effectively, and only the rare few who had an affinity for blood magic were able to guarantee.

‘Perhaps,’ the vampire agreed.

‘Who is behind this other group?’

‘You already know everything you need to.’

Issy’s hand hit the table hard enough to make Galene lean back. ‘If there’s trouble I need to know.’

Galene arched an eyebrow as she regarded Issy in the same manner one did a child who was trying to show off a really bad trick. ‘I deal with my business pet.’

‘Then tell me about last night.’

‘Someone got greedy and killed two humans.’

‘I can’t imagine one of your goon squad being so careless as to leave bodies for people to find.’

Galene narrowed her eyes, lips pursing.

‘If you want me to deal with Reynolds and get the agency off your back, then you need to tell me everything.’

‘It was not one of mine.’

‘So in the last twenty-four hours, you’ve had three people from...outside your domain as it were, coming in and causing problems, two have been looking for someone to create more of your kind, and one was straight up murdering humans before being murdered themselves.’

‘Yes.’

Issy wished she hadn’t given that drink away now. ‘What other issues have you been having?’

‘There have been no other problems.’

Issy didn’t know whether to believe her or not, but her good will to answer questions was only going to last for so long. ‘Are you sure?’

‘There is nothing else that would be counting toward treason, if that is your concern,’ Galene said, ‘now I believe that I have told you beyond what our deal called for. You can go to that agency and tell that human that I have my own investigators and I shall be taking care of matters myself.’

‘You can’t be your own law when there are human fatalities.’

‘Someone has come to my doorstep and broken my laws, I will not let it stand unchallenged,’ she said, ‘the only thing for the agency to do is console the aggrieved families, let them know justice will be meted, and put those victims to rest.’

‘It’s all over the media.’

‘I am aware.’

‘Are you going to do anything about that?’

Galene tilted her head. ‘Why do you think that I came here so late?’

‘Because you like to make a dramatic entrance?’

The vampire laughed, ‘In part.’

Issy inclined her head slightly, though she dreaded to think what had come from Galene stepping in front of the cameras, or how much she’d have to clean up and calm down in the aftermath. ‘Anything I need to be forewarned about?’

‘Not at all, pet,’ she said, ‘now if you’ll excuse me, I have other matters to tend to, do let me know when you’ve straightened out that Kevin Reynolds creature.’

‘You’ll be my first port of call,’ Issy said, if it would appease her and get her out quicker. One thing she did not want to do was deal with him, but between her and Galene, she was likely to only lamp the bastard, not rip out his chest whatever might constitute his heart.

Issy stood and picked up the glasses in one hand, smiling to Galene who eyed her for a long moment before standing, leaning in a little too close as Issy opened the door.

‘Until later, pet.’

Galene’s hand lingered over Issy’s on the doorknob for a few seconds too long, and Issy hoped that ‘later’ could be deferred to a phone call.

She waited for Galene to leave before trusting her legs to hold her steady enough to get her down the stairs.

That damned vampire would be the death of her yet.



## Chapter Eight: 2.35pm

‘What in the hells?’ Rose muttered under her breath seeing that she had three missed calls from her Mom.

‘Everything okay?’ Sean asked, turning off the engine once he’d parked the car.

‘Just a sec,’ Rose muttered and called her back.

‘Alrite bab?’

‘Sorry Mom, I was with a case, is everything okay?’

‘Yeah, just going to ask if you wanted to pick up a chippy on your way home, Maggie is here while Issy’s working.’

Rose’s expression fell, and she couldn’t quite hide it in her tone. ‘Sure. I’ll call you later for the order if *she*’s still there.’

‘Oh be nice.’

‘I thought I was.’

‘I’ll talk to you in a bit, love you.’

‘Love you too.’ Rose hung up the phone. ‘Oh for the love of – can’t she learn to send a text?’

‘What’s up?’ Sean asked.

‘Issy’s got a new friend who she brought to dinner last night, now that friend is hanging out with Mom while Issy’s working.’

Sean’s head tilted as he considered the information. ‘Really?’

‘Yeah.’ She huffed. ‘You know, Mom got mad the last time I tried to bring someone over like that, but Issy brings a friend round at the last minute and it’s no big deal. That’s Issy for you, She Who Can Do No Wrong.’

‘So you don’t like this friend?’

‘Yeah – no – I dunno – she just seemed a little weird.’

‘Aren’t all of Issy’s friends?’

Rose looked across at him and snorted. ‘At least you get it,’ she said, ‘wouldn’t surprise me if she’s some weird witch who I should be investigating for illegal magic.’

‘Maybe she’s getting help from your sister?’

‘Why would she do that?’

Sean shrugged. 'Isn't it what Issy does in the community?'

'Is never mentioned anything about her being in trouble.' Rose frowned and looked at her phone again, wondering if she needed to talk to her sister about it. If Issy was bringing trouble to their door then she needed to know, right?

'I'm sure it's nothing,' Sean said, 'It's not like she'd hide anything from you.'

Rose narrowed her eyes, of course she would, and they both knew it. She needed to know exactly who Maggie was and what Issy was doing with her. She looked at Sean when he shifted in his seat to get his phone out.

'The Good Matron calls,' he said, 'wants me to go and meet her in person.'

Rose cocked her head. 'What does she want?'

'Who knows,' he said, 'might only take an hour, might be gone the rest of the afternoon.'

Rose eyed him and looked to his phone, she hadn't heard it go off, and he wasn't one for keeping it on silent. Maybe she'd been too wrapped up in her own thoughts to hear it – she was usually more observant than that.

'Right,' she said, opening the door and sliding out, 'thanks for the lift.'

The second she stepped away and the door fell closed he drove off and her stomach sank as she realised that she'd left the box in her jacket on the back seat. She dialled him but his phone went straight to voicemail.

'If you get this, can you please come back, I left my jacket and a box on the back seat, I need both of them.'

That was problem one. Problem two, she discovered as she walked closer to the entrance and was blinded by an onslaught of camera flashes and a deafening barrage of questions.

'Oh hells no,' she muttered and looked over the top of the crowd, 'you've got this right?' she said to the door, and they all turned around to see who she was talking to.

She used the brief distraction to run around the side of the building to sneak into the other entrance, though as she rounded the corner, she could see it was guarded by a scrawny kid who looked like he was an intern that'd been given the short end of the stick.

'You do know the big kids are playing out front, right?'

‘And you’re here sneaking in through the side,’ he pointed out, ‘Toby Dalton, with the Mortal Herald.’

‘Good for you,’ she said, moving toward the door, only for him to block her path.

‘Just a moment of your time Miss...?’ When she didn’t respond, he looked at her lanyard, ‘Winters. Senior offic-’ he started to read, even as she yanked it from around her neck and stuffed it into her pocket.

‘Go away.’

‘What can you tell me about last night.’

‘Nothing.’

‘Why not?’

‘Not on that case.’

‘What case are you on?’

‘Like I’m gonna tell you.’ Rose turned and started walking toward the back of the building hoping that she could get to the next entrance in peace.

‘Can’t you give me something? It’ll look really good for me.’

She flexed her fists and her eye twitched slightly hearing him hurry to keep up with her pace.

‘Miss Winters, please,’ he said, ‘the agency set up a press conference shortly after the news broke, and then the vampires made their own statement, the people need to know who to believe so they can feel safe in their own town.’

‘I already told you I’m not involved with that, you’re best to go and bug someone else,’ she said, not even stopping to look at him.

‘Do you know anything or are you just really bad at your job?’ he asked, ‘how did you get your job as a senior officer?’

Rose ignored him as he got his phone out.

‘Let’s see if you’ve made any stories.’

‘You’re not going to find anything.’ Rose could feel her nails digging into her palms as they elongated into claws, the bones in her hands cracking and popping as they changed shape.

‘That because you’re so ineffective...’ he started, looking at her arms seeing the blood smearing her white sleeves. ‘What’s that?’

Rose’s hands were shaking, not entirely from the pain alone, and she hid them by crossing her arms, smearing blood across her shirt. She could feel the

sharpness of her half-formed scales digging into her skin, ripping through the material.

‘Leave me alone.’ She turned and started walking away.

‘You’re bleeding.’ He followed her again, reaching out.

As soon as he got close, Rose whirled around with one arm, smacking him with enough force to send him falling backwards several feet away, her nose cracking as it flattened and plated scales erupted from her skin.

He coughed, lifted his gravel-burned face, and stared at her a moment trying to register what happened and how things had escalated. Rose’s mouth opened and closed several times, but the apology kept dying before it found a voice. She just turned and fled through the door, letting it slam behind her.

She lifted her shaking hands to her face but paused seeing the elongated digits and sharp claws, with half formed ruddy-coloured scales poking out of her blood-smearred skin. She heard a pounding in her ears and realised it was her own heartbeat. Several ragged, gasping breaths later she was still unable to calm down or even think straight.

She – she needed – she needed to – Nial. She needed Nial.

The back door led to a stairwell, her legs shook as she took the first few stairs, pulling herself up by the banister, breaking it in several places thanks to her death-like grip, leaving a bloody trail.

Thankfully, she didn’t meet anyone on her way to her former partner’s office.

‘Rose?’ Nial shot to his feet seeing the state she was in; Rose’s eyes were a solid amber colour with three black pupils in each, her teeth a little too long and sharp for her face, nose flattened by plated ruddy scales that had started spreading over her cheeks. He took her arm and sat her on the small two-seater in the corner of his office while his partner, Charlie, glanced out into the corridor before closing the door.

Rose looked at him. ‘Back door, south entrance two... I... I think I hurt someone...’ her voice was quiet but rougher than normal.

‘I’ll go and check,’ Charlie said.

‘Bring a shirt from her locker on the way back,’ Nial said, ‘Code is 4985, right?’ he looked at Rose, who barely nodded her head.

‘Yeah,’ Charlie said and left the room, closing the door behind her again.

Nial pulled a chair over and sat in front of Rose. He noted that her fingers had elongated and turned into sharp claws, and shards of scales were poking through her skin without fully pushing through to form a hardened, scaly exoskeleton. He'd only seen her transform into her devilish visage once a few years ago and it had been painful for her, both physically, and mentally; she hated how much stronger she was when she leaned on her innate form. He'd been thrown clear across the park when one of her wings accidentally clipped him, and she'd barely forgiven herself for it – even if he'd assured her that it was only an accident.

'Shit, okay,' he muttered to himself, gently taking her hands to hold.

'Don't,' she tried to pull away, but he didn't let go, even as her sharp, rough skin dug into his palms.

'You're not gonna hurt me,' he said, 'it's okay, just focus on me.' He caught her gaze and smiled, exaggerating his breathing in slow deep breaths until she was in sync. 'Good.' He gently squeezed her hands.

'I-I can't calm down.'

'Yes you can,' he said.

Rose swallowed as her ragged breaths slowly started falling, following Nial; she felt the ache in her hands and started to look down.

'Hey,' Nial said, drawing her attention back to his face. 'Remember that team building week we went on five...six years ago, was it? We were doing that stupid orienteering exercise, and you decided that there was a shortcut off the map and it started pissing it down? We took shelter in a cave that was so haunted they ended up having to call a medium out because the ghosts followed us back to the centre we were staying in?'

He smiled seeing Rose's lip twitch, and the whites of her eyes started returning, he continued. 'Then we snuck out to town for a booze run, and everyone got so rat-arsed we were still drunk crawling through the caves the next morning.'

The scales on her face receded and she grimaced as the bones of her nose cracked back into their natural shape and she managed a small smile.

Nial chuckled to himself at the memory. 'You were at the back with Charlie, egging her on to growl every so often just to freak everyone out.'

Rose gave a quiet laugh. 'I was getting bored and everyone was so slow,' she said and flexed her hand with a wince.

'Forget your hand,' Nial said, taking a firm grip on it again. 'Yeah, it certainly got everyone moving. I was telling Leon about it last night, it's why it came to mind.'

'Leon last night, huh?' she echoed, appreciating the distraction, 'it's going well with you two then?'

'Yeah,' he nodded. 'We went to that new pub, Phoenix, where the Kite used to be, it's not bad.'

'I'll have to check it out.'

Nial smiled, feeling her hands finally return to normal. 'Better?'

Rose slowly flexed her hands, starting to gingerly massage them. 'Yeah.'

'I'll go and get you a cuppa, then you can tell me what happened?'

Rose nodded again and tucked her feet under herself. She ran her hands over each other carefully, just to feel the soft human skin. Why had that reporter got to her? She'd been called far worse before and nothing – maybe she was already riled up by her conversation with Sean but still – she shouldn't have lost it like that.

'Hey,' Charlie's voice made her jump and wipe her wet eyes, which only served to smear more blood across her face.

'The guy you talked about, found him and sent him to medical, he was a bit shaken but he'll be okay,' she said, 'got these from your locker.' She set the shirt to one side before handing her a pack of wipes.

Rose pulled off her bloody shirt, balling it onto the floor before gently wiping away the blood on her still tender skin, bruises already starting to form.

'Does it always look like you've gone ten rounds in the ring?' Charlie asked.

'Feels it too,' Rose said as she buttoned up her shirt, 'Is it the same when you shift forms?' She asked, it wasn't something that she'd thought of asking before, it just wasn't the type of thing to bring up in general conversation, but while they were around the conversation it was a chance for her to learn something new.

'First few times, but I do it so often now it's not so bad,' she said. 'Wait,' she took a wipe and paused as she sat down, 'can I?' She received a nod in

response and started to gently wipe the blood from her bruised face. ‘Does it swell up as well?’

‘Not so much, just bruises a lot.’ Rose said.

Charlie nodded. ‘Rest this over your eyes and nose,’ she put a fresh wipe on them to try and soothe her aching face. She then quickly kicked off her shoes and placed her clothes by her desk before shrinking down into her weredog, which was a golden retriever, and climbed onto the sofa beside Rose.

Rose’s hand rested on Charlie’s soft fur. ‘You’d make a good therapist,’ she commented.

‘Who’s a therapist?’ Nial asked as he came back in with a mug.

‘Charlie,’ Rose said, nodding to her.

Nial smiled and nodded. ‘Yeah, she’s great like that, especially on cases where we have to deal with kids,’ he said, ‘feeling any better?’

‘As much as I’m gonna,’ Rose said as the cup was pressed into her free hand; the warmth was soothing against the ache, and she cradled it. She was faintly aware that it was slightly too hot to hold comfortably in both hands, yet another reminder that she’d never be normal, as much as she tried.

‘So, what happened?’ Nial asked.

‘I think it started with me getting my back up over a call from Mom,’ she said, ‘Issy’s got a friend who – I don’t know there’s something *off* about it all.’

‘Off how?’ he asked.

Rose didn’t realise her hand had fallen back down onto Charlie’s head. ‘I don’t know. Issy says she’s a friend, but I’ve never heard of her, she’s a little bit weird. Now she’s hanging out with Mom while Issy’s working, and I don’t know, just really bugged me, none of my friends are ever treated like that.’

‘I can see that being frustrating,’ Nial said, ‘have you spoken to Issy today?’

‘Not really, she seemed really pissed about the whole vampire thing – she saw the news this morning and threw a hissy over text.’

‘Can you blame her?’

‘Whose side are you on?’

‘Both of yours,’ he said, ‘so she was all pissy, and this friend’s presence isn’t helping matters. What else?’

Rose downed half of her still slightly too hot tea, savouring the warmth. 'I've been put on a missing teenager case, left something I need to run by Issy in Sean's car, he's not answering his phone, and that reporter started asking some questions that just bugged me – I think it just topped off what was already a really bad day.'

'Sounds like it,' he said.

'I didn't mean to hurt him.'

Nial nodded. 'No, I know you didn't.'

'Charlie said she took him to medical.'

'I'll go and check on him, get a statement, just to make sure we're covered, okay?'

Rose nodded slightly as she finished her drink.

'Why not take the rest of the afternoon off?' he suggested. 'Whatever you're doing – it's not going to get done properly while you're not thinking straight.'

Rose closed her eyes for a moment, she hated that he was right; she didn't even have the box that she needed to ask Issy about, and there was no telling when Sean would return with it – if he was coming back at all. She wasn't in the right headspace to find and speak to Ellie's friends either – not without covering her face in concealer.

'You're right,' she said after a moment. 'Thanks, both of you.' She managed a small smile to them.

'Need me to drive you home?' Nial asked.

Rose shook her head, carefully getting off the sofa. 'I'll be fine, promise, let me know if Toby is okay?'

'Course I will.'

Rose picked up her bloody shirt and went to her office to find where she'd left her car keys.

Hopefully, no one else had taken to guarding the side entrance so she could slip out of there peacefully.



## Chapter Nine: 3.25pm

Issy scowled up at the Supernatural and Human Affairs Agency offices as she pulled into the car park, of all the places that she could go. She reckoned that most hell dimensions were a more pleasant experience.

As she parked in a space near the entrance, she saw the back of Sean as he pushed his way through the journalists who were still hanging around the front door; there was something about him that she couldn't trust, more for the fact he was working for the agency than he was on Galene's payroll – it was a conflict of interest, and it would cause Rose problems if he remained her partner.

Problems for another day.

For now, she needed to know what Galene had said to the cameras before heading into her verbal battle, just so she was prepared for whatever Reynolds would try and throw at her.

Playing the video, she could see that Galene had let the reporters into Wherever, though the bar looked almost alien in its brightly lit silence, compared to the dark room, with music that could still be heard halfway down the street at two in the morning; even in the day, the lights were usually dimmed, and the tunes were playing.

Galene was wearing the same outfit as she had to the moot, looking as solemn as Issy had ever seen her.

'Thank you for coming,' she said, 'I have heard the news this morning and wanted to address matters personally. The loss of life is always tragic, especially a life as short as a mortal one. My deepest condolences go out to the families of the victims, and I wish to assure everyone that my own network is already dealing with the one responsible.'

She looked at each one of the cameras as she spoke, never faltering or hesitating in her words, though Issy doubted that she'd had much time, if any to write up and rehearse anything; she'd always been good at improvising.

Galene continued. 'You all know that I enforce strict laws with my people for their safety, and that of all mortals. I will not allow this to happen again.'

'How can you be certain?' One brave reporter dared ask, then shrank back as the Matron's eyes turned on them.

‘These are the first unfortunate deaths of this kind in over two hundred years,’ she said, ‘there are consequences for my people when they break my laws.’

Issy was sure that wasn’t exactly true; but Galene had been alive a very long time and knew how to cover her tracks, even if she was directly responsible, Issy doubted anyone would be able to pin anything on her.

No one in the room seemed to argue with Galene or tried to refute her claims. She’d not done or said anything particularly outrageous that should have the agency’s ire fixed on her.

Did Issy believe that she’d already dealt with the problem? Perhaps, but evidence had been left on the scene; that didn’t sit well with her. None of Galene’s enforcers were careless enough to leave bodies, or witnesses.

Then there was the whole Maggie situation. She didn’t know what she was going to be doing about that yet, but she knew that couldn’t keep her hidden indefinitely.

‘One thing at a time Iss,’ she muttered to herself as she got out of the car, squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin as she walked through the reporters that tried to crowd around her. She contemplated summoning a ball of fire to make them scatter but didn’t want to deal with the burns that came with playing with fire; there was always a cost with magic, and it wasn’t always as negligible as energy.

The front door was locked, likely to keep the reporters out, so she pressed the button and peered through the glass, but she couldn’t see who was sat behind the desk from where she was.

‘Yes?’

Issy sighed hearing Tilly’s voice. ‘It’s Iris Winters, Rose’s sister.’

‘Oh,’ Tilly sounded like she’d just been told that her two-week holiday had been rejected. ‘Come on in.’

Issy made sure no one had the chance to follow her and walked over to the reception desk.

‘I think you’ve just missed Rose,’ Tilly said.

‘I know, I’m here for Reynolds.’

Tilly looked up at Issy, a slow smile creeping across her face. ‘Really?’

‘Just to talk to him.’

Tilly's smile dropped. 'Go on, he's not got any scheduled appointments for you to interrupt, unfortunately.'

'Thanks.' Issy said and the door opened for her. She took a glance at the stairs and the two lifts and contemplated the six floors she needed to ascend. If her memory served, the lift could be quite loud if she got into the wrong one, and she didn't want to alert Reynolds to her presence. She took the lift to the floor below and took the final flight of stairs.

Issy found herself controlling her breathing as she crept down the corridor toward his office. It was eerily quiet on the top floor; Rose had said that Reynolds had emptied everyone else out of their offices when he'd moved in. She'd later wonder why she bothered, he was only human after all, it wasn't like he had enhanced hearing. As she reached his office, she could hear someone else within.

It sounded like Sean.

Issy closed her eyes and took a slow deep breath, keeping calm, hoping that he was too into the conversation to hear her heart.

'I am sure,' Reynolds was saying, 'the Matron would be interested in hearing about your *extracurricular* activities.'

'I am sure she would be interested in yours as well, *Director*.' Sean replied with the same amount of venom Issy guessed her average conversation with him carried.

Reynolds did not sound ruffled in the slightest. 'The lies of a traitor desperate to save their own skin. I am sure she has seen that song and dance plenty of times before.'

'I am here at her behest, but I am working under your orders.'

'Really? Your cases seem to be legitimate, but none of them have ever been officially issued by myself or signed off by me. It appears you are working as a rogue agent to see to your own ends.'

Someone moved, and a chair could be heard scraping across the carpet.

Reynolds's voice remained calm. 'If anything were to suddenly happen to me, everything to indicate that you are a traitor will go to *every* interested party, and there will be nowhere safe for you.'

There was a low rumbling growl. Issy couldn't be sure whether it came from herself or Sean, just what was Reynolds playing at? More importantly, what was Sean into so deep that this was a threat to keep him in line? Okay, so Issy

wasn't fond of the guy, but he was the lesser evil in this scenario – if there was such a thing.

This is why she hated vampire politics.

The door banged opened, and Sean stepped out and looked right at her; nose to nose, Issy's hand curled slightly, fingers twitching as she prepared to cast magic to defend herself.

'What did you hear?'

'I just got here,' Issy said.

Sean just grunted and stalked off, slamming the stairwell door behind him.

Issy shook her head to herself and walked through the office door without knocking. She frowned as she felt the presence of magic dampening all around her, like someone had thrown over a heavily weighted blanket. Of course he'd resort to that sort of thing, because he was a coward.

Kevin Reynolds was a short wiry, balding man, with beady eyes and a dour expression that only seemed to change when he was smug about something. He looked how most people assumed wererats did in human form, but he was fully mortal, he just had the personality of a sewer.

'Rose...' Reynolds started, lifting his eyes. His downturned lips pressing into a thin line when instead of a neatly pressed suit and scraped back short ponytail, he saw a pair of jeans, a polo-neck and longer wavy hair. 'Oh it's you,' he said eying Issy for a moment before typing on his computer, hitting the enter button hard before he returned his attention to her. 'What do you want?'

'I am here on official business,' Issy said, helping herself to the seat uninvited, but it would at least put a barrier between her, him, and his letter opener.

Reynolds did not look even slightly impressed as he clasped his hands on the desk. 'You have five minutes before I have you escorted out of here.'

'How generous,' Issy said, 'I'm here on behalf of Matron Galene.'

'Is that so?' He sat back in his chair as he regarded her. 'And what demands is she wanting to make this time?'

Issy opened her mouth to deny that Galene was trying to make demands, but that was a lie and they both knew it. 'This agency is supposed to be answerable to both the human and the supernatural communities,' she said,

‘however, it appears as though you are trying to place blame without knowing what happened.’

‘Two humans died.’

‘So did a vampire,’ Issy said, ‘a little impartiality and diplomacy would be wise in such a delicate matter.’

‘Delicate?’ He echoed with the same incredulity as if she were trying to convince him that the sky was made of sand.

‘Matron Galene has created a system that has worked for a very long time, and she is not about to let something like this undermine her efforts.’

Reynolds heaved a sigh as he regarded Issy. ‘Be that as it may, there were still two human lives taken by a vampire.’

‘If you value the safety of humans, you won’t stop her from reopening her bar,’ Issy said, ‘if vampires can’t go there to feed, then I can almost guarantee two human deaths will be the least of your worries.’

Reynolds considered this for a moment. ‘If I allow this, she is to cooperate with a new effort that will...*disperse* the power that she has over her people.’

Issy laughed.

‘I am being serious,’ he said.

‘Look, I might get her to back down and cooperate with the investigation, if I can vouch for whoever is on the case, and if one of hers works with them, but whatever the hell kind of power play you’re trying to pull – it’s going to end badly, and bloody for you.’

‘You forget I was part of the Dangerous Magic Act campaign –’

‘And you did a lot of dodgy shit that got you kicked out of your lofty position of power,’ Issy said. She knew that he was trying to bait her into a reaction with bringing that up; it followed in the wake of a tragic accident, one of those ‘think of the children’ campaigns that didn’t really have the children’s interests at heart.

Reynolds narrowed his eyes, lips pressing into a thin line as his face flushed. ‘You can’t be old enough to remember that.’

Issy snorted and shook her head slightly, she might have been a teenager at the time, but she’d been paying attention. ‘Times may have changed, but your name is still mud in the circles that matter,’ she said.

‘Clearly not, or I wouldn’t hold this position.’

‘I’m sure that was all above board,’ she muttered.

‘More than the way you and your sister conduct yourselves.’

‘The hell did you just say?’ Issy was on her feet leaning over the desk.

Reynolds leaned back as he regarded her. ‘I think you heard me perfectly clearly, Miss Winters,’ he said, ‘Now you are aware of my terms, you can relay them to Galene.’

‘I should just tell you to shove it now, save her the trouble,’ she said narrowing her eyes. Her fingers twitched slightly, itching to throw some kind of spell at him.

Reynolds smiled. ‘Is there anything else I can help you with Miss Winters, or can we both continue with more important matters?’

Issy stuffed her clenched fist into her pocket; it wouldn’t be a good idea to knock him out without witnesses, he’d find a way to make his injuries appear like she’d battered him. If she wanted to do that she’d just throw him out the window and do everyone a favour.

‘Everything okay in here, Sir?’

She turned to see Nial standing in the doorway.

‘You are late,’ Reynolds said, ‘please escort Miss Winters out and ensure she does not get lost on her way,’ he spared her another glance, ‘tell Galene I will have her answer by tomorrow.’

‘You should think very carefully about what you’re doing.’

‘Is,’ Nial reached over and lightly squeezed her arm.

Issy narrowed her eyes at him and turned to stalk out of the office. She could feel the heat in her palm, and it started smoking; she might not be able to cast magic *in* that room but a fire could still spread once it started.

‘Iris.’ Nial clamped both of his hands around hers to smother whatever she was thinking of conjuring and kept pulling her down the corridor away from the office. ‘You okay?’

Issy sighed and shook her hand out. ‘Prick just bugs me.’

Nial pressed the button for the lift and poked her in the arm until she moved; he had to wonder what he’d done in his previous life to earn the position of Winters-Sister-Wrangler, and why they both decided to act up on the same day.

‘I know,’ he said and stepped out on the second floor and took her wrist, pulling her into his office. ‘Mind giving us the room?’ He looked at Charlie.

‘Do we get a prize for collecting the set or they got to be here at the same time for that?’ Charlie asked as she got up, ‘hi Is, bye Is,’ she closed the door behind her.

‘I’m not going to ask,’ Issy muttered and pulled up a chair.

Nial looked at her. ‘What were you here for?’

‘Galene is pissed and she’s making me make it my problem,’ she said, ‘Rose told me it’s your case, is there anything you can give me?’

‘I just need to head out for a couple of minutes.’ He rested his hand on a file and looked at her before leaving, closing the door behind him.

Issy opened the folder and glanced through it. The vampire was a John Doe, no identification on him, his fangs had been ripped out and not found on the scene. Issy dug her phone out and took pictures of the pages to get a proper look through later and possibly forward on to Galene. She studied the dark ashen face, trying to recall if she’d seen him before but didn’t recognise him, his clothes looked like they could have been bought from any high street shop.

It was impossible to age immortals, someone who looked in their twenties could be that age, or have been alive for hundreds of years. Issy herself had noticed that she’d stopped aging when she’d hit thirty, even though her human friends were starting to find their first grey hairs, and the lines on their faces were not entirely disappearing when they stopped smiling or frowning.

She didn’t know if they were immortal like their Ma, or if they just had extended lifespans but the concept of living a long time – or even forever unless something actively killed them seemed so foreign. She doubted that she’d ever truly understand what that would feel like until it came to burying their Mom, but she was still young herself, it would be some time before they had to start planning her funeral.

There was a knock at the door and Issy jumped, quickly closing the folder, shoving it away.

‘Alright?’ Nial asked as he poked his head around.

‘Yeah.’

Nial pulled his chair closer to Issy. ‘Can you talk to Galene for me? Tell her I want to work with her?’

‘Reynolds won’t like that.’

‘He won’t but Rose said some things earlier that make me think something more is going on here than a hungry vampire meeting an unfortunate end.’

‘There’s definitely more to it, Galene’s people wouldn’t leave bodies at a scene. Whoever did this are hiding who really bit the humans by removing the vampire victim’s fangs,’ she said, ‘Galene might be able to get a specialist in to recreate the fangs if you give them access to the bodies.’

‘What kind of specialist can do that?’

‘Their forensic orthodontist.’

Nial looked at her. ‘...why do they need one of those?’

‘For things like this?’ Issy said, ‘there’s almost as many vampires in dentistry as there are in haematology, they like to take care of teeth.’

‘Right, course they do.’ He shook his head. ‘Silly me.’

‘I’ll give her a call and let her know you want to talk, I’m not making any promises though.’

‘Thanks.’ He smiled. ‘Do you know if Rose is okay? Have you spoken to her?’

‘Why, what’s happened?’

‘She was a bit shook up, had a run in with a reporter, hit him pretty hard.’

‘Good for her.’

‘You know she doesn’t like hurting humans.’

Issy rolled her eyes, she’d always been too soft. ‘I’ll go and check in with her and forward your number to Galene.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Keep me in the loop about any updates? I’ve got a whole community to keep calm about all this.’

‘Yeah, of course I will, soon as I know anything, I’ll let you know.’

‘Thanks,’ she said and headed out.

She sighed; time to go home and talk some sense into her sister; so she’d roughed up a human, it wasn’t not the worst thing that she’d done.



## Chapter Ten: 4.15pm

Issy pulled up outside the family home and sat back, just taking a few minutes to gather her thoughts before she called Galene. She should have warned Nial about the vampire Matron's suspicions that some unknown agitators were trying to encroach on her territory, but after the conversation she'd just had with Reynolds, she couldn't say with certainty, he wasn't involved, so she couldn't trust the agency.

Nial seemed keen to work with Galene, but how much of that was an ulterior motive to spy on her? She was being too paranoid – it was Nial, she trusted him, and Gal could handle herself, he was only a human.

Digging her phone out of her pocket, she called Galene again, narrowing her eyes as it was answered after two rings – did she just stare at her phone constantly, waiting for a call?

'Hello pet.'

'Just updating you on the situation as promised.'

'Am I not worth your time for a visit?' Galene asked, and Issy could hear the teasing lilt in her tone. 'I suppose I shan't take offence as you have already *entertained* me once today.'

'Gracious as ever,' Issy muttered, 'one of my friends from the agency is working the attack that happened last night, and he wants to work with you. I will send you his number so you can do whatever you want with that.'

'How generous,' Galene sighed, 'do you have anything useful to report, pet?'

Issy hesitated, ten different replies died on her lips, and all of them would have started an argument; she was so wrapped up in what she wanted to say, she didn't see the front door of the house open. 'I think you're best to talk to Nial about the specifics of what's going on,' she said, looking surprised as Rose slid into the passenger seat. 'Though you might want to keep an eye on Sean Taylor.'

'Why?' Both Galene and Rose asked with the same suspicious tone.

Issy pointed at her phone, only for Rose to swat the hand away, looking at her expectantly. 'I overheard a conversation earlier, it appeared as though Reynolds was threateni –'

‘You are not snitching to *her* about my partner, I swear to the gods Is –’

Issy shoved Rose with her arm, making a clear ‘shut it’ motion with her hand, only for her sister to shove her back. ‘–threatening to tell you about something Sean was doing – Rose will you piss off? Why are you in here anyway?’

‘Came to see what’s taking so long, that friend of yours is driving me insane.’

‘What friend is this?’ Galene asked.

‘No one,’ Issy said quickly, pointing a finger in warning at Rose, ‘you go and do what you want with the information I’ve given you, I’ll text the number in a second,’ she said, ‘and you, get out of my car.’

‘I shall speak to you soon, pet.’

‘Don’t threaten me,’ Issy muttered and hung up, quickly firing off Nial’s number before shoving the phone back in her pocket.

‘You’ve got some explaining to do,’ Rose snapped, facing Issy as much as she could in the confines of the car.

‘I just went in to talk to Reynolds.’

‘About the vampire situation after I told you I was going to handle it.’

‘Yeah, great job.’

‘You didn’t give me chance.’

‘How long was I supposed to wait? People were concerned, Galene was pissed –’

‘There it is,’ Rose scoffed, ‘every time she says jump, you ask how high like all her other brainless minions.’

‘Hardly.’

‘Bullshit.’ She eyed her for a moment. ‘What’s she got on you?’

‘What?’

‘Come on, there must be something, some naked photos, videos, you can tell me.’

Issy stared at her for a moment and shook her head, that didn’t even need dignifying with an answer. She just got out of the car, slamming the door behind her.

Rose banged the door hard enough to rock the car as she got out, stomping across the lawn to grab her sister by the shoulder. ‘We are not done here.’

Issy shoved Rose away and stepped backwards toward the house. ‘You might not be but I am.’

‘Issy –’

‘Rose.’ Issy snapped and folded her arms with a level of exasperation their Mom would be proud of. ‘Would fighting make you feel better?’

‘What?’

‘Would beating the shit out of each other get whatever this,’ she gestured vaguely at Rose, ‘is out of your system?’

Rose paused as the question knocked the wind out of her argument. ‘Yes – no – maybe... I don’t know anymore.’

Issy rolled her eyes and turned to head inside; if Nial hadn’t given her the heads up about what had happened earlier, she’d have probably murdered her already. ‘Let’s go.’

‘For what?’

‘Not all of us have designated training time at work to keep us sharp,’ she said, ‘I need to make sure I can still wipe the floor with you if I need to.’

Rose snorted. ‘You’ve never been able to beat me in a fair fight.’

‘Because you never fight fair.’

‘Me? You’re the one that uses magic.’

‘If you say so,’ Issy said, pulling off her boots as she got inside. ‘Hi Mom.’

‘Alrite bab?’ Louise called back from the lounge, followed by a distracted greeting from Maggie.

‘You staying for dinner again?’

‘Maybe,’ Issy said heading through to the conservatory with Rose.

Louise followed them in there, folding her arms. ‘What are you two up to?’ she asked with the same suspicion as when they were teenagers trying to sneak around.

‘We’re just going to spar,’ Rose said.

‘Outside,’ Issy added.

‘Are you sure that’s a good idea?’ Louise asked, and Rose just gave her an exasperated look. ‘Alright, but if you break it, you fix it,’ she warned, ‘and that includes each other. No fire either Issy, I’ve only just got the garden back from the last time you decided to scorch it.’

‘Yes Mom,’ they said in unison with the same earnestness when they were about to do the opposite of what they’d been told as kids.

‘Why do I bother?’ Louise asked, ‘might as well talk to the wall.’

‘If it starts answering, get help.’ Issy said.

‘Cheeky sod.’ Louise swatted at her and flicked the outside lights on full so Issy would at least be able to see without her glasses, then she went to find the first aid kit and get the ice packs ready.

They took the time to stretch out, empty their pockets, and helped each other to wrap their feet and hands, just because they had accelerated healing, there was no use in inviting preventable injuries – they’d learned that the hard way.

Issy took off her glasses, leaving them on the side, the garden spotlights were bright enough so she wouldn’t have trouble seeing. They moved onto the grass; it was a little more forgiving to land on than the patio.

Rose wasted no time feinting left, right, then left again, and Issy dropped her arms, ready to say something about taking it seriously, but Rose moved in. She punched Issy in the stomach. Issy grabbed her by the shoulder and yanked her in, kneeling her in return.

Rose doubled over and Issy rested on Rose’s back to catch her breath; Rose took the opportunity to get under Issy and threw her over her shoulder. Issy landed on the patio with a crack. She coughed, grimacing when loose tiles rattled beneath her.

Rose was over her again poised to kick her, but Issy grabbed her foot, yanking her off balance. She fell face first onto the slabs.

‘Nial told me what happened.’ Issy said as she climbed to her feet.

‘Of course he did,’ Rose grunted as she stood, a bloody graze already on her cheek, the grass completely forgotten as they sized each other up. ‘What do you care anyway?’

Issy blocked blow after blow; whenever Rose moved to kick, she countered it, every punch was blocked. They moved so fast and in sync that it looked like a lethal duel to the death; they had been sparring that long they knew each other’s moves better than they knew their own.

‘Because you’re in a mood.’

Rose twisted behind Issy, grabbing her in a headlock. ‘Yeah you’re real concerned sat in the driveway phoning that bitch first.’

Issy dropped her weight down and used it to pull Rose over her shoulder, the paving cracking under the force of her landing. ‘I am concerned, I just had a job to do.’

Rose groaned, catching her breath for a moment. ‘Right.’ She pushed herself up. ‘You’re never gonna be Medora, you know.’

Issy’s jaw clenched. ‘Someday, maybe.’

‘No. You’ll always be too human.’ Rose stated.

‘Just like you’ll never be human enough, you mean?’

Rose opened her mouth and closed it again and they clashed, Issy booted Rose in the ribs, landing a blow just before Rose could; she stumbled back and coughed, doubling over, holding up her hand.

‘Shit, you okay?’ Issy asked; she didn’t move forward, it wouldn’t be the first time Rose had used that trick, and she wasn’t going to fall for it – but the coughing wasn’t easing. Had she accidentally punctured something? She edged closer. ‘Rose?’

Rose’s outstretched hand yanked Issy closer and Issy heard the crunch before the pain in her face registered, and she slammed into the ground face first, Rose’s knee on the back of her neck.

Issy tried to push her sister off, but Rose sat her weight on her heavily.

‘Yield?’

Yield? She had to be joking right? Issy wanted to get up and toast the bitch for pulling that trick. Rose had the gall to yank her head up by her hair and repeat the question. Issy just spat blood out.

She closed her eyes and exhaled, focusing on her breathing as she started gently blowing to mimic a breeze, channelling her magic into the effort, fingers swirling into her palms at her sides. If Rose wanted to play dirty, then she’d oblige.

The wind rattled the branches of next-door’s trees and the fence panels as it picked up, and Issy started rolling her palms like she was rolling a ball, building up the energy.

‘What the —’ Rose muttered as she looked around, and then down at her sister. ‘Is that you?’ She was answered with a force of wind that smacked into her hard enough to knock her sideways, sending her scraping across the ground.

Over the fences the neighbours could be heard chattering about the freak whirlwind as the breeze died down.

‘Really can’t let me win, huh?’ Rose muttered, climbing to her feet.

Issy stood, gingerly rolling her shoulders. ‘You weren’t even close.’

They circled each other and Issy kicked out, but Rose grabbed her leg, she used the momentum to swing her other leg up, clipping Rose around the head and they both smacked onto the patio.

Issy untangled herself and rolled to lie beside her sister, closing her eyes.

‘You done?’

‘If you are.’

‘Yeah.’

Rose was quiet for a few moments, just letting the silence, and dust settle.

‘I hurt someone earlier.’

‘Did they deserve it.’

Rose reached out to smack Issy but they both just grimaced and Issy held her hand instead. ‘He was only human,’ she said, ‘I was just so... aggravated already and he wouldn’t stop when I asked him to leave me alone.’

‘Sounds like he deserved it.’

Rose shook her head. ‘I could have killed him.’

‘That would have taught him a very valuable lesson.’

‘You’re not funny.’

‘I’m not laughing.’

‘I’ll break your face in a minute.’

‘You already have,’ Issy said, rolling her head to look at Rose, gently squeezing her hand. ‘You’re not responsible for them, you know.’

‘Someone has to be,’ Rose looked at her, ‘you don’t exactly give a shit about human life.’

‘Course I do.’

Rose scoffed. ‘No, it’s about more than caring for Mom, or the three people you consider friends.’

‘I have more than three mundane human friends.’

‘My point, is you need to have the same care for them as you do the supernatural community – and if you need that explaining to you, then I really don’t know how to help you.’ She pushed herself up with a groan. ‘Even our

mother cared enough about humans to turn her back on her kin and change the world.'

Issy rolled her eyes, Rose made her out to be so bad at times, just because she didn't share the same gently-gently approach with humans, but their ma had never stepped in unless there was the threat of a demonic invasion. She groaned and shook her head to herself as she found her feet again; Rose of all people arguing the good their ma did for humans, whatever next?

'Oh what have you done to your face?' Louise asked on seeing Issy walk through the door.

'I think I improved it,' Rose commented from behind the ice pack she was holding against her own.

'Honestly, what am I going to do with you two?' Louise asked as she put two mirrors on the table and two bowls of water, and a pack of gauze. 'Clean yourselves up then I'll take a look at the damage.'

Issy grimaced as she caught sight of her bloody nose, and gingerly cleaned around it, and the rest of her bruised face; her eyes flicked to the side as Maggie joined them at the table. Rose groaned at the invasion.

'I was watching from the window,' she said, 'do you spar like that often?'

'Not as much as we used to,' Issy said, gingerly cleaning her face.

'You know how to protect yourself?' Rose asked, glancing at Maggie.

Maggie shrugged. 'I guess. I can throw a few spells around, usually makes people think twice before messing with me.'

'I'm not going to ask specifics, so I don't have to take you in for dangerous magic.'

'Really?' Issy looked at Rose, who just shrugged. She was distracted when Louise pulled up a chair with the first aid kit.

'C'mere, let me fix your face.'

'I already did,' Rose said, and quickly mumbled an apology when her Mom shot her an unimpressed look.

Issy started unwrapping her hands while Louise secured her nose in an external splint with minimal flinching and fussing; she'd see how it healed on its own before going to have it checked out. Their accelerated healing was both a blessing and a curse, they healed quickly, but sometimes it was too fast. Once she

fell from a window and her skin started knitting together over the broken glass – that hadn't been a fun hospital trip.

'Are you staying for dinner?' Louise asked, pulling her from her thoughts.

'No,' Issy said, 'I've got some moot things to follow up on before it gets late.'

'Will you be in the shop tomorrow?' Rose asked, 'got a little box thing that I need you to check out, there's some sort of weird magic going on with it.'

'Bring it over,' Issy nodded. 'Do I get a consultation fee?'

'Aren't you already on retainer?'

'My rent just went up.'

Rose huffed moving the ice pack onto her hands. 'Fine, I'll bring a cheque tomorrow, you'd get blood from a stone.'

'Depends on the kind of stone and what it's made up of, what it's been soaked in, if its porous...'

'Don't be a smartarse.' Rose scowled at her, throwing a look at Maggie who was quietly snickering, until she got caught.

Issy picked up the mirrors and took them back through to the kitchen where Louise was rifling through the freezer. 'Mom? Can I bring Maggie back here tomorrow?'

'What is going on with you and her?'

'Nothing, I just figured she'd be bored at the shop all day,' Issy said, though she mouthed 'I'll tell you tomorrow' so Rose didn't hear.

Louise nodded. 'Alright. Are you okay to drive home?'

'Yeah I can only see two of you.'

'You're not even funny,' Louise warned, 'you can't even put your glasses on right now, can you?'

Issy grabbed them from where she'd abandoned them in the conservatory, picking her phone and keys up as well. She tried to put her glasses on, but they wouldn't fit over the bandaging on her nose without causing any major discomfort.

'Thought so,' Louise said, 'I'll take you both home, then pick you up in the morning, and bring you back here for your car.'

'Thanks.'



‘One day you’ll both listen to me to not go for each other’s faces,’ Louise raised her voice so Rose would hear, earning a ‘yes Mom’ from both of them, in that placating ‘we are definitely not paying attention’ kind of way they always did.

Issy peered through to the lounge. ‘See you tomorrow,’ she called to Rose.

‘Oh, we’re leaving?’ Maggie deflated in her seat but got up and smiled to Rose. ‘Check you later.’

‘Can’t wait.’ Rose muttered, ignoring the look that Issy shot her, or tried to, she didn’t look half as intimidating when most of her face couldn’t actually move.

‘Later,’ Issy waved through the door, picking her boots up and just carrying them to the car. ‘How do you feel about stopping by the chippy round the corner on the way back? It’s Halloween, after all.’

Louise considered for a moment, pausing in the doorway. ‘Alright, it was the original plan before things were sidetracked,’ she told her then gave her the once over. ‘I’ll go in, not letting you go in with a face like that.’ She fished her purse from her bag that was hanging off the banister. ‘What do you want from the chippy bab?’ She raised her voice, so Rose knew she was talking to her.

‘Usual ta.’

‘Sausage then?’

‘Mm...kebab.’

‘Same for me,’ Issy said.

‘That sounds good,’ Maggie nodded.

‘No one ever wants anything cheap when I’m paying.’ Louise shook her head fondly and herded Issy and Maggie out of the door.

If they hurried, they could beat the dinner-time rush.

## Chapter Eleven: 9.15am

Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> November 2012

After having a decent night's sleep, Issy had woken up feeling like she'd been run through a grinder several times and was regretting most of yesterday's decisions; Maggie had at least woken up and was being very sympathetic with her pain, doing all the running around for her. At least there weren't any new catastrophes on the news; they were just re-running yesterday's stories. She was grateful that there had been no further updates to put the fear of vampires in the mortal population.

Issy was sat with an icepack on her face and Misha on her lap when Louise let herself into the flat.

'Morning girls.'

'Morning,' Maggie replied with an equally bright greeting.

Issy grunted and raised her hand in a brief mimicry of a wave.

'She's still on her first coffee,' Maggie said, 'she's feeling a little rough.'

'Ah,' Louise nodded, 'has she had breakfast yet?'

'She can hear you both talking about her.' Issy grumbled. 'And yes, Maggie made breakfast.'

'How is your nose doing?' Louise asked, sitting on the arm of the sofa, removing the ice pack to look for herself.

'Mostly just feels really tender, I think it's come back together straight and in place.'

'Yes, it's bruised but it's straight, you should be fine,' she assessed, hugging her gently. 'Did anywhere else start to hurt later?'

'Everywhere?' Issy cracked a smile. 'Nothing that felt like it was serious.'

'So what don't you want your sister to know about Maggie?'

'She came to me for help,' Issy said, 'vampires were after her and there is a lot going on and I don't want her on the agency's radar, or Gal's.'

Louise sighed and rubbed her face, it was far too early in the morning for this sort of information, she would have smacked Issy with the nearest cushion if she didn't look so badly beaten already. 'Okay, we can keep a low profile, maybe go out and see what new films there are to rent, have a duvet day.'

‘Never want to do that with us,’ Issy said.

‘You only want to do it when it’s not you involved,’ Louise pointed out, ‘how does that sound to you Maggie?’

‘Good.’ Maggie smiled, tucking a loose curl behind her ear.

‘Okay, everyone get what you need and let’s get the day started.’

Issy stepped into her trainers and shoved her laptop into her bag so she could get some community-related work done at the shop, and Maggie disappeared into her own room. ‘Can you see if you can find anything out about her family situation? She said she was trying to escape from them and ended up being tracked by vampires? She won’t tell me anything else about where she’s from.’

‘Maybe that’s all she wants you to know for now,’ Louise said, ‘not everything is a problem that needs solving bab, you can drive yourself mad thinking otherwise. Whoever her family is doesn’t matter.’

‘Unless they’re the reason vampires are after her,’ she said, pulling her shirt on.

Louise tapped her lightly round the back of the head. ‘Don’t start borrowing trouble. What would they want with her anyway?’

‘They want her for specific magic,’ she said, ‘probably blood magic.’

‘Oh Issy you’re not falling in with that crowd again? What have I warned you –’

‘Mom calm down, I’m not. *She’s* not. Okay? I’m sure she’s not. I think the vampires tracking her might be connected to the ones who are trying to call Galene’s authority into question.’

‘And where does the agency come into all this?’

‘I just don’t trust them,’ Issy grumbled.

‘Even your sister?’

She hesitated and sighed, shoulders sagging with a wince. ‘Of course I trust her, but she trusts everyone around her too much.’

‘I think you’re being paranoid, but we’ll be careful.’

Issy shrugged as she rifled through her bag, making sure that she had everything. ‘It’s not paranoia if I turn out to be right.’

Maggie came out with Misha, setting the cat down on the sofa.

‘Okay, ready,’ Issy announced as she closed her bag up, glancing into the kitchen to make sure Misha’s bowls were filled – not that she didn’t trust Maggie when she’d said she’d done it, but she just wanted to be sure.

Issy followed them out, making sure that Misha didn’t try to follow them, wouldn’t be the first time the cat had come to work but it usually ended up with more broken items and frayed tempers than it was worth. Misha was good as gold at home, but soon as she was somewhere new, she became a right little git.

After picking her car up, Issy decided to park on the Bastion car park to save her legs.

She stopped by the little sandwich shop and grabbed another coffee before heading into the Magic Mirror. Cai was alone in the shop; he was quite lanky for his age, made reaching the top shelf easy for him, with long mousy hair flopping back as he brushed it out of his face.

‘Morning.’ Her smile faltered as she saw that he’d decided to take it on himself to rearrange the books. Again. ‘What you doing there?’

‘Hi,’ Cai said, glancing over to her, ‘thought I’d change things round a bit.’

‘I can see that.’

‘What happened to your face?’

‘Rose,’ she said, ‘she’s coming over with some work for me.’ She set her bag down on the counter.

Cai nodded. ‘Oh right, she called not long ago, asking if you were in yet.’

Issy nodded, her eyes falling on the stack of books. ‘You know I’m just going ask you to put those back as they were.’

‘But...’

‘People come in here to buy specific books, which they find easier if they are categorised in sections on the shelf. How is anyone going to find that book on crystals, if it is right beside a beginner’s book on divination?’

‘Well, they will look at more books?’

‘Or they’ll just not be bothered and not buy anything.’ She sighed as his shoulders sagged, and he looked at her like a scolded puppy; she took a breath and softened her approach. ‘I like that you’re trying, and taking the initiative, I like the

way you rearranged the crystal display last week, *that* works, but sometimes, some things are better left as they are.'

'You liked the crystals?' he asked, perking back up instantly.

'Yes.' She smiled and mentally braced herself as he started talking a mile a minute about his thought processes behind arranging them all by colour rather than name, throwing in the occasional 'mhm' and nodding along.

It was fifteen minutes before he seemed to take a breath. He was a sweet kid, from one of the werewolf families on Livery Street; Issy had him working in the shop a couple of the mornings he didn't have to go to college to get a bit of money behind him.

'Okay, let's start putting these as they were, hm?' Issy suggested, trying to redirect his attention and energy. She took the category labels that had been put to one side, replacing them on the shelves. 'Right, put them back in these categories, alphabetical by authors surname, any you don't know, leave to one side.'

'Okay.' He nodded and started on his task.

Issy checked the rota to see who'd left him on his own this morning: James. Of course it was James. She'd let him get his sleep before reminding him that leaving the new kid alone was not the best idea.

She took her phone out sent Rose a message.

Issy:

I'm in the shop now, whenever  
you want to come down.

Rose:

I'll be there soon.

'Don't threaten me with a bad time.' She muttered.

'Sorry?'

'Talking to myself,' Issy waved him off with a smile, 'sister issues, you know?'

'I got three of them,' he said, 'one was trying to get me to work with her in Vangro's.'

Issy smiled at the face he pulled. 'In the bakery? Wouldn't that be decent work experience for your college course?'

'It would,' he agreed as he finished a section of books and neatened them up, standing back to examine his handiwork, 'but it was for stocking shelves.'

Issy ducked her head to hide her quiet laugh and cleared her throat.

‘There’s nothing wrong with that.’

‘No, I know, but it was at night, after the shop closed, I like being round people,’ he said, and looked over, ‘I think these are all right, would you come and check?’

‘Of course.’ Issy smiled and went over to look, ignoring how he stood there, fidgeting anxiously. ‘These are all right, good job.’

‘Really?’

‘Really,’ she said, ‘why not go and take a break? I’ll carry on with these.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’m sure.’

‘Want anything bringing back?’

‘No thank you.’

‘Okay see you soon.’

Issy breathed a sigh of relief as she was left alone in the shop, though her peace was short-lived. The second she started organising the books, the bell on the door rang. She turned and smiled at the customer who walked in.

‘Hi, welcome to the Magic Mirror. Shout if you need anything.’

‘Cheers,’ they said and started browsing the crystals.

Issy glanced over to the counter and realised her bag was still on top of it, so she went over to shove it out of the way on a shelf underneath, watching as the customer picked up a crystal and put it down; going through the same process with half of them before Issy decided to interrupt. ‘Is there anything I can help you find?’

‘Oh erm I’m just looking thanks...’

‘Okay, I’m just here.’

Before she could say anything else the bell of the door rang again, but Rose announced herself. ‘Did someone ransack your books?’

‘Worse,’ Issy said, with a lowered voice, ‘new kid tried to be helpful.’

‘Harsh,’ Rose snorted, placing a box on the counter. ‘Have they learned the ways of Issy the Pedantic?’

‘I am not pedantic.’

Rose grinned at her and marched over to the books, poking one of them to the back of the shelf.

Huffing, Issy shook her head and went over to pull it forward again. ‘Well no one will see it if its right back there, will they?’

‘Pedantic,’ Rose repeated, ‘how’s your face?’

‘Still sore but it’s fixed in the right place,’ she said, ‘you?’

‘Takes more than one of your weak punches to hurt me.’

Issy rolled her eyes and looked at the box on the table. ‘Oh is that what you wanted me to look at?’

‘Yeah,’ she said and glanced over to the customer who was glancing over to them.

‘Cai will be back soon, so we can go and discuss it in private. You can go and sit in the common room if you want.’

‘Sure.’ Rose nodded and picked up the box again, glancing over to the customer as Issy unlocked the door.

Once Rose was gone the customer sidled up to the counter. ‘I erm I heard that you sell transformation crystals, but I can’t see them?’

‘For your appearance?’ Issy asked and they nodded in response. ‘They are enchanted pieces, so I keep them behind the counter,’ she said, and pulled the lockbox out. ‘We’ve currently got ones for hair, eye colour, voice, gender.’

‘Yeah, that one. Can I try it? I just want to see how it feels.’

Issy smiled and nodded. ‘Of course,’ she said and got one of them out. ‘Sometimes it’s all some people need, and sometimes it is the first step. What’s your name?’

‘Max.’

‘I’m Issy,’ she said, ‘I used one like this a lot when I was younger and trying to figure out how I wanted to look, and it really does help. What you do is you put it on, and you hold it, concentrating on your body, facial features, hair, and that will attune the enchantment. And every time you want to try something new, you just do the same.’

‘Is it just an illusion or would I really be just like a guy when I use it?’

‘You’ll functionally be a guy as long as you wear it,’ she said, ‘but it’s not as damaging or physically traumatic as those old cosmetic spells that they used to use for this sort of thing. It feels a little weird and tingly as the magic sets in. You might feel more tired for the first few days because it latches onto your energy, but you eventually get used to it.’

‘Okay,’ Max nodded, ‘can I wear it all the time?’

‘You could do, but the enchantment in it will need to be recharged at least once a week overnight to keep it strong,’ she said and pulled a small wooden box out from under the counter. It was only a little bigger and slightly deeper than a matchbox. She made sure the pendant fitted into it properly before setting it down. ‘The sigils on the outside, and the inlay is designed to magically charge an enchanted item that is put inside it, you just have to put it in, and the magic will do the rest.’

‘Okay thanks. How much is all of this?’

‘What can you afford?’

‘What?’

‘Well together they should be about seven hundred quid, but,’ she said quickly seeing the colour drain from their face, ‘*but*, I only charge what people *can* afford for things like this.’

‘That’s good of you,’ they said. ‘I don’t want to underpay you for this though, but I’ve only got fifty quid that I was planning to spend.’

‘Fifty is fine.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘I can come in and pay a little more later on?’

‘If that makes you feel better, but I won’t hold you to it, or chase you down, okay?’

‘Would it be rude to ask why?’

Issy laughed and shook her head. ‘Not at all,’ she assured him and wrapped up the pendant. ‘When I was younger, a family friend owned this shop and I’d hang out here all the time, and he offered magical solutions for nearly every problem. For everyone that could afford his prices, there were twenty people in need who couldn’t, but that never mattered, he’d help them anyway because it was the right thing to do, and if they could offer something then that was fine, if not, it didn’t matter.’

She started wrapping the box in bubble wrap, placing it into a bag with the pendant. ‘When I came back after travelling and studying abroad, he asked me to take over, and I quickly realised that things are just that – *things*. They are replaceable – people not so much.’



Max nodded and dug their wallet out, taking five crumpled notes out onto the counter. 'That's really nice of you. Do you ever need an extra pair of hands around here?'

'Are you looking for a job?'

'I could be, you seem like a nice boss to have.'

'Thanks,' she took the cash and put it in the till, 'I'm pretty well staffed at the moment, but if you pop in every so often, you never know when things might change.'

'Okay,' they nodded, picking the bag up, 'thank you so much for this, I'll come back and show you how it settles on me when I can.'

'I look forward to it,' she said, lifting her hand in a wave as they left.

'Bye, hi,' Cai said as he passed Max on his way back in. 'Been busy?'

'Just one customer,' Issy said, taking out a notebook to write the purchase in. 'Have a good break?'

'Yeah, I grabbed a bacon sandwich from next door and took a walk around the park.' He held up a coffee cup. 'I got you one of those fancy caramel latte things with a double espresso that you like as a sorry for messing your books up again.'

'Thank you, you didn't have to spend your money on me, I don't pay you that well.'

Cai laughed. 'It's good,' he assured her and resumed his task of diligently reorganising the shelves, examining every book that he picked up.

'Rose has turned up, will you be okay if I head through to the Bastion to talk to her?'

'Oh yeah sure,' he said, 'I'll shout for help if I need it.'

Issy nodded and packed away the lockbox and picked up her bag, pulling the slider across the shelves to hide everything behind there, just in case. She took herself through to the common room to see what Rose had in store for her.

## Chapter Twelve: 10.30am

Issy found Rose lounging in the common room with a drink, and her feet propped up on the coffee table in front of her, the mystery box beside her. The only other occupant in the room was Ethan who was sat on the far side; his eyes flickered over his book to Issy, and she held a finger to her lips as she crept up behind Rose, poised to flick her ear.

‘I can hear you breathing you know,’ Rose said, tilting her head back to look at Issy. ‘Not very good at the quiet thing, are you?’

‘Wasn’t trying to be,’ she said, ‘come on, let’s head to the office and you can tell me what you’ve got.’

Rose groaned as she pulled herself up from her seat and rolled her shoulders.

‘I’ve heard rusty hinges make less noise than you,’ Issy commented as she headed for the stairs.

‘You want another beating?’

‘I’m starting to think you can’t handle it.’

‘Don’t let it get to your head,’ Rose rolled her eyes, ‘it’s just an act to make you feel better about your lacking fighting skills.’

‘Whatever helps you sleep at night,’ Issy said, opening her office door to find two ghosts sat in there. ‘Am I interrupting anything?’ she asked.

‘Sorry Miss,’ Jack said springing up instantly, ‘we were just finding somewhere quiet.’

‘Try one of the rooms in the library,’ she suggested and watched the two lads disappear as Rose closed the door behind her.

‘Don’t you move them on?’ Rose asked.

‘Not if they don’t want to, Jack’s a good kid, he doesn’t cause any trouble,’ Issy sipped her drink, ‘so what have you got for me?’

Rose put the box on the desk and dug a crumpled pansy head out of her pocket. ‘I need to know what that box is for, and the flower I’m just curious if there is any trace of magic on it.’

Issy picked up the pansy and took one look at it. ‘Well you’ve cracked the case,’ she said, ‘this flower was brutally murdered, did it have any enemies, or was it just a clumsy hand?’

‘Sarky bitch,’ Rose huffed and sat down. ‘The neighbour thought that there might be something off about the family because of the potted plants.’

‘Ah so it’s a jealousy motive,’ Issy nodded, ‘well we’ll make arrangements and give it a proper burial, how do we go about contacting the rest of the plant pot, do we send someone round or...?’

‘I’m going to slap you in minute.’

Issy laughed. ‘Oh lighten up and give me the box.’

‘Not sure I want to now.’

‘Don’t be an arse.’

‘Its spending too much time with you,’ Rose said sliding the box across the desk to her.

‘Now this is interesting,’ Issy said looking at the box, noticing that nothing seemed to rattle inside it as she picked it up, and it didn’t seem heavier than the wood that it was made out of. It was remarkably similar to some of the boxes in the shop. ‘What do you know about it?’

‘It was found in the back of a missing teenager’s wardrobe, hidden with a couple of other books.’

‘Have you opened it?’

‘Do I look that daft? It was rhetorical.’

Issy looked at the box, her fingers tracing the carved sigils on the outside. ‘It looks like it was made to conceal something, the energy around it appears to be being drawn inside.’ She tapped the top of it and considered her options for a moment, then decided that it was safer to not accidentally fry the electronics in here. She got up and downing her drink, ‘Let’s go and open it somewhere more secure,’ she paused, ‘leave anything you don’t want to accidentally get shorted out by magic.’

Rose considered a moment and dropped her phone and keys on the desk before following her sister across the corridor to one of the other rooms. ‘Are you sure whatever you’re planning to do is safe?’

‘Do I look like a risk taker? That was rhetorical.’ Issy flicked the *In Use* sign across *Magic Room 1* before entering. It was a simple room with no

windows, and tiling along the floors and walls that were decorated with various warding sigils, mostly to protect the rest of the building from any disastrous accidents.

Issy handed the box back to Rose for a moment as she closed the door behind them then moved into the centre of the room, sitting on the floor to make herself comfortable.

Rose followed suit, no use standing if she didn't have to. 'Why are there no seats?'

'One was accidentally animated and tried to eat the occupant of the room, and the other was set on fire when a spell backfired.'

'...fair enough. A lot of experimental magic in here then?'

'Nothing the agency need worry about,' Issy said, 'you know the Bastion is neutral territory and is protected by the Pacts.'

'Yeah, yeah,' Rose rolled her eyes, she used the ancient multi-realm peace treaties as a cover for everything; one day Rose would get a copy of the Pacts and read through them to see exactly what they entailed and how much trouble Issy was in for leaning on them when the mood suited her.

Issy drew her palms together until they were almost touching and concentrated her energy on the small space in between, slowly filling it with a bubble of magic that grew as she pulled her hands apart.

'What're you doing?' Rose asked but got no answer as Issy was fully focused on expanding the ball, until it was about the size of a football. Then, on the surface of the energy, she drew a circle inside another circle, and dotted the centre – it was a simple sigil for containment, which she activated by pressing her palm against it, making the whole translucent globe shimmer.

'Now you're just showing off,' Rose muttered.

'You have your skills and I have mine,' Issy said and took the box from her again, 'this is just making sure that nothing blows up in our faces.'

'Well that's reassuring.'

Issy placed the box within the ball, her hands tingling as they passed through the field. She flexed them before twisting the clasp, slowly opening the lid.

Nothing.

The box was empty save for the black woollen lining.

‘Well that’s a bust,’ Rose grumbled.

Issy peered into the box and reached inside it slowly, just to make sure nothing had been concealed. She felt the faint traces of lingering energy brush against her fingers, something with a magical charge had been concealed within the box. Closing it, she tapped the lid a moment.

‘She’s been missing three days, you said?’

‘Yes,’ Rose nodded, ‘Why?’

Issy withdrew her hands from the bubble, leaving the box contained within it, shaking the excess energy off her. ‘There’s a trace of residual energy in the box from whatever was kept in there. It was old magic – almost familiar, I think if I had more I’d probably recognise it.’

‘Is it strong enough to track?’

Issy hesitated and shook her head. ‘I can’t say for certain, there’s a chance, but there is only a small amount of energy in there.’

Rose ran a hand over her face. ‘Right. Anything I can do to help?’

‘If I knew where she practiced magic, it would help, I might be able to figure out what she was doing at least.’

‘I’m going to talk to her friends and see what I can find out, I’ll let you know if they tell me anything.’

‘Okay,’ Issy nodded and pushed herself to her feet, offering a hand to her sister, pulling her up. ‘I’ll leave it like that for now, it will keep the box and the energy inside it contained.’

‘Won’t someone get curious?’

‘Most people are sensible enough to not touch a magic bubble in a room if they don’t know what it’s for,’ Issy said, moving to the single hook on the back of the door and plucked the key off it. ‘I can also just lock the door.’

‘Smartarse,’ Rose rolled her eyes as she headed out of the room. ‘She had two books on the Apeira – could it have something to do with that?’

Issy paused and tilted her head as she considered it. ‘I didn’t sense anything from out of this realm,’ she said, ‘but like I said, the trace of energy was minimal.’

‘So what are you doing until then?’

‘I’ll carry on working, start figuring out how to track that energy,’ Issy said, ‘you did remember you’re paying me for this, right?’

‘You’re really charging the agency for wiggling your hands about a bit and telling me you don’t know?’

‘Reynolds was the one who cut the magic department so much you need to outsource, so take it up with him if you’ve got a problem.’

‘I was joking, no need to get snitty with me.’

Issy huffed as she locked the door, shoving the key into her pocket. ‘I am not getting in a snit, you’re the one with an attitude about my work.’

‘Whatever, I’ll see you later.’

‘You left your keys and phone in my office.’ Issy said, stopping Rose in her tracks. Issy smirked behind her back and followed her in, taking a seat behind her desk. ‘Would you be able to tell Ethan to mind the shop with Cai for me for a bit?’

‘Who is Ethan?’

‘He was in the common room, the really tall guy, black hair, green eyes, horns, tail, bull-ish looking.’

‘Why not just say ‘minotaur’?’ Rose asked, ‘that’s a simple descriptor, know who you mean instantly.’

‘Because it bugs you when I don’t get to the point.’

‘You’re in a weird mood today,’ Rose said, ‘are you on something?’

‘Just a salted caramel latte with double shot of espresso, and a hint of magical energy.’

‘Just your usual weird then, okay.’ She pocketed her phone and grabbed her keys. ‘I’ll call you if I find anything, will you do the same?’

‘Of course,’ Issy said. As if she would dare leave Rose out of the loop. ‘Got that cheque?’

‘I’ll shove it up your arse if you mention it once more,’ Rose reached into her back pocket and threw it on the desk. ‘Happy?’

Issy unfolded it and checked the details, making a show of holding it up. ‘Pleasure doing business with you.’

‘You should have just come to work for the agency.’

‘How does ‘Not if it was the only job in the world, I was homeless, and about to die of starvation’ sound to you?’

‘Because of Reynolds?’

‘He’s the first million reasons, yes, but not just him, the whole system needs shaking up, it’s not what Ma created it to be.’

‘It moved on with the times,’ Rose shrugged. ‘you’re more than happy to use the resources when it’s convenient.’

‘Because it should be a community resource, as much as a human one, but now it’s just a place mortals go running to whenever they get scared of something going bump in the night.’

‘You know that’s not true.’

Issy folded her arms. ‘The Dangerous Magic Act has your colleagues starting literal witch hunts.’

‘You’re just being paranoid.’

‘Hornbury Academy up the road was recently raided and shut down under the DMA because whoever was completing the spot check didn’t like the look of the theoretical books that students were reading.’

‘That sucks for them, but it’s not a bad thing for it to be enforced, because it discourages people from doing anything dangerous,’ Rose said, ‘you know how I feel about certain magical practices.’

‘You’re more than happy to ask me to use magic when it’s convenient for you.’

‘I’m asking you to trace a missing person, not raise the bloody dead, there’s a difference between something helpful and necromancy.’

‘Necromancy could be helpful. In the States, they use necro workers in homicide cases.’

‘Well that’s just all kinds of creepy and wrong and how is that even ethical?’

‘If you were murdered, would you want me to go to any lengths to find the person responsible?’

Rose paused and eyed Issy, that felt like a trick question if ever she’d heard one, knowing that Issy had a more dubious means of – well doing anything if no one was looking in her direction. ‘Within reason, and within the law.’

Issy rolled her eyes. ‘Yeah yeah,’ she waved her hand dismissively, ‘boring sod approach, got it.’

‘I am not –’ Rose huffed seeing the grin on her sister’s face, tempted to knock it off her, it’d serve her right too. ‘Forget it.’

‘You’re too easy to wind up.’

‘I’ll speak to you later.’ Rose said, heading for the door.

‘Love you.’

‘Yeah, you too, asshole.’

Issy laughed as the door closed. She sat back for a moment, half spinning in her chair as she figured out what to do next. She needed to think of a way to track that energy, but she needed a starting place.

Of course.

She dialled the agency and put in the extension to a friend who she knew would talk to her.

‘Good afternoon Supernatural and Human Affairs Agency Information Services, Leon speaking how can I help?’ The phone was answered with all the enthusiasm of someone who’d been condemned to a lifetime in a call centre.

‘Hi Leon, for the sake of this conversation it’s Rose.’ Issy said.

Leon was quiet for a moment as his brain rebooted. ‘Oh hi how are you?’ His voice perked up.

‘I’m alright, you?’

‘Not too bad, still breathing.’

‘Good to hear it,’ Issy said, ‘I need a favour.’

‘Course you do, no one ever rings me for a natter,’ he sighed, ‘what do you need?’

‘Is there still a magic hotspot detection thing set up? Am hoping it hasn’t been cut.’

‘I think so, why?’

‘Can you check my current case for the date and time my person went missing, then crossmatch it with times in the vicinity that there were some flairs of magical energy – if there were any at all.’

‘Does your sister know you’re doing this?’

‘Sort of.’

‘Mhm, I’ll look into it and get back to you when I find something.’

‘Thank you, I’ll owe you a drink.’

‘Damn right you will.’

‘Speak to you soon.’

‘Bye.’



Issy sighed as she hung up, there wasn't much else she could do on that front for now, she just had to wait for some answers.

## Chapter Thirteen: 12.45pm

After leaving the Bastion, Rose realised she'd been there longer than she'd intended and checked her phone for messages, surprised to find that she'd not had a single one. At least Sean had got the hint and was giving her some space to work. She hesitated when she lowered her phone, then decided to call him, just to check in.

There was no answer on the office phone, Rose frowned, where was he? He hadn't mentioned having anything on when they were in the office earlier. Sighing she tried his mobile, if he wasn't going to answer that she'd just have to throttle him when she tracked him down. This wasn't like him, he had to be up to something.

Or was that Issy's paranoia rubbing off on her?

'Sean Taylor speaking,' He answered after it nearly rang out.

'Oh you are alive,' She muttered, 'the hell are you, Sean?'

'I just stepped out for lunch, I figured you were still busy with your sister and weren't coming back till after?'

Rose paused and took a breath. Of course. It was lunch time. 'Right, sorry.'

'Are you alright? You've been acting a little odd the last couple of days. Is the case too much for you?'

Did he really have that in his back pocket waiting to go? 'There's nowt wrong with me, I was just calling...' she hesitated, and leaned against the wall, tucking herself out of the way of people walking by. 'Just to check in, let you know I'm taking my lunch in town, then I'll be back in the office after.'

'Alright,' he said, 'you found anything on Ellie's friends yet?'

'Still looking into them.'

'Call me if you need anything,' he said, 'I'll see you soon.'

'Yeah by –' she sighed as he hung up before she even finished speaking. She was just getting stressed with the job – she'd never admit to Issy being right, at least not to her sister's face, but maybe she had a point.

What if being passed over for the directorship was a sign that she should be looking at a different career path? It wasn't like she was going to get any

progression as long as Reynolds was in the picture, and she didn't want to move away to another area.

Sighing, she pocketed her phone and pushed herself off the wall, heading across the road, toward the high street. She stopped at the chippy on the corner for a cone to pick at, stuffing a bottle of pop into her jacket pocket.

It was market day, so the street was more packed than usual. She could hear the same guy who'd been selling flowers for at least twenty years shouting from halfway down Market Street 'Fiver a big bunch, here! Just a fiver!'

With the last spare quid in her pocket, she grabbed a bag of fresh donuts when the smell was too tempting to walk by. She lingered in the travel agent window for a few moments, looking at the deals on holidays that she'd never take – always too much to do whenever she had time off work. Last time she'd got away was a couple of years ago with Issy, they'd gone to France for a week and ended up taking out a couple of ghouls and helping with an exorcism in their hotel, so it hadn't been exactly relaxing. Issy attracted trouble without even trying.

It had been fun though. She binned the empty cone and took a swig of her drink before continuing up Market Street. She could go freelance, it wouldn't be the first time it had crossed her mind, there were plenty of people in both the supernatural and mortal communities that would likely feel better for a local alternative option that wasn't the Agency, or the mortal police force. It wasn't like she was going to get any further in her job, maybe it was time to move on.

'Can I have a moment of your time?' Someone with a clipboard called toward her.

She squared her shoulders and lifted her head marching past more purposefully to avoid a pair of them, standing outside the shopping centre entrance like a pair of sentinels. Some poor soul who was too polite to say no got caught instead.

Rounding the corner that housed the main bank in town, she passed the third charity shop and turned left to cross into the castle gardens that overlooked the park, where she sat on the wall to contemplate life over a bag of now lukewarm donuts.

From her vantage point she could see the castle gardens, all bedded down and bare for the winter months. The path wound its way down and disappeared at

the edge of the trees too few in number to be considered woodland anymore. The park was hidden just on the other side.

She could see the peak of the helter-skelter in the distance; the fair turned up every half term and planted itself on the field beside the bowling alley and cinema. Half term also explained why there were more kids than usual hanging round. She frowned, it was odd that Nial wasn't off this week; he usually took half terms to be with his kids.

Shaking her head to herself, she set the bag on the wall beside her and dusted her fingers on her trousers, pausing to eye the gang of pigeons that had started wandering her way, and thought better of leaving her remaining treats beside her, drawing the bag onto her lap as she dug her phone out, figuring she should get back to work.

She picked up her social media search for Ellie's friends, finding one of them had posted proclaiming their boredom twenty minutes ago, suggesting a meet-up in the park. Nice, all she had to do was spot them, and casually run into them.

She looked for the faces that she'd seen in Ellie's photos. No luck with those hanging out around the wall. She pocketed her remaining donut and started down toward the park.

Most kids took to hanging round there, no matter the weather, it had always been the same. When she and Issy were teens, the park was the place to go to practice magic and test out abilities away from parents and people that'd give them a bollocking at home; it still was after dark, when the people who were out and about were more likely to look the other way over the magics being cast.

Rose sometimes thought that Issy could have done with being discouraged from certain practices more. Their Mom hadn't been overly keen, but their mother had waved off her concerns and encouraged Issy. She hadn't known what Issy was capable of, *what she'd done*, neither of their parents did; Rose doubted that Issy was even aware that she remembered.

Still, worse things had happened in the park since then.

Rose passed through the trees quickly; there was something about them that left an unnerving feeling of being watched, like they could come alive at any second. She figured it was down to whoever had taken to calling the trees home, not wanting people lingering round, she couldn't blame them really.

She stepped out to the grassy field of the park. To the further end on the left near the car park was a playground with a small kiosk café, and over to the right was the lake that always got crowded with people sitting round it over the summer. Despite the chill in the air, it was quite busy; there were groups sat around the lake, kids playing in the playground, and a dozen or so people congregated in their groups around the park.

Rose causally walked around, checking everyone out, earning more than a few glances; she stood out physically in her suit, but her presence radiated physical non-human strength, much in the same way Issy was a beacon of magical power, and it was how anyone who could sense her knew to run before they saw her coming.

As she neared the lake, she spotted the three friends sitting on their coats; Abby was a small teenager, half hiding behind her long mousy hair, Dan was a stocky lad with a floppy haircut that didn't look out of place on a 90s boyband poster, and Zoe had blonde highlights in her brown hair. She was looking around. She was more aware of their surroundings.

Rose sat down nearby, earning a glance from Zoe, otherwise they paid her no mind, talking about revision and mock exams. No mention of their missing friend, odd if they were close, considering she'd only been missing recently, she shuffled over.

'Hi, are you Zoe, Abby, and Dan, by any chance?' she asked.

'Who wants to know?' Dan asked.

'I'm Rose Winters, with the Supernatural and Human Affairs Agency,' she showed them her ID, 'I'm looking into Ellie Jameson's disappearance.' She watched as they all glanced between each other for several long seconds, but no one broke the silence. 'I heard that the four of you are close?'

Zoe shifted uncomfortably when none of the others volunteered information. 'Yeah.'

'Zoe,' Dan hissed her name.

'We don't know what happened to her,' Zoe said quickly, 'but we're her best friends, we just want her to be found.'

'Do you know if she was practicing magic at all?'

They all exchanged looks again, but Dan answered. 'How much of this is going to get back to her parents?'

‘I’ll decide on that later, but she is eighteen, legally an adult.’ Rose suppressed a sigh as they looked at each other again and nodded.

‘Well,’ Dan said, ‘she was interested in magic, she’d read books in the library whenever she got the chance, had a USB drive that she kept lots of stuff on, but I don’t think she was actually doing anything with any of it.’

Interests rarely stayed purely academic for long, especially with curious kids who had parents they wanted to rebel against, Rose thought, what if she had just decided to run away? The pressure of her parents, school, the thought of university – it might have all been a little too much for her. She wouldn’t be the first person to crack.

Rose felt her phone vibrate in her pocket and checked it quickly.

Mom.

She flicked it onto silent and put it back. She’d get back to her later. She returned her attention to the friends. ‘Is there anything out of the ordinary that any of you remember her saying or doing around the time she disappeared?’

Abby shook her head, biting her lip, fixing her eyes on the floor. ‘No, she was her usual self, she was excited about her uni choices, they’re all as far away from her parents as you can get.’

‘Did she have any other friends that she spent time with? A boyfriend? Girlfriend?’

‘You met her parents, right?’ Zoe snorted, ‘think they’d let their precious daughter have a love life.’

‘I didn’t ask if they let her, I asked if she had one.’

‘She didn’t,’ Dan said, ‘it is always just the four of us, and none of us like each other in that way.’

‘Was she sneaking out to meet you guys?’

‘No but,’ Abby shook her head, shrinking in on herself as the other two looked at her, ‘she said she’d made contact with someone who was stuck in between realms.’

Rose sighed internally, this was Issy’s wheelhouse, not hers. It certainly explained the books in her room. ‘What did she tell you about them?’

‘Not a lot really, just that it was someone who was in trouble,’ Zoe said.

‘Did she say how she was going to help them?’

Dan shook his head. ‘No, she was very secretive about the whole thing, took us a lot to get that much out of her.’

‘When did all this start?’

‘A week or two ago maybe?’ Abby said, ‘she became obsessed, like literally everything became about finding a way to help this person.’

‘But you don’t know who – or what – she was talking to?’

‘She’d go to the far end of the field at school and talk to them through a mirror, but whenever we went over, she quickly cut it off.’ Zoe said, and looked at Rose, ‘what do you mean “or what”?’

‘The Apeira is full of horrors, there’s a high chance that whatever she was talking to was not what they claimed to be.’ Rose rubbed her face and winced a little, there was nothing much left there, but it still felt tender. ‘Did any of you ever see her with a box?’

‘A little wooden one?’ Abby asked.

Rose looked at her. ‘Where’d she get it from?’

‘The day she disappeared, we went into that big building behind the magic shop,’ she said, ‘Ellie said she’d been told to look for the box in the library, was told exactly where it’d be.’

‘What was in it?’

‘She never opened it while I was around, she just said she needed it for later and we got into an argument because she wouldn’t tell me what she meant. I just dropped her at home around three in the afternoon. Then she didn’t come into school on Monday.’

‘Did you tell anyone about this?’ Rose asked, and Abby shook her head. ‘Great. Who needs enemies with friends like you.’

‘That’s a bit harsh,’ Dan said.

‘Something wanted to use Ellie, it took the time to gain her trust and even had her get an item that could have been used for anything...’ Rose frowned. No not anything, it would be something specific, she just had to think logically. Something that was in a box concealing its power, meaning it was powerful.

An artefact, or key – or an anchor for something to pull themselves into this realm.

She took out a notepad from her pocket. ‘Write your numbers down on here, I might need to speak to you again.’

‘I’m not in trouble?’ Abby asked quietly.

‘Expect a visit from the police,’ Rose said, ‘they deal with human teenagers doing stupid crap.’

‘Hey,’ Dan started to object, his chest puffing out.

‘You really don’t want to pick this fight,’ Rose warned him and took the notebook back as she stood. ‘You’ve all been incredibly helpful, thank you.’ She took her phone out and dialled the information service number as she walked away, marching straight for the Magic Mirror again.

‘Good afternoon, Supernatural and Human Affairs Agency Information Services, Leon speaking how can I help?’

‘It’s Rose.’

‘Oh hi Rose, real Rose or not-Rose?’

‘What? Has Is – of course she has. I need to know if any rift openings were detected in the early hours of Monday morning.’

‘Hi Leon, how are you, Leon? What’s new with you Leon?’ He said, ‘Oh I’m wonderful thank you for asking, between work and boyfriends kids I’m great.’

‘Sorry, bad night all round.’ Rose muttered, rubbing her face.

‘I was asked for any magical hotspots for that night,’ he said, ‘there’s one that looks like it fits the pattern of a rift.’

‘Where?’

‘I might just tell your sister; she knows how to ask nicely.’

‘I’m sorry, please tell me where the rift is located.’

‘The Old Chef.’

Rose narrowed her eyes as she tried to think of where that was, her pace slowing as she reached the gardens, just so she didn’t accidentally mow down the children who were running around in her path. ‘Didn’t that close down last year?’

‘I will send you all the information I can find on it if you give me two minutes.’

‘Thank you.’

‘You sound stressed.’

‘Rough couple of days,’ Rose said, cutting through the shopping centre, and heading down the multi-story car park, and out the other side, to be on the



same street as the alley that led to her sister's shop. It was easier to drag things out of Issy in person than in a phone call.

What was she keeping in the Bastion that something trapped in the Apeira would want to get hold of?

## Chapter Fourteen: 2.05pm

Issy was in her office, following up on the last of the things that needed arranging after the moot, and making sure that no other problems had popped up that needed urgent attention. Fortunately, everyone was laying low with the recent attack, and not wanting to cause any problems or draw attention to themselves. She had to wonder how long it was going to last.

She checked her phone hearing it ping.

Leon:

Rose is looking for a rift, are you after the same thing? Found a likely spot at the Old Chef. Closed last year, been abandoned since.

Issy:

Thanks, I'll check it out.

How had Rose come to the conclusion it was a rift? She was about to call her sister when the woman herself came into her office without so much as a knock.

'I could have been doing anything in here,' Issy said.

Rose folded her arms. 'Right, nothing I haven't walked in on you doing before.'

'Because you can't learn to knock.'

'Learn to lock a door.'

'You pick locks.'

'You shouldn't have taught me,' Rose shrugged and closed the door behind her. 'She was communicating with something in the Apeira.'

Issy closed her eyes. 'Oh that poor, stupid girl.'

Rose nodded. 'One of her friends said that she was directed to get the box from the library here.'

'What?'

'Did you know it was there?'

'Did it look like I recognised it when I was handling it?'

Rose sighed and took her ponytail down, scrubbing a hand through her hair, helping herself to a seat. ‘Sorry, just feeling frustrated that the case had led me to this point. Another one I’m not gonna be bringing home.’

The animosity in Issy’s demeanour evaporated as she regarded her sister, and she nodded. ‘It might not be too late,’ she said.

‘It’s been three days here and we both know time doesn’t work the same way there.’

That much was true; it was the world between realms, but it was also where the realms bled into each other, things like reality and time didn’t exist, and if one didn’t have an anchor or know how to navigate through it, they could be lost forever.

There was a recent case of Sarah Gossep, a sixteenth century human from York who’d been out for a walk and not noticed a rift, walked straight through it. Issy had borrowed Rose’s login details to read up on it, because of course the Agency had got hold of her and hidden her, but the report Issy had managed to find said that in the moment she’d taken to gather herself from the disorientation, turn around, and go back through, she’d walked into the streets of twenty-first century Tokyo.

This Sarah had been damned lucky to have not been detected by the denizens of the Apeira, and for the rift to have stayed open – though how lucky she actually felt was debatable. Being catapulted several hundred years into the future, realising the world she knew was gone, all her friends and family were long dead. Issy couldn’t begin to imagine what that was like. That was something to think about another time.

‘So, the item in the box was what?’

‘I think it might have been an anchor to bind something in one place?’

Issy considered the possibility for a moment. ‘It’s possible, something would have to be imbued with powerful magic for that,’ she said, ‘would make sense that it’s in a box concealing it.’

‘Didn’t you sense anything weird happening?’

‘The Old Chef is on the other side of town, I’m not a magic radar.’ She frowned. Vampires did however have magic detectors; they had been searching for a specific magic user who’d suddenly come onto their radar.

‘What’s wrong?’ Rose asked.

‘Why don’t you check out the Old Chef?’

‘On my own?’

‘Yeah, I’ve got a couple of questions for someone, I’ll come and join you when I’ve got answers.’

‘What am I looking for?’

‘Signs of magic? Any items that have been used. A rift. Vampires.’

‘Wait what?’

‘It could be important, I’ll know more when I meet up with you.’

Rose folded her arms and looked at her sister.

Issy closed her laptop, leaving it on her desk. ‘Just trust me on this, please?’

‘Fine.’ Rose sighed, not that she was given much choice in the matter and fished the paper bag out of her pocket. ‘Donut?’

Issy eyed it suspiciously. ‘How old is it?’

‘I got it today, Duchess, fresh enough for you?’

Issy took the bag and inspected the squished contents for herself.

‘Wouldn’t be the first time you tried to give me something that was making a mark on the evolutionary scale.’

‘Whatever, see you in a bit.’

‘Yeah,’ Issy sighed as she ate the donut, needing the sugary hit for the conversation that she was about to have. Any other time she’d think it was just a coincidence, but she couldn’t stop thinking about Maggie.

Rose looked over to her as she reached her car, ‘Don’t take too long.’

‘I’ll try.’

Rose watched as Issy turned off in the opposite direction, and wondered where the hell she was going, almost tempted to follow, but she needed to get to the old pub and see if there were any signs of Ellie being there.

The Old Chef was on the other side of town, heading out toward the A5. The pub stood on the side of the road, looking every inch a run-down relic, with boarded-up windows and doors. Rose pulled into the car park, and could see that hidden from view of the road, one of the boarded-up doors had been battered in.

It was a good ten-minute drive to get there from the town centre with traffic; it must have taken Ellie at least an hour to walk there in the middle of the night, and that was if she was a quick walker. What was the girl thinking?

Rose climbed out of the car and paused as she took everything in. Magic presences, she might not have a clue about, but she could sense a demonic energy in such proximity.

No, not a demon. A rift. Recently opened.

She hated it when she was right.

As she got close enough to the door, she was able to see the wood had been wrenched off from the outside; she doubted that Ellie had the strength or ability to do that. There was a loose panel at one of the lower windows, she was more likely to have climbed in that way.

Rose looked around the car park. The gravel had been disturbed recently, and not just by her car. She walked the path from the door, seeing spots where the gravel looked like it had chunks of it kicked up randomly. She put her foot next to it and dragged back. Someone who was stopping and starting with walking, struggling with something. Tyre marks where the gravel really dug in. Too long to be a car – van perhaps? Made a quick getaway.

As little as she thought of Galene, vampires didn't typically kidnap people, unless they found a magic user that they thought was capable of boosting their numbers. She made a mental note to get Nial to see if his human victims were magic users or not – that might help his case get some answers on motivations.

Where did that leave hers? Why was Issy suddenly interested in vampire involvement? She wasn't going to get any answers by staring at the gravel.

Shaking herself out of her stupor, she made her way back toward the broken back door, stepping inside.

The interior had about as much charm as you'd expect from an abandoned pub, with peeling wallpaper, ripped stained carpets, upturned tables and chairs that had just been left to rot with the rest of the building. Though being so far out from the main town and halfway up the A5, it wasn't subject to squatters like some of the old buildings on the industrial estate that were more conveniently located.

They'd had a few good parties here in its day, it was quite sad to see the sorry state the pub was in now. She looked from the window and saw the

disturbed dust and dirt, imagining that Ellie had crawled in and landed there. She cast her eyes along the floor for the faint footprints that led to her path through the building.

Passing the bar, Rose glanced behind it; of course, all the booze was long gone. Typical. She sighed to herself and pressed on through to the restaurant. The demonic energy was stronger in there.

At least she'd found ground-zero for the rift. Strange place for one, but then the barrier that kept the realms separate liked to weaken in random areas; Issy knew more about it, her area of expertise more than Rose's.

Rose sighed to herself, what was she even looking for? The restaurant was barer than the bar, or maybe it was that the tables were pushed against the further wall that led toward the kitchen.

There was nothing obvious that she could see.

*Unless you use the eyes that were made to spot all things demonic*, she thought, not quite sure where it came from. She considered telling herself to go sling their hook, but then thought better of it. As much as she hated to admit it, it might lead to finding Ellie, or at least give her parents some closure.

Exhaling she flexed her hands and concentrated on changing her eyes; they started stinging as her pupils shifted and split, her amber irises bled out all over the whites of her eyes, and the pupils split into three, one settling in the top inner corner, the other in the bottom of the outer corner, one in the middle.

It took a moment of blinking to adjust, and when she did, she could see everything, the cold areas of the room, the heat of the creatures that were living in the walls. Her eyes fell on the tear in the centre of the room, it was closed now but she could see a chaotic churning energy from all the realms combined, lingered around the crack.

Ellie had been successful. At what cost?

Rose shook her head to clear her eyes. She couldn't exactly open the rift and try to fish Ellie out – well Issy could but that'd be really stupid, especially as they were unarmed and unprepared.

Where was Issy?

Rose looked around the floor to see if she could find anything that looked like it should be an anchor. She noticed that a broken compact mirror was not far away, there was an 'E' engraved into it. She'd have to ask Issy how that could

even come about, she was sure there was a lot of interference in the Apeira, it wasn't like trying to reach the Spirit Realm.

Across the room something didn't look like restaurant debris, a small wooden figure no bigger than her hand. It had the head of a kitten, the hind legs of a rabbit, the tail of a snake, and the fluffy upper body of a dog with a scaly underbelly.

She needed Issy.

Where was she? It had been at least half hour since she said she wasn't going to be long. Never trust Issy with her timekeeping.

Rose took out her phone and saw a message.

Issy:

SOS. Home now.

The hells was that supposed to mean? What had happened? She tried to call, but there was no answer, she tried to phone home, but no one answered that phone either.

She pocketed the figure she'd found and hurried out of the pub to get back to the car.

Better be an emergency or there'd be trouble.

## Chapter Fifteen: 2.36pm

Issy reached the family home and pulled up on the kerb. How was she going to ask Maggie about this delicately? Should she even be delicate? Her guest had not exactly told her the whole truth. Maybe she should have let Rose in on what was going on – she was better at this kind of thing.

She frowned as she looked out of the window and saw that the door was slightly open. She got out of the car and could sense the dying embers of recently cast magic coming from inside.

A thousand scenarios made her freeze in place.

Shaking herself, she reached back into her car, taking out a tube, no bigger than a lip gloss, twisting it halfway so a shortened staff sprang into her palm, and she twirled it in her hand to build up energy as she made her way up the path, just in case whoever had been causing trouble was still inside.

She pushed open the door.

The staff clattered to the floor and rolled back down the path.

The smell of burned electricity from lightning magic, and the acrid scent of copper were thick in the air before she even stepped inside. Photos were hanging off the wall, some frames broken on the floor, the living room door was hanging half in the hall like it had been ripped off its hinges.

‘Mom?’ Issy whispered, forcing her feet toward the door. ‘Mom?’ She called out, finding her voice again and stopped in the door to the living room, as her voice was stolen by a strangled sound. The sofa looked like it had been pushed aside, cushions scattered everywhere, the duvet spread out on the floor. It was her Mom’s by the look of the pattern but Issy didn’t remember it being so red.

‘No,’ Issy whispered, over and over as her eyes fell on her Mom.

Louise was lying on her side half on the duvet, looking too pale, too still, her eyes glassy and unseeing, staring ahead of her.

Her phone was just out of reach across the floor along with one of the pokers from the old fireplace set she’d kept just in case.

*...Just in case...*



Issy knelt beside Louise, hands hovering, hesitating to touch, not wanting to feel how cold she was. ‘Momma? Mom...’ She gingerly pushed Louise onto her back and clamped a hand around her mouth.

Her hands shook as she grabbed Louise by her bloody shirt then let her go.

What did she do?

The blood.

There was too much of it.

Maybe there was enough.

She swallowed and exhaled as a chill crept over her; there was a line she’d promised that she’d never cross. *But it was Mom*, what other option did she have? Surely her Ma would understand – would Rose? Would Mom?

No, she couldn’t wait. It might be too late already, but she had to try.

Her hands shook as she unbuttoned Louise’s shirt, and she closed her eyes concentrating all of her energy on the blood that she could feel still in her mother, the blood that was soaking into the carpet and duvet beneath her, the blood that she began to bring up close to the surface. It started pooling around her, glowing at it was infused with energy.

She wet her fingers in the still wet wound on Louise’s neck, drawing symbols that she’d memorised from Galene’s texts on her Mom’s forehead, chest, and stomach, pouring her power into the symbols as the spilled blood rose around the body in a ball. Holding up her hands she made a cutting motion across her palm with her thumbs and the skin parted, her blood flowed out into the ball, blood of the living mixing with the blood of the dead.

Issy felt woozy by the time the spell took enough from her, but she didn’t let that break her concentration. She channelled the ball down and it covered Louise like a second skin, healing her wounds and soaking itself in through the symbols she had cut.

She closed her eyes feeling the blood in her, one hand moving up and down the body to get it moving, the other following the rhythm of a heartbeat as she tried to get it started again.

Nothing.

‘Come on Mom,’ she whispered, ‘death can’t have you yet.’

Nothing.

Issy put all her remaining energy into willing her heart to restart. She didn't know how long she sat there, her arms numb, her reserves on empty. She could feel the embers of static electricity around the room and drew them in to Louise's body.

A little shock in the centre of her Mom's heart.

Louise stirred.

Issy cut the connection and she collapsed onto the carpet beside her. She reached for her phone in her pocket, sending a message to Rose before she closed her eyes, her phone falling out of her hand.

Issy:

SOS. Home Now.

Issy didn't know how long she lay there, drifting in and out of consciousness, but Rose's voice brought her around fast.

'What the hell happened here? Mom? You okay? Mom?'

Mom? Issy's eyes snapped open and she sat up and looked over at Louise who was sat with her knees drawn up to her chest, looking pale, eyes darting from the door to Issy and back again.

'Mom?'

Rose stopped in the doorway, taking in the scene of her Mom shaking, Issy on the floor barely coherent, the smell of blood strong, but there wasn't any to be seen. Her voice was calm, as she focused on her sister, not wanting to scare Louise after whatever ordeal she'd been through, but it was barely restrained. 'What did you do?'

Issy looked up at her and swallowed. 'I did what I had to.'

'What does that mean?' Rose hissed, grabbing Issy by the arm and pulling her out of there into the kitchen pinning her to the wall. 'What did you do?'

Issy opened her mouth and closed it again, tears in her eyes, how could she make Rose understand? She hadn't seen it. 'She was dead.'

Rose stared at her for a moment, just trying to register what she was not saying, especially as their Mom looked very much alive if very shaken up. She punched Issy in the face, watching her go down, glasses broken, hanging off her face. 'Fuck.' She kicked her for good measure.

She went back to the lounge and crouched down in front of Louise. 'Hey, it's okay, you're safe, do you know what happened? What do you remember?'

Louise shook her head a little.

‘Why not go upstairs and take a shower, get a change of clothes, you might feel a bit better for it?’ she suggested, offering her hand to pull her to her feet; cold and trembling as Rose wrapped an arm around her.

Issy moved into the doorway, holding her nose that had been broken for the second time in two days, but she backed off as Rose glared at her.

‘Stay.’ Rose said.

Issy exhaled and found a spare pair of glasses in one of the kitchen drawers, then went to find her phone; there was only one person who was equipped to help them deal with this kind of situation, as much as she hated to admit it.

‘Hello pet, what a lovely surprise.’

‘I-I need you at Mom’s,’ Issy whispered, her voice cracking, ‘it’s an emergency.’

Galene paused, hearing Issy’s shuddered breath, and dropped any pretence of playfulness. ‘I will be right there.’

Issy just hung up and set her phone on the side.

‘Who was that?’ Rose asked.

‘How’s Mom?’

‘Who. Was. That?’ Rose repeated, ignoring Issy’s question.

‘I called Galene.’

Rose stared at her for a moment. ‘I think I must be losing my mind. I’m pretty sure I just heard you say that you called that bitch to come and deal with whatever the fuck is going on here.’

‘I called her because she’s the best one who is able to help Mom right now.’

Rose’s fists clenched tightly at her sides. ‘Issy, I swear to the gods, if you’re implying what I think you are –’

‘She was dead,’ Issy said, unable to even look in Rose’s direction, fixing her gaze on the carpet, not able to get the vision of Louise’s lifeless body lying there from her mind. ‘I didn’t know what else to do –’

‘Because vampirism is the natural go-to answer,’ Rose scrubbed a hand through her hair. ‘*Fuck*. How did this happen?’

‘I don’t know,’ Issy said, ‘I came here to talk to Maggie...’

‘Where is she?’

Issy shook head. 'I don't know.'

'If she's done this and you brought her into this house.'

'Oh my,' Galene's voice cut off any further arguments, 'it seems like we are in a spot of trouble.'

Rose whirled around and pointed at her, a thousand threats dying before they could find a voice, and she just settled for a glare.

'Pleasure as always darling,' Galene said, not at all bothered by her demeanour as she took in the room, looking around curiously, getting a sense of what might have happened, and she turned to Issy. 'Oh, Iris, what have you done?' She asked, unable to hide the pleasure in her voice.

'What I had to.'

'Where is she? I assume it is your mother, yes?'

'You are far too happy about this,' Rose snapped.

Galene turned on her. 'My dear, it is not often we get to welcome new vampires to our numbers, especially one I am as fond of as Louise, *she* was always pleasant company.'

'Will you help her?' Issy asked.

'You're out of your mind.' Rose hissed.

'Of course I will,' Galene said, ignoring Rose, 'I will take her back to the bar and keep her safe there while she adjusts, and you sort this... mess out.'

'I am not agreeing to this!'

'I will also send someone by to help find whoever did this.'

'I'll be calling it in, Sean will be coming.' Rose said.

Issy glanced at Galene who inclined her head. 'Very well.'

'She's upstairs,' Issy said, and watched Galene leave the room.

'Are you seriously going to ignore me when I say no? It is bad enough you do this –'

'Enough is enough,' Issy cut her off, 'I made a decision in the moment – and if you had come back to seeing her dead on the floor you can't say you wouldn't have tried anything to bring her back.'

'How do you know it's even Mom in there?' Rose asked, 'what's dead should stay dead for a reason. Gary Ford –'

‘You said you didn’t remember that.’ Issy narrowed her eyes as she regarded Rose, her own expression starting to harden, her bloody and misshapen nose only serving to make her look rougher.

‘I killed a friend when I was showing off, it’s not something you forget,’ she said, ‘I also remember he was walking around an hour after you said you would fix it, but he was all wrong.’

‘It was the first time I tried anything like that.’

‘You lied about the whole thing.’

‘I was trying to protect you.’

‘You made me feel like I’d gone crazy.’ Rose shook her head hands dropping to her sides and she just stared at the wall for a moment, trying to refocus her thoughts. ‘Did Maggie do this?’

‘No.’

‘Then where is she?’

‘Whoever was here took her,’ Issy said, ‘she was the target.’

‘What?’ Rose’s head snapped to her sister and her hand flexed, ‘you better tell me everything and be completely honest about it.’

‘We met Tuesday night – I think she might have been the one who came through the rift but I don’t know – I came back to all this.’

‘I knew there was something off about her. That was stupid.’

‘She said that vampires were after her.’

‘What?’

‘She said they wanted her for a specific reason.’ She took a step around the sofa when Rose looked like she was about to punch her again. ‘I’ve been keeping her safe, no one knew where she was.’

‘What about that bitch up there?’

‘I never told her anything about Maggie, especially with everything else going on,’ she said, ‘but we can assume vampires were here, there was no sign of forced entry, so it had to be someone Mom knew.’

‘Aside from *her*, she doesn’t know any.’

‘What about Sean?’

Rose frowned. ‘No – he wouldn’t do anything like this.’

‘Did you tell him about Maggie?’

‘I said you had a friend that was here yesterday... I was ranting to him about it in the car just before the reporter incident.’ She closed her eyes. ‘Can’t believe he’d do this.’ She took her phone out, sending the same message to both Sean and Nial, needing both of them there.

Rose:

Need you at home, there’s  
been an incident.

Sean:

On my way.

Nial:

I’ll be there soon, I’ll bring  
Charlie.

The sisters turned their attention to the stairs as Galene helped Louise down, keeping an arm around her, carrying a bag in her other hand. She guided Louise to sit down, leaving the bag beside her, before motioning the sisters out of the room.

‘Is she okay?’ They asked in unison.

Galene looked as soft as Issy had ever seen her as she regarded them both. ‘It can take a while to shake the shadow of death,’ she said, ‘how much of herself she will regain remains seen.’

‘What do you mean?’ Rose asked.

‘The magic will always take something of a person as payment, some part of their personality, a memory or more; they say you never get over playing Russian Roulette, let alone the toll on the caster.’ She smiled, looking Issy over. ‘How are you feeling, pet?’

‘Fine,’ Issy said, though she’d not given herself the chance to see how she really was. It didn’t help that all she could think about was her aching face.

‘Hm.’ Galene watched her for a moment longer before turning to Rose. ‘Fortunately for you I am quite fond of your mother, both of them actually, so I will look after Louise, and ensure she is safe and tended to.’

Rose pressed her lips into a thin line and peered around the door to look at her Mom, she didn’t even *look* like their Mom right now, sat with her arms wrapped around herself, one hand resting over her neck, just staring listlessly at the floor. ‘I will be checking every inch of your bar.’

‘Of course.’ Galene walked through to the lounge again, and picked up the bag. ‘Come on dear.’ She held out a hand to Louise, who stared at her blankly for a moment before taking her hand and standing, not looking at either of her daughters.

‘Gal,’ Issy started, her mouth opening.

‘I am doing this for her,’ Galene said. ‘I will leave one of mine nearby, just in case.’

‘There’s no need,’ Rose said, ‘I’ve already messaged Sean and Nial, they’re on their way with teams, so you better get Mom outta here.’

Galene inclined her head, resting an arm around Louise as she guided her out of the house.

Rose whirled around and punched Issy again, just to get some of the emotion out, and her stupid sister was just taking it. Damn it, it wasn’t half as satisfying when she wasn’t fighting back. ‘Get out of my house.’

‘Rose –’

‘I don’t want to hear it right now, I don’t even want to look at you. Wait outside I’ll get one of the guys to take you to get your statement of what happened.’

‘What d’you want me to say?’

‘Unless you wanna be locked up for the next five hundred years, I’d suggest leaving out the fucking necromancy.’

‘It’s not quite n –’ She was silenced by her sister’s glare and hung her head.

‘Mom was attacked in the house, a friend has taken her to get checked over, she doesn’t remember anything about the attack, so we didn’t want to make her wait for treatment.’

Issy nodded and sighed and grabbed a spare pair of glasses out of the junk drawer before heading outside; she found her stave on the path outside and picked it up, returning it to its smaller concealed shape with a twist, before popping it into her pocket. She tried to put her glasses on but her face hurt a little too much, so she slid them on top of her head. Sinking down on the kerb she hugged her knees, resting her head on her arms.

What else was she supposed to do? She couldn’t just let her die.

She’d never liked the idea of an immortal life.

Issy closed her eyes. Would she remember that – would she hate Issy for doing this to her?

‘Issy?’

She looked up hearing her name and saw Nial crouching down beside her.

‘What’s happened?’ He asked, looking from the house back to her, a million other questions in his eyes, not entirely sure which to ask first.

Issy just shook her head, not trusting her voice, especially as others walked by, she didn’t want to say anything she’d later regret.

‘Nial,’ Rose called from the doorway, ‘leave her,’ before disappearing back inside.

‘I’ll take her to get a statement,’ Sean offered, holding out a hand.

Issy took it and pulled herself up, feeling a faint static shock, like he’d been nicked with a spell; something of burned electricity and copper and aftershave.

‘Rose.’ Issy called out and moved toward the house, but Sean’s grip on her was firm.

‘Let’s get this over with, shall we?’ He said, opening his car door.

Issy frowned as she slipped into the back of the car. It was like someone had wrapped a weighted blanket around her. She couldn’t feel even the smallest bit of energy. She ran her hands over the seat, trying to sense where the warding glyphs might be. Instead, she found a small obsidian stone in the groove of the back seat. It was about the size of what she’d given Maggie the other day.

Sean was silent for a moment before his shoulders dropped and he looked in the mirror at her. ‘I am sorry about your mother,’ he said, ‘we tried to take the witch peacefully, but she was not allowing that to happen.’

‘You’re not working for Galene.’

‘Only for appearances,’ he said, ‘but her time is over.’

‘Then who?’

‘You will meet them soon enough.’

At least they wanted her alive.



## **Chapter Sixteen: 4.20pm**

Issy was sure that Sean had been taking a convoluted route on purpose. Was he trying to confuse her or shake off someone he suspected was following them? Galene had said she would leave someone watching the house. Had they picked up on something being amiss? Would they have followed?

She could take Sean out the second they were out of the car, but there was no telling if they were off to meet the mastermind behind this recent trouble, or whether Maggie would be there.

She hoped that Maggie was in one piece – she'd managed to escape from them before, after all; they weren't likely to forgive that in a hurry. Instead of fighting, perhaps she should play their game until she knew Maggie was safe. Then they could work on getting out of there together.

Sean pulled up in a supermarket car park. 'Am I going to have trouble with you?' He asked.

Issy just looked at him. 'What has this person got on you?'

'What?'

'Why betray Galene?'

'Betray her?' Sean echoed. 'She has betrayed us.'

'Why?'

'That's a long list,' he said and got something that she couldn't see out of the glove box. He took off his belt and turned around. 'You're at the bottom of the list. Hands.'

'Me?' she moved her belt out of the way and leaned forward.

He tightened cuffs around her wrists, then threw a hood and eye mask at her. 'Put those on.'

'Why me?' she asked, getting a look at the suppressing sigil etched all around both cuffs as she took her glasses off, putting them on the back seat. At least if Rose got in the car for any reason, she might see them and realise something was wrong.

'Anyone else who refused her would be killed,' he said, 'I loved a blood witch once and I had to watch her being tortured when she refused to help create

more.’ He growled. ‘But not you. You who refuse her repeatedly. Why should you get away with your life?’

Issy was glad there was a hood covering her head so he couldn’t see the expression that came with the cold dread that crept up her spine. ‘I’m immortal, she’s just playing the long game, thinks I’ll give in eventually.’

‘You will not be given such a luxury,’ he said.

Issy felt the car pull off and she grabbed at the length of her hair, yanking a few strands out to drop on the back seat too. If Rose got it to someone at the shop, they might be able to track her.

If Rose saw it.

If Rose cared to find her.

She closed her eyes.

She couldn’t rely on Rose calming down enough to want to help her, but she wasn’t going to regret her actions, or apologise for them. She would assume that she was on her own, and hope that help would come anyway.

She couldn’t tell how long they were driving for or what direction they were going in, but if they were working on causing Galene problems, then she’d assume that they were still in the local area. Perhaps he’d turned to go to one of the farms the town had been built up around. The Alinston industrial estate on the other side of town had completely closed after the crash of 08. There was plenty of places for vampires to hide themselves and remain unnoticed if they wanted to.

She rested her head against the window and tried to listen for outside noise, but her hearing wasn’t as good as Rose’s, and all she could hear was the car and the sounds of the road.

‘So, you’re pissed with her over me, why else?’ She asked, if she could go armed in with as much information as possible it might put her somewhere near to an equal footing.

‘Her treatment of our people, if we dare to question, dare to think for ourselves, we are silenced.’

‘She has given you peace, or do you forget vampire hunting being a respected profession?’

‘Oh I remember,’ he said, ‘I also remember it is because we were so feared. The most powerful mages could not stop us, so they cursed our bloodlines

to live like our undead kin, forced to live at night or travel through sewers to avoid the day.'

'And Galene made underground networks cleaner and easier for you to move around, and later gave you factor V sun cream and protective clothing to allow you to walk in the day again.'

'She did not give it us.'

'She made damned sure it was easily available to all her people. You know what companies would charge for something like that if they could get away with it.'

'Of course you would believe whatever lies she fed you.'

Issy scoffed. 'Yeah, I'm the one being lied to.' She jolted as Sean slammed on the breaks. 'Trying to give me whiplash?'

'It does not matter, soon you will be part of the reason her grip on the world fails.'

'What makes you think this other person will be better?' She asked, 'Galene made it safe for vampires everywhere to feed, made blood readily available. Do you think you'll get that if everyone is running scared off you again?'

'That won't matter,' he said, 'we have the descendant of the one who cursed us with those *limitations*.'

'Maggie, that's what you were after her for?'

'Her brother was too powerful to take when we found him, as was her father, and every generation before.'

'Then why not her?'

'She is still young and not fully come into her power yet; they do not usually run away from home so early, so *vulnerable*.'

'So you were detecting that family's magic.'

'When the rift opened.'

And Rose had told him exactly where to find her; Issy closed her eyes, if she had warned Rose maybe none of this would have happened, or maybe Rose's staunch trust in her colleagues would have seen it happen anyway.

'So this missing person case?'

'I was sent to track the magic that night,' he said, 'I saw what happened to the human and I took the witch. When she escaped – well, I know how good an

investigator Rose is, ensuring that she was on the case would have led me to the witch one way or another.'

'Well we won't have to wait for Galene to kill you because Rose will annihilate you first for using her like that.'

'Rose will find what she needs to give the family closure,' he said, 'I will convince her to drop her search for the witch, if she tries to continue. It won't be hard, given the loss of her mother and her sister's disappearance.'

So he hadn't seen the lack of blood, or body on the scene, he didn't know about the blood magic. 'Well, you've got it all figured out,' she said.

Sean didn't say anything as he stopped the car and got out.

Issy swallowed and exhaled, trying to keep calm – the last thing she wanted was to show any fear – they'd pick up on her heart hammering in her chest. She was about to reach and peel the hood up so she could glance outside at her surroundings when there was a bang on the window.

Laughter.

The car rocked. She was being watched and taunted.

She sat with her hands in her lap, testing the cuffs, too tight to slip.

There was a series of random bangs on the car all around from the bonnet around to the boot.

The door opened, and someone leaned over to unbuckle the belt, Sean, by the smell of his aftershave. 'Come on.' He grabbed her arm, barely giving her the chance to get out under her own power.

She felt gravel beneath her feet, and she dragged her heels a little. She didn't want to appear too willing to draw suspicion. Sean's grip on her arm tightened and he yanked her forward, making her stumble.

A door opened and she was led through; it echoed when it closed behind them. Wherever they were was relatively empty; through the hood she could smell damp, mould and old death.

There were hushed voices all around them, but she couldn't quite make out what they were saying. Her senses were dulled by whatever sigils were on the cuffs, but she could guess that she was surrounded by vampires.

They passed through into another room and came to a stop then Sean finally let her go.

A door closed and she listened. The room was silent, though she had a creeping feeling that she wasn't on her own.

Something brushed against her left; she turned with her arms raised; it brushed against her right. She reached to pull the hood off her head, and she was pinned face first against a wall. There was a breath on the back of her neck, and she could feel her heart hammering in her chest.

An amused chuckle rumbled from the body pressing against hers, sharp teeth grazed against her skin.

Issy exhaled and calmed herself down stepping away from the wall only to be slammed into the ground, pinned by a very sharp heel digging into her skin enough to be a threat until she went still.

Whoever was over her laughed and took their foot off. 'You really are a good pet, learn fast.'

'I think you've severely overestimated –' Issy started getting up but felt something sharp pressing down against her throat.

'Ah, ah.' they tutted. 'I didn't say you could speak.'

Issy was glad that the hood was on her face so they couldn't see the murderous expression on her face.

'Now,' they said, crouching down with a hand at the back of her head to pull her close. 'You are going to work for us, yes?'

'I can give you an estimate of my rates as a consultant.'

'At least you are amusing.' They ruffled her head through the hood. 'While I am removing Galene, you are going to be busy creating an army of our kin.'

'What's your problem with her?'

'Never you mind.' They pulled Issy back to her feet. 'Now go and get some rest, you will either start working for us tomorrow, or I will have people spend some time with you to make you more agreeable.'

Issy felt someone grab her arm. It wasn't Sean, she suspected that he was already gone to carry on playing the part of double agent. This person had a smell of lingering death and a bruising grip. She was pulled along; they passed through what felt like a corridor and into somewhere, and she fumbled down a staircase until she was thrown onto a cold concrete floor. A door closed behind her and she finally felt that she was alone. She pulled the hood and eye mask off.

The room was pitch black so she could see perfectly, but there was nothing to look at in there, it wasn't very big, no light, no window; there was a solid wooden door at the far end, that could be burned. She tapped on the wall; it was likely plasterboard.

What buildings did she know of that could be big enough for a room like this? There was a partially renovated farmhouse on the edge of town just past Harroway that had been abandoned. It was possible, he'd backtracked from the country roads to town and gone another way to reach it.

She had to assume whoever she'd spoken to was their leader, but she hadn't recognised their voice as anyone within Galene's inner circle as far as she was aware – unless it was from a long time ago.

'H-hello?'

Issy jumped and looked around, but she was alone.

'Hello?' she replied. 'Knock on your wall.'

She listened.

*Tap.*

*Tap. Tap.*

*Taptaptap.*

She moved to sound and knocked back. 'I'm here,' she said.

'Issy?'

She knew that voice. 'Maggie? Are you hurt?'

'Issy – gods I'm so sorry I tried to – your Mom –'

'She's safe,' Issy said, 'are you hurt?' She asked again, not liking that the question had gone unanswered.

'I'm okay,' she said, 'she wants me to change her past – turn her into a living vampire.'

Issy frowned, there was only one family who had that kind of power – the same family that could pull the level of bloodline curse on a whole species – but things like that would take more than one person, what did they think Maggie was capable of? 'What did you tell them?'

'Nothing yet – I don't want to say I can't because I think they'll run out of use for me.'

'Maybe,' she agreed, 'are you Shay's sister?'

Maggie was quiet for a few moments. 'Yeah,' she answered.

‘Why didn’t you tell me that when you came into the shop asking after him?’

‘I was scared,’ Maggie said.

‘Of what?’

‘Being caught by these guys, being found by my family,’ she sighed and there was a thud between their walls, ‘I guess I felt safer being someone who needed help.’

‘Did you think I’d have turned you over if I knew?’

‘I didn’t know you,’ Maggie said, ‘he left you the shop, you two are friends.’

Issy closed her eyes a moment, she could understand her reluctance to tell her everything, but she knew the family, the majority were not that bad, so why would she be trying to escape from them? Questions for another time.

‘Will Shay be looking for you?’

‘No,’ she said, ‘it’s been thirty years.’

‘That explains a lot,’ Issy muttered, ‘Are you bound?’

‘Cuffs, with sigils on, they learned from last time.’

‘Me too.’ Issy nodded and considered her options; breaking the door down would be possible, but noisy, so would breaking through the wall to get to Maggie.

‘Is this where they had you before?’ Issy asked.

‘I don’t think so.’

‘It’s okay, we’ll get out of here,’ Issy assured her. She had her weapon in her pocket, but she didn’t want to risk losing it on a failed escape attempt.

‘You sound tired,’ Maggie said.

‘Long day.’

‘Rest while you can, better to think about an escape when you’re at full strength, we’ll be smart about it.’

‘You make it sound like you do it often,’ Issy commented.

‘I have a talent for attracting trouble,’ Maggie laughed.

‘Good to know, I’ll be sure to add it to my questions next room mate we get.’

‘We?’

‘Assuming you’re not going to run off soon as we’re out of here.’

‘Am surprised you still want me around after what’s happened,’ she replied, her voice wobbling a little.

Issy shook her head a little, ‘It’s not your fault.’

Maggie sniffed. ‘Thank you.’

‘They need us in one piece, and seem willing to at least give us the chance to come round to agree willingly, so we rest while we’re left alone, and see how things are later.’

‘Okay.’ Maggie agreed. ‘We’ll be okay.’

Issy smiled a little. ‘We will.’

Though she didn’t know who she was trying to convince more.



## Chapter Seventeen: 4.56pm

Rose wrapped her arms around herself as she leaned forward, perched on the edge of a chair in the conservatory, elbows resting on her knees, head in her hands. She could hear Nial and Charlie in the house directing the team they'd called in, but she wasn't paying any attention to what was going on. She doubted that they'd find much. Issy had seen to that.

How could Issy be so *stupid*?

Rose could still remember fifteen-year-old Gary Ford's dead eyes as he shambled through the park, his broken body twisted, jerking with jittery movements, the sounds he made still made her shiver. The unnatural speed he'd rushed the first person he'd seen and tore into them.

Their mother must have known. She'd spent an hour in Issy's room with her, there'd been raised voices, crying, a lot of talking. Issy was quieter, more subdued for a few months after. Was that because of the magic she'd tried, or because she'd been caught and read the riot act? There was a slight *shift* in her afterwards, she was less cautious and more ambitious. Her studies became more focused on magic-related subjects, and she excelled in them.

Magic always came with a price. How would this affect her now? Rose could pretend she didn't care all she wanted, but Issy was still her sister, and would be her problem if she went off the deep end.

She'd just brought their Mom back from the dead and turned her into a fucking vampire without a second thought – how much worse could she get really? Rose hated to think if she was going to find out.

'Hey.'

Rose wiped her eyes quickly and looked up at Nial who handed her a mug.

'I've sent everyone home, just me here, thought you wouldn't want to be on your own just yet.'

Rose opened her mouth, and a small squeak came out and she cleared her throat. 'Thanks,' she said, fixing her eyes on one of the bubbles in her tea.

'What happened?' he asked, 'just between us?'

Rose shook her head a little. 'I came home, and it was as you saw it...but...' She hesitated, as good a friend as he was, if he knew the details, he

would have a duty to report what Issy had done. She wouldn't blame him if he did, it would save her from having to do it. 'Issy was pretty out of it on the floor and Mom was...she...'

'Is she okay?'

Rose bowed her head. 'I don't know. She's,' she took a breath, her hand tightening around the mug. 'Galene is looking after her at the moment, helping her through her change.'

'Change?' He echoed, and the realisation dawned on him. 'Oh no, you don't mean that she's a...?'

'Vampire?' Rose spat out the unfinished question and nodded.

'I'm sorry,' he rested his hand around hers, 'I know it's not what she'd want.'

'Everyone knows that! Even Issy. But she –'

Nial prised the mug out of her hand and set it down, drawing her into a hug. 'Grief will make a person do really dumb things, especially when they are capable of it,' he said. 'I'm not excusing what she did, but I can see her side too. I mean there's very little I wouldn't have done to have even an extra five minutes with Dad.'

'I wasn't here,' Rose whispered, burying her head against his shoulder. 'I had a call from Mom – what if she was phoning to say she was in trouble? What if I could have been here to save her from going through that?'

'What if the world ends tomorrow and none of this matters?'

'You're really bad at this.' She grumbled with a snuffle.

Nial smiled as he rubbed her back. 'I know, my point is that you can drive yourself mad with all the what ifs,' he said, 'this has happened, you need time to process it, and find a way to make things as normal for Louise as you can.'

'If she even remembers us, or wants us around.' Rose mumbled. 'Galene said that it's different for everyone – she might not be the same as she was.'

'Well, if she's not, you adapt and help her through that.'

Rose closed her eyes and sighed.

'Do you know what happened?'

'Not exactly,' she drew back enough to grab her drink, not wanting it to go to waste. 'I told you about Issy's friend? She's tangled up in a lot of stuff, Mom was keeping her company here, and they came for her.'

‘Who?’

‘I don’t know exactly,’ she shrugged, ‘I’ll go over tomorrow see if she’s been found, might be able to stand looking at Issy without wanting to smash her stupid face in by then.’

‘It will be a start,’ he nodded, ‘not saying that you have to forgive her in a hurry – or ever, but you’re going to be in each other’s lives for a very long time, you should tolerate each other, at the very least.’

‘We’ll see.’ Rose downed her drink and wiped her damp face. ‘Did they find anything in there?’

‘They took a reading of the magic in the room.’

‘Shit. They’ll find illegal magic and Issy all over it.’ Rose frowned.

Nial looked at her. ‘Doesn’t she have a license?’

‘For combative magics, yes, not for necromancy or creating vampires. Stupid bitch.’

‘Hey,’ Nial grabbed the mug before Rose could fling it across the room. ‘This isn’t the office, no breaking your own mugs here,’ he said, ‘I’ll give Charlie a quick call, I might be able to catch her.’

Rose nodded, running her hands through her hair as Nial went into another room, his voice muffled by two closed doors. She rubbed her head, feeling a pounding behind her eyes.

Nial went back to her. ‘The readings were accidentally deleted before they could be uploaded and checked. It’s a shame how magic affects tech like that.’

‘Thank you,’ she sighed. She might be really upset with Issy, but she wouldn’t want her imprisoned because she’d done something completely idiotic.

‘Want me to help you straighten this place out?’

‘Haven’t you got somewhere to be?’

Nial shook his head. ‘Rach has taken the kids, and Leon knows that emergencies happen with work, so he’s good. I’ll make it up to him another night.’

Rose nodded a little. ‘Thank you,’ she said, moving through to the hall taking in the scene.

There were photos hanging off the wall, some smashed on the floor, the shoe pile beside the door strewn everywhere. Nial bent over starting to pick things up, carefully setting the photo frames aside.

Rose ignored him, focused on the door; had Mom opened it only to be shoved aside? That would suggest someone she knew. If it was a vampire then it must have been someone who'd been invited into the house before, did Mom know any vampires? Had she ever taken Sean there? Had she invited him in before? Was Sean even a suspect or was that Issy's paranoia – she'd let him take Issy.

No, Nial was right, she was just going to send herself mad with all the questions. It could have been anyone, she was sure that vampires had humans who did dirty jobs for them in premises they had no access to, it could have been one of them.

Scorch marks on the wall looked like a pattern of lightning. She touched it a moment following its path and looked back. It had come from the lounge door. Had Maggie tried to defend them both? There was another on the opposite wall, a different angle. Had she come from the kitchen or was she running to it? She hadn't noticed anything amiss. Coming from it then, Rose decided, hurrying to Louise's aid, flinging her natural magic at whoever was in the hall. At least her Mom had help – someone had *tried* to defend her. It offered little comfort.

She walked through to the lounge and stopped. The sofa was at an odd angle, like someone had wrenched it aside; Mom's duvet was still sprawled on the floor, sofa cushions scattered everywhere. There was a poker on the floor, taken from the old fireplace set, her phone not far away.

It was the lack of blood that was the most numbing thing about the scene. As if nothing bad had happened at all. She rounded the sofa and moved to lie down on the floor on her side, one hand reached toward her phone, the other resting near the poker.

Was this how her Mom spent her last moments, bleeding out?

'Rose.' Nial's voice was quiet as he peered into the lounge.

She closed her eyes and curled up, burying her head in the duvet, it smelled so strongly of the blood that was no longer there. Everything did. How did she get rid of stains that didn't exist?

Nial's arms were around her again, gently pulling her off the duvet, and sitting with her. 'I've got you.'

Rose leaned into him, accepting the comfort he offered. He'd always been the same from the time Issy had left to go to uni, he'd lent an ear, shoulder to cry on, body to spar with, a person to fill the void her sister's absence had created.

She didn't know how long they were sat like that, but her neck was starting to ache, she hated to think how his creaky human body was doing in that awkward position. She sniffed and wiped her face.

'You go and get some rest, I'll straighten up down here,' he said.

Rose shook her head. 'I can't leave all this to you, I need to do *something*.'

'Have you eaten yet?'

'I don't think I could face anything.'

'Not even the chow mein from round the corner?'

Rose considered for a moment, but her rumbling stomach made up her mind for her. 'Maybe spring rolls.'

'Okay.'

'And dumplings.' She opened her mouth to speak again but he cut her off.

'And the sauce, I know.' He nodded and dug his phone out. 'It's the Dragon, isn't it?'

'Yeah – oh you want the number?' Rose reeled it off for him from the top of her head.

'That's the real superpower here,' he said and dialled the number.

Rose got up and left him in peace to place the order, bundling the duvet up and carrying it upstairs. She paused as she got to Louise's room, pushing the door open.

She wasn't sure what to expect, but it didn't look any different to how she left it. She sat on the bed, setting the duvet down, and noticed that the photo of her and Medora was gone – Galene probably took it to help with her memories.

Would she help? Was this all some elaborate ploy to get Issy back? She shook her head; she was starting again.

A thud came from downstairs, and her blood ran cold.

She dashed to the landing and looked down. Nothing looked out of place.

'Nial?'

'Next time can you get a lighter sofa?'

'You idiot, what are you trying to move that yourself for, you'll put your back out?'

‘I’m thirty-eight not eighty.’ He grumbled, ‘besides, it’ll be my knees that’ll go first.’

Rose rolled her eyes and went back downstairs, smacking him on the arm.

‘What was that for?’ He asked rubbing his arm.

Rose moved the sofa on her own without any of the drama he was having over it. ‘Scaring me like that. I thought...I don’t know what I thought but I – never mind.’ She shook her head.

‘Thought they’d come back?’

She nodded and closed her eyes.

‘Do you want to come back to mine?’

‘Do you mind?’

‘If I did, I wouldn’t ask.’

‘Okay.’

Nial smiled at her softly and put all the cushions back where they belonged and replaced the poker back on the rack, picking up Louise’s phone.

‘Right, you go and get a few things packed up and I’ll go and tidy the hall up.’

Rose nodded numbly and shuffled back up the stairs. How easy had it been to clear away the signs of death? The walls would just need a lick of paint and there’d be nothing left. Except for the smell. She didn’t know if that would ever leave.

She could hear Nial in the hall, picking up broken glass, she wanted to shout to him to be careful, but he knew, didn’t he? He was sensible. Then again, she’d thought the same of Issy.

She sighed and grabbed a bag out of her wardrobe and stuffed some clothes into it, remembering a spare couple of uniforms so she didn’t have to come home immediately if she didn’t feel like it. She always hated being in the house on her own. She doubted that she’d be inviting Issy round in a hurry.

Nial was right, she didn’t have to forgive her, but for the sake of helping mom, they needed to at least be civil. She’d talk to her in the morning once they’d both had time to calm down and think things over.

## Chapter Eighteen: 6.02am

Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2012

Rose was woken by a pounding head and a rolling wave of nausea that she managed to swallow down. Her hand fell to the side, and something made of glass clanged. She looked down and saw the bottles that were all around the floor.

*'Fuck it, I'm breaking out the booze,'* she'd announced last night, getting into the drink cabinet and it looked like she'd emptied every bottle Nial owned. She was grateful for her inhuman constitution, though Nial was looking about as rough as she felt, as he came back from the bathroom.

*'Not sympathy drinking you under the table again,'* he grumbled, flopping into the nearest chair. *'Too old for this.'*

*'Lightweight.'* Rose snorted and groaned.

If Mom was there right now, she'd be smacking her with a pillow. *'Look at the bloody state of you.'*

Mom.

She closed her eyes. She needed to know if she was okay and scrambled around for a little hair of the dog to help with the hangover before she attempted to get up, passing the remnants of the whisky to Nial. *'Here.'*

*'Tryna finish me off woman?'* He asked cracking an eye open to look at the bottle.

*'It'll help,'* she said. *'Gonna phone Queen Bitch, see how Mom is.'*

*'Kay,'* he took the bottle and had a swig, then immediately bolted up and ran back to the bathroom.

Rose searched around for her phone and found it in the kitchen, opening the back door to get some fresh air to help sober her up. Then the damned phone wouldn't unlock.

It took her too many minutes to realise that it was Issy's phone. She'd picked up the wrong one. Seemed like going home and seeing her sister were going to be unavoidable after all. Sitting on the doorstep, thumbing through Issy's contacts, she was pleased to see she hadn't changed Galene's name. Rose called *'Bloodsucking Bitch'*. The phone nearly rang out.

*'Hello pet.'*

‘Wrong one, bitch.’

‘Where is your sister?’

‘How’s Mom?’

‘Where is Iris?’

‘How’s Mom?’

‘Answer my question.’

Rose narrowed her eyes, her head pounding, either still or again, it was hard to tell. ‘I picked up her phone last night, and your number was on it, so I used it. She’s probably at home right now sleeping.’

Galene made a displeased sound, but accepted the answer. ‘Your mother is well, she is resting at the moment,’ she said, ‘she will do a lot of sleeping and drinking for a while as her body adapts. Undead vampires are rare.’

‘What do you mean? Aren’t you all the same?’

‘Hardly’ Galene said, sounding offended at the suggestion, ‘Your sister managed to bring her back from the dead and turn her.’

‘What does that mean for Mom?’

‘It means that she is more vulnerable,’ Galene said, ‘the usual cream will not keep her safe in the sun, even a grey cloudy day will not be safe for her, she will need more blood more regularly, she will not be able to tolerate mortal foods. Consecrated grounds will be uncomfortable for her. Items of power will harm her.’

Rose considered all the information. ‘So, a typical storybook vampire.’

‘My father’s early experiments created undead creatures of the night, that did find their way into some of the older stories.’

‘Can they turn others?’

‘No, it is blessing, or a curse depending on your point of view,’ she said, ‘gifted through magic, though usually the person in question is alive. The ritual brings a person to the point of death, but they are never dead to begin with. Issy is incredibly talented copying my father’s original spells to resurrect her like that.’

‘Okay stop praising my sister for being fucked up,’ Rose said.

‘Could you honestly say you wouldn’t have done the same, had you the ability?’

Rose frowned rubbing her face. ‘Yes. No. I don’t know. Mom wouldn’t have wanted this.’



‘No,’ Galene agreed, ‘but in the heat of the moment, Issy made a decision and acted how she thought best to.’

‘You’re just happy that she proved capable of doing what you want.’

‘While that does factor into my defence of your sister, I think you should also consider how it would have been to find her dead on the floor, and from the smell of it, bled out over the carpet.’

‘I am not going to forgive her if that’s what you are angling for.’

‘Not saying you should, dear, just try a little empathy.’

‘Coming from you?’

‘What can I say? You caught me in a charitable mood for worldly advice this morning.’

Rose snorted. ‘Whatever.’

‘Is there anything else?’

Rose sighed. ‘I suppose I should thank you for the help you’re giving Mom.’

‘So graciously given,’ Galene said, ‘don’t worry dear, I am doing this for her because I am fond of her, as I said.’

‘She’s married you know.’

‘I am aware.’

‘Look after her and keep me updated,’ she said, ‘I’ll be in touch.’

‘I’m sure you will.’

Rose hung up and ran a hand her face.

‘Alright?’ Nial asked hanging a coffee in front of her.

‘About as good as you look. She said Mom’s as okay as she can be.’

‘That’s good.’

‘I need to see if Issy has found Maggie, speak to her about the Jameson girl, and give her phone back.’

‘Want me to come with you?’

‘Thanks, I should be okay.’

Nial nodded. ‘Alright.’

Rose sighed and sipped her coffee, she’d take a run to her sister’s, it wasn’t that far away, and she could use the workout. ‘Are you okay to drive?’

Nial looked at her and seemed to do a brief self-assessment before downing his coffee, nodding. ‘Yeah, driven worse before now.’

She snorted. ‘I don’t doubt that.’

‘I’ll head straight for the office after I shower, clock us both in, sure I’ve got a spare uniform there still.’

‘Thanks.’

She finished hers off and pocketed Issy’s phone, finding her keys between the gin and vodka bottles – she pulled a face, she didn’t particularly like either.

‘See you soon,’ she called as she left the house, taking the ten-minute jog to Issy’s flat.

Rose didn’t bother with knocking, Issy didn’t deserve that kind of thought or respect right now. She opened the door to Misha meowing at her.

‘Issy?’ She called, but the flat was quiet apart from the cat.

She walked through, her bed was made, curtains were half drawn, no smell of recently cooked food, or the usual morning coffee, and Misha’s bowls were empty. It didn’t look like Issy had been home.

‘Fine.’ She muttered and took the food out of the cupboard, feeding her and filling her water dish, then sorted the litter tray out.

Maybe she’d said something stupid, and Sean hadn’t let her go. She could have started looking for Maggie and forgot about the cat – unlikely, but possible.

She’d go to the shop, just to make sure that Issy wasn’t there. ‘Are you gonna be okay?’ She asked Misha, who ignored her, happily devouring her food, so she left her in peace.

As Rose left, she met one of the neighbours on the stairs; a tired looking man, carrying a baby, barely looked at her and mistook her for Issy. She greeted him pleasantly, not intending to put her sister out with her neighbours.

She took the short walk down the street to the shop, not wasting any time by lingering around, she stepped into the Magic Mirror and saw Nettie behind the counter, head in a magazine as usual. ‘Is Issy here?’ She asked, cutting off any absent-minded greeting the half-dragon was about to give her.

‘No, not seen her since... Wednesday?’

‘Damn it.’

‘Something wrong?’

Rose shook her head a little. ‘I don’t know. Something happened last night and she’s not at home, and not here, so she might be looking for that friend of hers, whoever she really was.’

Nettie nodded. 'Okay, I'll give you a bell if she turns up here.'

'Thanks.'

'You've got my number, right?'

Nettie rummaged around under the counter and pulled out an address book, then flipped through it, reeling off Rose's number.

'Great, if either of them turns up, call me.' Rose said, turning to head out of the door.

'...okay?' Nettie muttered, raising her hand in a lazy wave as the door closed.

She checked the phone when she stepped into the alley hearing a quiet but obnoxious ping sound.

New Message Received.

Nial:

No record of her coming in last night.

No sign of Sean this morning.

Rose frowned and rubbed her face, her finger lingering over the reply button, but what did she even say to that?

There was always the chance that Sean had taken her in on the quiet, not wanting to draw attention to her presence for Rose's sake, or to put her on Reynolds's radar. Issy would be telling her she was being stupidly blind right now, but Rose *knew* Sean and he wasn't like that.

Rose took off out of the alley in a full run up the street; she almost paused as she passed Wherever, knowing that Mom was inside, but as much as she hated Galene for trying to use Issy and breaking her heart, she knew she was the best person to help her out. Could she be behind it all? She'd considered it a possibility, but that bitch was all about reputation, and that of her people, and she would have more to lose than gain by targeting the family.

She was oblivious to the oncoming car as she crossed the road until it started beeping at her, and she chose to ignore it, slowing her pace to cut through the Vangro's carpark; the small supermarket carpark was already filling up, complete with loitering teenagers in the far corner. She'd often hung out around there with her friends when she was skiving off school, back in the days before security cameras had been put up, and that part used to be partially blocked, so no one could actually see them at a glance. They used to go in the shop at lunch and

grab snacks, then hide out until it was nearly home time – she'd never been in the same classes as Issy, so her sister couldn't rat her out for missing lessons.

She crossed the junction and picked up the pace to a run again, carrying along the main road and past the *other* high school that was in the town centre. They'd both gone to Alder High, which was on the same side of town, just further along the outskirts.

She crossed another road and turned left onto the precinct that had their favourite chippy, Chinese, a shop, and their hairdresser. If she cut through the alley, she'd make it back faster by a couple of minutes, but there was always a chance that psycho dog had been let out in the garden by now.

It was worth the risk, she needed to waste as little time as possible to get to Sean and find out what happened to Issy. She might not care for her much now, but it didn't mean that she didn't care at all, besides, if something happened to Issy, Rose wouldn't be able to kill her herself.

She slowed to a walk past the garden when she heard movement behind the gate and the dog started barking, following her along the fence.

'Oh shush you,' she said. It wouldn't be so brave if it was face to face with her.

As soon as she was a garden away, she ran full pelt out of the alley and right down the road to her home. She slowed as she looked at Issy's car, still abandoned outside her house. She went over to see if her sister was lurking in the back seat, but the car was empty. Keys were still in the ignition. Lucky that no one has nicked it in the night.

She looked around, unable to sense another demonic presence that would suggest her sister was in the area, but then Issy didn't have that kind of energy. She was more human in that way.

She got into Issy's car and pulled a face. Like her flat, it always smelled of cinnamon and vanilla – but not in a nice Christmas bakery kind of way; in the confines of her car, it smelled like someone had dropped the air freshener in the solution and forgot to fish it out for six months. Rose could never find the offending article, so she had nothing to toss out. She quickly checked through the car and found that Issy's weapon was missing, she vaguely remembered stepping over that on the path yesterday; hopefully, she'd picked it up and had some form of protection with her, whatever she was doing.

*Ping.*

New Message Received.

Nial:

He's just come in.

Issy:

Just about to shower, will be  
there asap. Rose.

Nial:

I'll keep an eye.

Rose took the keys and locked the car up, heading toward the house; she hesitated at the door before letting herself in, intending to break the record for her fastest time in showering and getting ready for work, not wanting to linger longer than necessary.

## Chapter Nineteen: 9.05am

Issy had been resting on and off for hours; with no windows or clock, it was hard to tell how much time had passed, but given how well rested she felt, she figured it must have been into the next day.

Maggie had spent the night dozing on and off, talking through the wall when she was awake; she'd managed to find a loose fleck of rubble from the ground and had been trying to scratch away at the sigils, but hadn't had any luck in scratching at the right ones enough to destroy them.

Issy had remembered that she had her staff in her pocket, and with some twisting, managed to get it out.

The cuffs were on tight, but not too tight that she couldn't slip the thin tube between the metal of the cuff where it was nearest the hinge and, with an effort twisted the top to extend it.

Sitting on the floor she braced her feet against each end of the staff and pushed as hard as she could. Again. Again. And again. The cuff gave very slightly but it wasn't enough to get her hand free. She untangled her legs and twisted the middle of the staff to retract and remove it, popping it back in her pocket, hopefully it would just be mistaken for a lip gloss if it was found.

She tried twisting her hand through it again, pulling her thumb against her palm as much as she could, and she was close to getting it through when the creaking hinges of a door snapped her attention, forcing her to stop and pull it back over her wrist. There was no further sound in her room, and she couldn't see anyone moving in the darkness.

Maggie.

She moved to the door and started banging against it. 'Hello? I'm ready to talk now.' She called, trying to get their attention.

*Thud.*

Something hit her door hard.

'Wait your turn.' A gruff voice snapped.

'I'll be okay,' Maggie called though she sounded distant. 'Get off me, I can walk...' She could hear her voice fading.

Issy didn't doubt that Maggie could take care of herself in normal circumstances, but she didn't have access to her magic, and Issy felt she was someone who'd be able to get herself into trouble by not shutting up.

She pulled on the cuff again, trying to pry her hand out of it, but it just kept getting stuck around her thumb, even when it was nearly dislocated. She tried clamping her trainers around it and pulling. Gritting her teeth, she almost succeeded in shredding the skin off her hand but couldn't get it to budge. If only she had a pin or something to try and pick the lock with.

She stomped at the ground with her foot in frustration and sat back against the wall with only silence for company.

How was she going to get out of this? It wasn't just her she had to think about – she wanted to get Maggie out of there safely if possible. That meant playing along until they had an opportune moment to escape.

Within reason. There was only so much she could let herself go along with, and she had filled her quota of stretching ethical limits for a while. At least she knew that her Mom was okay, Gal would look after her.

She didn't know how long she was sat alone in darkness for when the door opened and the shadow of a vampire walked in, hauling her up by her arm. 'Get up,' he grunted.

'If you gave me the chance I would have,' Issy said struggling to get her feet under her, given no time to gain her balance before she was all but dragged out of the room. 'Not bothering with the blindfold this time?'

'Not like you have any power here.'

Issy scowled at him; she wouldn't always be so powerless, and she would make sure to prove it to him.

She was being kept in a cellar of sorts, she realised as she fumbled up the stairs, and into a kitchen. The room smelled of blood and death; she shook the image of her Mom on the floor out of her head – how many people had died in a similar fashion here for it to become so ingrained in the place? How had no one noticed that many people going missing or turning up dead? It had to be down to Sean's abusing his place in the agency to cover up everything.

She stopped.

Reynolds knew.

That rat bastard *knew* Sean was up to something, and he was letting him get away with it. Oh when she got out of there, she was burning that place to the ground. How much did Rose choose to not see because of her blind faith in that place and the people she worked with?

A tug on her arm broke her out of her thoughts and she realised that the back door led outside, if the crack of daylight peeking behind the thick curtain was anything to go by. Windows were boarded up with thick curtains hanging over them.

They walked through a hallway, there were two closed doors either side, and stairs going up near the front door that had several bolts and securing it. She could imagine the back door was similarly locked.

She was led through to another darkened room that could have once been a lounge but was now stripped of anything functional. A quick glance of the room confirmed that Maggie was not in there, but another woman was. She smelled of death; her dark hair and sunken eyes helped to make her look just on the wrong side of ashen and gaunt. Issy knew from Galene that it was common among vampires who'd not been able to feed for a while.

The one holding Issy kicked her legs from under her and pushed so she hit the floor, kneeling on her back hard enough to crack it. 'This is where you belong in Her presence.'

'Let her go, she will learn her place in time.' The vampire's smile was unkind and bared too many sharp teeth, as she regarded Issy with cold eyes. 'Leave us.'

Issy got up as soon as her guard took the pressure off. She made a move to follow him – which made him pick up the pace, slamming the door behind.

'Now now,' the vampire slid her arm around Issy's bicep, firmly drawing her back, 'we do not hurt those who are only doing their jobs.'

Issy pulled her arm away and turned to face her again, not wanting any part of her out of sight. 'If you wanted reasonable, you've got the wrong sister.'

She chuckled. 'Is that so? I hear you wanted to talk to me.'

'First I want to know *who* I'm talking to.'

'What is a name to an immortal? As you grow up, you'll see it as a mark of convenience to be shed and changed when trouble comes your way.'

Issy eyed her for a moment. 'You are ancient.'



‘Yes.’

‘Older than Galene.’

Her expression dropped, and she spat out her answer. ‘Yes.’

‘How? She was the first.’

‘That’s what *she* likes to think,’ she said, ‘no my dear, she was the living vampire, the curse was passed on to many who were undead before her, but her father considered her to be a success and ignored the rest of us.’

Issy nodded slowly as she took in that information; Galene had glossed over her father’s earlier experiments before; she certainly didn’t think any of them had survived for all this time.

‘Who are you? Perhaps I have read your name in his books?’ She asked.

‘You understand Ancient Macedonian?’

‘I have reading glasses with a translation enchantment on them,’ she said.

The vampire tilted her head slightly, studying Issy for a long moment.

‘How fascinating, an enchanter as well as a blood mage?’

‘I have a friend who is,’ she said, ‘someone who I may be able to offer their services, if I knew your name?’

The vampire’s lip twitched faintly, amused by Issy’s persistence, so she relented. ‘Helena.’

Issy regarded her, it was a name she knew well from those books, and the frenzied writings of a madman who’d lost a wife by the same name, only to ‘find’ her centuries later. ‘Yes, I know of you.’

‘And what did that wretch write of me? He kept his work very secretive, he only shared it with his precious little daughter.’

‘That you reminded him of his dead wife, so he took you off the street, kept you locked away while he tried to perfect the ritual. He decimated the population of Ichnae in his endeavour to turn you.’

Helena inclined her head. ‘It took me a long time to remember I had a life before I was turned – my whole identity built around a woman who’d left him.’

‘I can understand you’d have some very strong feelings about him.’

‘Strong feelings? His daughter tried to exterminate us,’ she said, ‘once she had other living vampires, she tried to eliminate the undead, and even employed vampire hunters for her cause.’

Issy could believe that – there was a lot that Galene was capable of, and even more that she was likely to have done to consolidate her power, but she also knew that Galene would have had her reasons. ‘So if most of you are undead, what do you want that witch for?’

‘I want to be his first success,’ she said.

She’d been lying to Sean, Issy wasn’t surprised by that. She considered the implication and nodded to herself. She would need to make this play very delicately. ‘Sean thinks you want her to break a curse.’

‘I do,’ she said, ‘just not the one that he thinks.’

‘So you think she can magically change the past? Maggie? The girl you took from my Mom’s home? She couldn’t even levitate a pencil if she tried.’

‘So you think we should dispose of her?’

‘I think you should just let her on her way. Threaten her. She won’t talk to anyone about this.’

‘And if I do?’

‘Let her go, give me Sean’s life and I’ll help you,’ she said, ‘I can create more vampires for you, with enough time I can find whatever other magic you wanted.’

‘She offered the same in return for your freedom,’ she said, ‘now I have to decide who will be more useful to me.’

‘Let her go,’ Issy said, ‘I have the ability to give you what you desire.’

Helena smiled, stepping in closer, and Issy had to fight the urge to put distance between them. ‘How can I trust you?’

Issy smiled and leaned in, resting her cuffed hands on one of Helena’s shoulders. ‘Give me what I want, and you’ll have done more for me than Galene ever did,’ she said, hoping that she at least sounded convincing. ‘Besides, I am a respected member of the community, I can help you to destroy her reputation and elevate yours – what you’ve been doing has been very sloppy work.’

‘How so?’

‘The murder of the humans and vampire was your doing, right?’

‘What makes you think it was?’

‘Galene’s people wouldn’t defang someone for killing humans and then kill that person as well, what lesson is learned from that? They certainly wouldn’t leave a body to find either.’

‘Perhaps you will be useful.’

‘I’ve been around a while, I know how things work,’ she said, ‘things that Sean also knows and should have advised you about.’

Helena’s eyes narrowed slightly as she considered Issy and her words, letting the silence stretch for a few moments. ‘You may be an adequate replacement, if we have a deal.’ She bared sharpened teeth in a smile that made Issy feel like prey. ‘Your heart betrays you,’ she said, ‘it is beating so fast I can almost taste your fear.’

‘I’m not afraid.’

‘No?’ She asked, and in the blink of an eye was behind her, sharp teeth grazing against her skin.

‘No.’ Issy swallowed, not daring to move. Galene toying with her always felt familiar, *safe* almost, but this...this was an unpredictable danger, and she didn’t even have her magic to defend herself.

There was an amused purred sound in her ear on her right, then her left; an arm wrapped around her waist and a hand clamped down on her neck, pinching a nerve hard enough to send her limp. Sharpened teeth ripped into her skin.

‘Stop.’ Issy tried to push the vampire off her but couldn’t get her arms to move, and her legs would have given way had the arm around her waist not been holding her up. Galene had never fed from her, always respected her boundary when she’d said no; blood was a powerful tool in magic, and not one to be given, or taken lightly. The grip on her tightened, and the teeth bit into her harder.

‘No – ge’ff –’ she mumbled, a cold shudder running through her; her head swam as it lolled back and the grip on her neck was finally let go, not that she had the strength to push Helena off her.

Keep breathing.

If she kept breathing, she was alive.

In. Out.

In. In. Out.

Out. In.

Her eyes closed.

## Chapter Twenty: 9.28am

Rose was showered, dressed, and in the office in a record of forty minutes – including going over a couple of just-turned red lights and viewing the speed limit as an advisory warning rather than anything lawful to abide by, but she'd deal with whatever came through the door later. She needed to find out what was going on with Sean.

She drove across the car park until she found his car, then got out to investigate. After wiping the back window down with her sleeve, she peered in and could see glasses on the floor half under the passenger seat. They looked like Issy's spare pair, and the strands of red hair stood out on the black carpet.

She wouldn't forget her glasses, and she certainly wouldn't leave hair behind – hair and blood were two of the easiest ingredients to use in a spell against a person – or to find them. Damn it. She knew her sister's way of thinking; Issy had left it on purpose because something was wrong.

Rose took her phone out of her pocket and called Nial's office.

'Charlie speaking.'

'Charlie, it's Rose, I need you to come out to Sean's car. Do not let anyone come near it until I get back out here.'

Rose hung up and paced before going back to her car, making sure it was completely blocking his in, before locking up.

'Rose, what's going on?' Charlie asked, jogging across the car park.

'I don't know what Nial's told you, but Issy is missing, Sean knows where she is.'

'How do you know that?'

'Her glasses and her hair is in the back of the car,' she said, 'she left them both on purpose, I know it, she wouldn't just leave either, especially not in the back of Sean's car, she can't stand him, and wouldn't trust him to not use them in a spell.'

Charlie glanced over to the vehicle. 'Want me to have a sniff around?'

'Sure, I'm gonna go in and catch up with Nial and question Sean.'

'Fair,' Charlie nodded, 'Nial had him in 201 not long ago.'

'Great, thanks,' she said and jogged across the car park.

‘Rose, the Director wants you,’ Tilly said from behind the desk the second she walked through the door.

‘He can wait.’

‘What’s going on?’

‘Tell you later.’ Rose muttered, barely pausing to have the conversation as she took the stairs up two at a time to get to the next floor. As she approached the room, she could hear Sean and Nial talking.

Rose tried the door only to find it locked, so she knocked. ‘It’s me.’

The lock clicked open, and she stepped in, Nial locked it again.

‘What is going on here?’ Sean demanded.

Rose looked at him as she took her jacket off. ‘Where is my sister?’

Sean paused and frowned. ‘She said something about leaving town when we were done talking.’

‘Really?’ She asked, loosening her tie, pulling it over her head.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I’m sorry for your loss, but I am sure she just needs some time, finding your mother like that must have been difficult for her.’

Rose nodded slightly. ‘Funny,’ she said, unbuttoning her sleeves, rolling them up, ‘Mom’s okay.’

‘What?’

‘She was attacked, but she’s alive,’ she said.

‘How is that possible I...’

‘You what? Were sure you killed her?’

Sean shook his head. ‘I smelled the blood, house was thick of it.’

‘I’m only going to ask you one more time,’ Rose said, ‘where is my sister?’

‘I don’t kn –’

Rose didn’t give him a chance to finish before grabbing him around the throat, slamming him into the nearest table with enough force to make it crack, her grip tightening. ‘I suggest you stop lying, I am running very low on patience.’

Sean clawed at her hand, opening his mouth as he struggled to speak, unable to form words.

‘Rose,’ Nial caught her attention. ‘Maybe let up enough for him to speak?’

She curled her lip a little and let his neck go, grabbing him by his clothes and hauling him back to his feet. ‘I saw what she left in your car.’

Sean swallowed. 'I-I handed her over...I don't know where she was taken.'

'Handed her to who?'

'Galene.'

'Why?'

'Make more of us.'

'And the other witch?'

'We needed her.'

'Her specifically?'

Sean nodded. 'Her family's magic is strong, she is ideal, so we tracked her when she surfaced.'

Rose closed her eyes for a moment as she realised what he was saying, and they opened again, pure amber blazing. 'You saw Ellie fall into the rift.' He nodded and she slammed him into the wall. 'You had me on the case to lead you to Maggie.'

'Yes.'

Rose considered his answer and nodded to herself, letting him drop, then she wound her shoulder back and put her full force behind a punch that crunched on impact and sent him staggering across chairs and tables before he hit the floor unconscious.

'Really?' Nial looked at her.

Rose held her fist gingerly. 'Hard faced bastard.' She muttered. 'You okay to lock him away?'

Nial nodded. 'Attempted murder, assault, kidnapping, that's without looking into anything else that he's been doing here.'

Rose nodded and ran a hand through her hair. 'Right, you take him,' she said, fishing the keys out of his pocket so she could get into his car without setting the alarm off.

'Where are you going?'

'I need to talk to Reynolds,' she said, picking her jacket up off the floor, making sure nothing had fallen out as she shrugged it back on.

'Wait.'

'We can't wait.'

‘No, but you’re best to go and talk to him with a witness,’ he stated, ‘help me get him secured into a cell first, then we’ll go to Reynolds together.’

‘Issy –’

‘Can look after herself,’ he said, ‘besides last night, weren’t you saying you wanted her dead?’

‘By my hand,’ Rose said, ‘no one else’s. She’s my sister, only I’m allowed to make her suffer.’

‘Fair enough.’ He grunted as he hauled Sean’s dead weight up with Rose’s help.

She paused as she took the brunt of his weight and looked at Nial. ‘What are you whinging for?’

‘He’s heavy.’

‘Not that heavy,’ Rose said and shifted so she had him over one shoulder in a fireman’s lift. ‘Wuss. Get the doors.’

‘I am but a mere mortal,’ Nial said.

Rose snorted. ‘You’re not exactly in line for the Mr Punyverse title, you know?’

‘It’s my age.’

She shook her head. ‘I don’t have good sight on my right.’

‘Door open left,’ Nial said, and she adjusted how she was carrying Sean to get through, not really caring if she bashed him. ‘Stop, lift right,’ he said, ‘it’s coming.’

‘I could just throw him down the stairs.’

‘No.’

Rose rolled her eyes and heard the lift doors open.

‘Wait,’ Nial said and exchanged hellos with people who got out, though they took one look at Rose’s hard expression and decided against even acknowledging her. Nial stepped into the lift and held the door open. ‘Okay, it’s clear, about three good steps and a wide corner around.’

Rose stepped into the lift and leaned Sean against a wall to give her shoulder a break, hauling him onto her other shoulder once they reached their floor, then waited for Nial to get out of the lift to carry on getting the doors.

When they reached the cells, they found Pam on the booking desk.

‘What’s this?’ Pam asked.

‘I need a vampire secure cell,’ Rose said, ‘Nial will fill you in while I get him comfy.’

Pam sighed and leaned back, ‘Rin, escort these to 003.’

Rin, a feline-eyed-and-eared werecat poked her head out of the office door and nodded, grabbing the keys. ‘This way,’ she said.

‘Thanks,’ Rose followed her as she unlocked the doors. ‘It is secure for vampires, right?’

‘Yes,’ Rin said, ears twitching. ‘I will stand outside while you strip him.’

‘Completely?’

‘Belt, tie, jacket, anything in his pockets, shoes, anything that could be used as a weapon or to hurt himself.’

‘Right.’ Rose muttered as the cell was opened and closed behind her. Why did she get this job? She took his jacket off and threw it over to the door, along with his tie, belt, and shoes, then she went into his pockets, getting his wallet and phone out.

She felt his body tense.

Sean sprang up at her.

Rose was ready and she caught him, slamming him down with enough force to dent the floor, kneeling on him, her forearm pinned him by the neck. ‘I really wouldn’t if I were you.’ She hissed.

‘Problem?’ Rin asked.

‘Is there?’ Rose asked him, and he shook his head a little, holding his arms out but he relaxed. ‘No.’ Rose finished searching him, taking a knife that was sheathed at his ankle. ‘Do you have anything else on you that you shouldn’t?’

‘No,’ he said and winced, poking at his jaw and cheek.

She patted him down, not trusting his word, then picked up the bundled jacket, phone, wallet, and knife, backing out of the cell. She was shaking as the door was locked behind her.

Rin gave a quiet, inquisitive, ‘Mrrr?’

Rose swallowed and shook her head. ‘I can’t. Not right now,’ she said, passing the items to her. ‘You deal with that? I need to go and tear the boss a new one before I fall apart.’

‘I miss all the fun.’ She sighed but took them.



Rose wiped her eyes and exhaled before squaring her shoulders and marched back out to Nial. ‘You done?’

‘You okay?’

‘Next person to ask me that gets a smashed face.’

‘You could just say ‘no’ like a normal person,’ he said, giving her shoulder a squeeze as he passed her on the way back to the lift. ‘I guess there’s no talking you out of speaking to Reynolds?’

‘No,’ she shook her head, stepping back inside, smashing the button a little too hard for the top floor, ‘he has some idea of what Sean was doing – Issy tried to warn me, but I brushed her off.’

‘So you don’t think Galene has her?’

‘It wouldn’t make sense,’ Rose shook her head, ‘she *likes* that Issy refuses her, she sees it as a game – there’s no reason to suddenly change the rules now, she has literally nothing to gain by killing Mom, kidnapping Maggie, or Issy.’

‘So you think this other faction of vampires is responsible?’

‘I think anyone who’s got the balls to take on Galene has to be capable of some very questionable, and very stupid acts,’ she said.

Nial nodded in agreement and stepped out. ‘Need a moment?’

‘No thank you, want you to record the conversation.’ Rose said and marched three doors down to Reynold’s office. The door was closed, but she didn’t hear him talking to anyone inside, so she threw it open hard enough to rebound, almost slamming in Nial’s face.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ Reynolds was on his feet, lips pressed into a thin line.

Rose crossed the room. ‘Sean has been caught playing both sides. I know that you know what is happening, you will not like what happens next if you do not tell me everything, and you better make damned sure it matches up to what I know.’

‘How could you know anything?’

Rose slammed both of her hands down on the desk, her lip curled in a snarl, and a sound ripped from her throat that reminded both men in the room that she was not a human. ‘Start talking.’

‘I suggest you calm down Miss Winters.’ Reynolds returned to his seat.

Nial cleared his throat and shook his head to his boss. 'I'd start answering her question, sir.'

'I know that Sean was working with another...sect of vampires,' Reynolds said, 'I found some discrepancies in his reports, and I questioned him about it.'

'You didn't ask me.'

'You were his partner, you signed the reports off, of course you were going to have his back.'

Rose scoffed and shook her head. 'Bullshit.'

'I have never made it a secret that I am not a fan of the Matron, or the power that she has gained for herself,' he said, 'I thought Sean and his new contacts could help to *disrupt* her hold on things.'

'Incite a civil war among vampires, you mean.'

'No that's —'

'Exactly what would happen if things were allowed to go far enough, and who the hell do you think would be the casualties that get caught in the middle? Or did you think that Galene would just hold up her hands and wave a white flag if someone else came in and said they wanted to take over?'

'If she had any care for her people —'

'She would protect what they have, and what she knows works for them,' Rose cut him off again, 'has everyone taken stupid pills or something? Fuck sake.' She kicked the desk hard enough to make something snap.

'Do you know where these vampires are operating from?' Nial asked.

Reynolds considered the question for a moment. 'He never said where he met them.'

'I find it hard to believe you didn't want to know.' Rose narrowed her eyes.

He leaned back in his seat as he regarded her. 'No? As long as they were not causing issues, I had little care for their movements.'

'Then that changed when actual bodies turned up.'

His lips pressed into a thin line. 'Yes, your sister overheard that particular discussion, I believe.'

Rose glanced over to Nial a moment who shrugged, it was always hard to tell how much of the truth Reynolds was telling; Issy would say he lied whenever he breathed, but she said that about most people.

It didn't bring Rose any closer to finding her. 'If I find out you've been hiding anything from me...' She let the threat hang turning to walk out.

'We are not done,' he said, 'after this little display, not to mention assaulting a member of the press, I have no other choice – you are suspended pending further disciplinary action.'

Rose paused mid-step and turned back to him. 'You know what? I am going to finish what I'm doing, close the case I'm working, then I am going to quit so you can shove your disciplinary action up your arse,' she said, 'and I am going to make sure that everyone above your paygrade within the agency network knows exactly what you've done, what you've allowed to happen on your watch, and how you've screwed up so badly one of your top agents with the best record has walked.'

She turned, and Nial opened the door for her so she could stride out, and he followed her, even letting it slam behind them.

Neither of them said a word until they were in the lift, and Nial rested arm around her shoulder, drawing her into a half hug, rubbing her back when he realised she was shaking. 'It's okay.'

'Don't.' Rose stepped away and held up her hands. 'Not here.'

'Okay.' He dropped his hand. 'Next plan?'

Rose exhaled and ran a hand through her hair. 'Next? Right. In Sean's car – Issy left some hair, we might be able to find a magic user who can track her.'

Nial nodded. 'Okay, I've got a spare evidence bag in my office, we'll stop by there, something to put the hair in so it doesn't get too contaminated.'

'Good idea,' she said, stepping out, following him to the office a couple of doors down.

She leaned against the wall while he went inside, just taking a moment; she was still trying to understand how things had happened so fast – yesterday had seemed like such a normal day, too normal for it to end like this. She'd picked up on a lead for her case, only for her Mom... no she couldn't think about that at the moment. Her stupid sister needed her to save her sorry arse; she couldn't fall apart right now.

'Got one,' Nial said, rejoining her, and they started out toward the exit. 'I'll go and get my car, you're in no state to drive.'

‘Sure,’ she sighed, not having the energy to argue with him, but plucked the bag out of his hand, ‘I’ll go and get the hair then, he’s parked toward the back.’

Rose crossed the car park to find Charlie still guarding the car.

‘Anything?’

‘Smelled like Issy, and the same burned electricity and blood smell as your house.’

‘Figured as much,’ Rose nodded.

‘Everything go okay?’ Charlie asked.

‘Yeah, sorry it took so long.’ She dug Sean’s keys out and unlocked the car, retrieving the hair, glasses, and a crystal.

‘No problem.’

‘I’m borrowing Nial a little bit to try and track Issy down,’

‘Want me to come too?’

‘Don’t you have your own work to do?’

Charlie shrugged. ‘You’d help me if I needed some brute force, you might need a sensitive nose to sniff her out.’

‘True.’ Rose managed a small smile as Nial pulled up, ‘We’re heading to the Magic Mirror to see if there’s anyone around that can track her down.’

Charlie nodded, opening the doors, letting Rose take the front seat. ‘We’ll find her.’

‘I know.’

Rose believed that, but what state would she be in?

## Chapter Twenty-One: 11.49am

Whenever Rose and Nial were in a car together they belted out classic rock at obnoxious volume. This drive was no different. It was helping. Rose frowned, when was the last time she and Issy had done anything like that? Sure, they got on most of the time, mostly for their Mom's sake, but when did they last have fun together?

She didn't know how she could begin to trust her after this, but between her concern for Issy and Galene's words, her anger toward her sister had calmed – Rose hadn't been there to see her Mom dead on the floor, could she say she would have acted differently? Logically, she knew her Mom was mortal, and wouldn't want to have been turned into a vampire but in her heart, was Rose ready to let her go forever?

A gentle nudge from her right made her jump, and she looked at Nial.  
'Hm?'

'We're here,' he said, 'need a minute?'

She needed several days' worth the way things were going, but she just shook her head. 'I'm good,' she said, getting out of the car, making sure that she had the bag with her. Rose ignored their chattering as she carried on through the alleyway into the shop, and they followed her.

'Hi Nettie,' she greeted the half dragon who didn't look like she'd moved since earlier.

'Have you found her?'

'No,' she said, 'but she did leave some of her hair in the last place she was – is there anyone around who might be able to use it to track her down?'

'Oh I'm not sure who's in the Bastion right now,' she said, 'If you watch the shop a minute I can go find out.'

'Thanks,' Rose nodded, watching her disappear through the back door. She glanced around the shop, not that she was looking at anything, but it felt better than pacing around.

'Are you really quitting?' Nial asked.

'You're quitting?' Charlie asked.

Rose sighed and looked over at him. ‘I was thinking about it yesterday before any of this happened – and really, what else am I going to do in the agency?’

‘What would you do instead?’ Charlie asked.

‘Work as a private investigator.’

Nial looked at her a moment and nodded. ‘Can see that suiting you, and you could always do freelance consultation work too.’

‘Exactly,’ Rose smiled a little, though how much she’d want to have to do with the agency for a while was up for debate, especially while Reynolds was still running the district. ‘I’ll be fine.’

‘I know you will,’ he said, feeling his phone vibrating. ‘Sorry,’ he muttered while fumbling to fish it out, ‘Galene.’

Rose moved in closer so she could listen in.

Nial answered the phone and turned the volume up for Rose. ‘Good morning, Matron.’

‘Hello Nial,’ she said, ‘have you found anything for me yet?’

‘My apologies Matron, something has come up that needed my attention.’

Galene was silent for a moment. ‘I see, that is very disappointing to hear, I had assumed that this was being given your full attention.’

‘Yes, of course – but the Winters sisters are very close friends of mine, and given what has happened, I was supporting Rose and ensuring what Issy has done would not be reported.’

‘Ah, well then,’ her tone changed, ‘that is forgivable.’

‘While I have you on the phone, is there a chance you could come to the Magic Mirror? I have a few questions for you.’

‘If you have questions for me my dear, then you can come here and ask me, I will make myself available.’

Nial looked at Rose who was scowling at the phone, but she nodded.

‘Very well, I shall be there shortly.’

‘The door will be open, let yourself in, someone will meet you.’

‘Thank you, I will see you soon,’ he said and hung up. ‘Why does every conversation with her feel like I’ve just bargained away a decade of my life, or invited myself to become a main course?’

Nettie came back into the shop then and resumed her position behind the counter. 'Someone's coming.'

'Right,' Rose glanced over to the door, taking the bag out of her pocket, putting it on the desk, 'I just need to go and talk to the Matron about something with Nial. Anything they need for the spell take it from the shop and invoice the agency.'

'Sure thing,' she said.

'Thanks, we shouldn't be too long,' she said and stepped outside with Nial.

'Alright?' he asked.

'As okay as I'm getting,' she said as they headed out of the alley to head up the hill; Wherever stood in the old precinct along with a restaurant that Galene had bought out to expand her bar a couple of years ago, when it was in danger of going bust.

'No starting any arguments or fights.'

Rose had the audacity to look outraged at the suggestion. 'Like I would.' She huffed and walked past him, pushing the door open, only to walk into someone who seemed to materialise in front of her.

'The Matron is waiting for you, if you will follow me.'

Rose glanced back at Nial who closed the door behind him and shrugged, nodding for her.

The curtains that covered the windows were blocking out most of the light; it wasn't quite dank, she'd seen it with lights on and music playing, it was too much of a classy bar to be described as such, but the quiet darkness definitely left a sense of unease; the feeling of being watched.

They were taken through the back of the bar and up a ridiculous flight of stairs that led to the toilets, then through another door that had 'Private' on it. She didn't know what she'd been expecting, but there were a lot of rooms up top.

She had to wonder which of the doors was her Mom behind. Their guide opened one and stood aside to let them in. Rose inclined her head to the vampire before stepping into the surprisingly bright office, eyeing Galene who was sat behind a desk; she regarded her, she didn't think she'd ever seen her in her natural habitat, she certainly looked more relaxed. Her hair had a slight kink to it rather

than the poker-straight edge she was used to seeing, bunched up against the soft edge of her turtleneck jumper.

‘I was beginning to think you weren’t coming.’ Galene said sitting herself up straight, motioning to the seats in front of the desk. ‘Rose.’

‘Bitch.’

Galene’s lips strained in a smile that promised she would resist the urge to rip her throat out.

‘Rose.’ Nial elbowed her as they sat down. ‘Apologies, we got here as soon as we were able, a lot has come to light this morning that we are hoping you can help with.’

Galene took the mug off her desk and sipped it, licking the red stain off her lips, arching an eyebrow as Rose pulled a face. ‘What?’

‘Do you have to drink that right now?’

‘Congealed blood is a terrible waste,’ she said, ‘unless you are offering some fresh from the source?’

‘Keep your fangs to yourself.’

‘Rose, remember why we’re here,’ Nial ignored the scowl that she gave him.

Galene looked between them, ‘I take it you have not found her then?’

‘What do you know?’ Rose demanded.

‘If you’re referring to Issy, no,’ Nial said, holding his hand up to Rose.

Galene frowned and set her mug down. ‘Olivier followed the car she was taken in last night, but he lost them at the island in the retail park.’

‘What were they doing up there?’ Rose asked.

‘Good place to lose someone, with the traffic lights they’ve put on the islands, and all the car parks to hide in,’ Nial said, ‘it’s where I’d go if I was concerned about being tailed. It’d be a good place to swap cars too, except there’s the risk of being seen with a hostage – and someone as well known in your community as Issy, all it would have taken was one person to recognise her as being in trouble and he’d be screwed.’

Rose looked at him. ‘You’ve thought about this before, haven’t you?’

‘Haven’t you?’

‘Not in so much detail.’

‘That’s why you’d get caught.’



Galene cleared her throat. 'I would ask if you had any leads on her whereabouts, but I can see I do not have a crack team in front of me.'

'Hey!' Nial huffed. 'We got some information out of Sean, though he was implying that you wanted both Issy and Maggie – ow.' He looked at Rose as she kicked his shin and shook her head.

'She doesn't know about her,' Rose hissed.

'The little doe-eyed witch Iris was trying to distract me from the other day? I am aware of her.' Galene's lip twitched around the rim of her mug. 'So they have her as well?'

'Yeah, safe to assume she's the whole reason they attacked the house in the first place,' Rose sighed.

'What did he say they wanted her for?'

'About some curse her family cast,' Nial said, ignoring the look Rose gave him.

Galene leaned forward. 'The nightwalking curse?'

'If that's what you call it,' Rose said, 'but I've spent time with Maggie, she couldn't pull a rabbit out of a hat, let alone break a curse like that.'

'Hm,' Galene sat back again, her long manicured nails tapping her mug as she considered the information. 'And where is this traitor now?'

'Sean? He's locked up, pending further investigation.'

'You will release him to my custody.'

'You're joking, right?' Rose asked.

'If you want my further cooperation in this matter, you will release Sean Taylor to me so I can deal with him myself.'

'He's been arrested, we can't just let him go.'

'Then I am sorry I can be of no further assistance to you.'

Rose stared at her. 'Are you really going to be so petty and let who knows what happen to Issy because you can't get your own way?' She looked at her, 'Of course you are. Aren't you at least interested in uncovering the vampires responsible for causing problems on your doorstep?'

Galene shrugged, 'I have every faith that you will deal with them if you come across them, for your own sake.'

'I wouldn't put money on it.'

Galene smiled. 'We shall see,' she said, 'if there is nothing else?'

‘Did you know he was working for them?’

‘I had my suspicions,’ Galene said, ‘though I thought he would have shown his hand much sooner. He was very bitter after his partner’s execution.’

‘See, you sound almost reasonable, then you come out with crap like that.’ Rose shook her head.

‘My dear, do you think this is the first time something like this has happened? It isn’t even the hundredth.’

‘You’re doing a really bad job then.’

‘Yet I am the one still here.’

‘She’s got a point,’ Nial said.

Rose was about to open her mouth and speak when the door banged open, and she jumped to her feet.

The vampire that had let them in had something bundled up in their hands.

Galene was on her feet and in the doorway before Rose realised she’d moved, taking the bundle from the other, ‘Where did you find this?’

Rose peered around Galene to see the poor vampire looking more than a little scared, taking several seconds to find their voice.

‘It was thrown in through the front door, Ma’am.’

‘By whom?’

‘I don’t know I didn’t see, I brought it straight up to you.’

Galene curled her lip, her voice low, but Rose could still hear. ‘Get on the security cameras and find out who it was, where they came from, and in which direction they went. Have Toni contact Phil and get him into the cameras around town, I want eyes everywhere, if they were in a vehicle, I want it found.’

‘Y-yes Ma’am, right away,’ they scurried off faster than Rose had ever seen anyone move.

‘Is there a problem?’ Rose asked, eyeing the ball that Galene had snatched off the vampire. ‘What you got there?’

Galene’s head snapped in her direction, and she let out a low growl; Rose took a step back holding up her hands; if there’d been any colour to Galene’s skin, it would have drained from her face. Rose had known the Matron a long time, but had not seen her like this; the tenseness in her whole body, the slight snarl of her lip, the white-hot fury in her eyes. This was the vampire matriarch, not the sister’s

annoying ex who kept turning up like a bad penny, and she looked like she was out for blood.

‘You should leave,’ Galene said in as much of an even tone as she could muster.

‘Let me see that,’ Rose said, thinking she could smell blood. Her nose wasn’t as strong as a vampire’s, Galene could probably tell exactly who it had come from.

‘Let’s go before we outstay our welcome,’ Nial said, grabbing Rose by the arm, pulling her from the room.

‘Did you smell that?’

‘She looked ready to rip out both of our throats.’ Nial herded her down the stairs. ‘She wasn’t going to tell us anything else, so let’s go and see if they’ve had any luck at the shop.’

Rose frowned and glanced back the way they’d come, Nial was right. As they walked down the street, she was almost sure she’d caught sight of one of Galene’s goons following them, but when she turned around properly to look, she couldn’t see anyone.

She carried on walking with Nial, picking up the pace.

She was being paranoid.

## **Chapter Twenty-Two: 12.38am**

What was it that had got to Galene so much?

As they reached the shop Rose stopped dead.

Issy's blood.

It was the only possible answer, and it made her run cold.

She was the only person that might get that kind of reaction from the vampire; not from any place of concern, Rose doubted Galene genuinely cared for anyone but herself, but she did see Issy as 'hers' – her personal magic user – and she didn't share.

'What?' Nial turned back to the doorway realising Rose had stopped.

Rose just shook her head. 'We need to move faster,' she said, 'that had to have been Issy's blood.'

'That she was drinking?'

'On whatever was thrown through the bar door – you saw how rattled Galene was. Issy's ability to create more vampires is all she cares about, based their whole relationship on it.'

'So you think it was some kind of what – a warning, provocation, challenge?'

'All of the above maybe,' Rose said, 'baiting Galene into reacting to catch her at a disadvantage.'

Nial rubbed his face and looked at Nettie, who was in her usual position. 'Did you find anyone?'

'Sure did, they are in the second magic room – the first one is locked for some reason.' She scratched the base of her broken horn, fluffing the patches of hair around it.

'Issy was using it for a magic thing yesterday,' Rose said, 'I don't know if she had the key on her or if it was left in her office.'

'I'll leave it until she gets back,' Nettie said, 'she can deal with her own magic.'

Rose nodded and took Nial through the door into the Bastion, heading straight for the magic room; it took everything to not run through the building,

figuring the sight of two agents going full pelt through the Bastion would cause alarm.

Issy wouldn't be happy if she caused a scene.

Charlie stepped out of the second magic room as they came up the corridor. 'Heard you coming,' she said.

'Found anything yet?' Rose asked.

'Nick can't track Issy's exact location, he says there's some sort of warding hiding her, but he's trying to create a path of where Issy went, and at what point she might have disappeared, trouble is, it's not freshly picked hair, so it might not be completely accurate.'

'A general vicinity is all I need.' Rose said.

Charlie nodded. 'I'd leave any electronics you don't want frying out here,' she said and held a finger to her lips as she quietly opened the door, letting them back in.

Rose set her phone in the box outside the door before walking in; she was usually oblivious to magical energies, but they were so strong in the room it was making her feel queasy. Even Nial was looking a little peaky.

Nick was a stout man with an impressive greying beard, looked like a typical wizard from one of the old TV shows who did part time work as a Santa in the holiday season. 'Oh this is a mess,' he said, his fingers moving as if he were weaving invisible threads. 'Hard to see where she was coming or going.'

Rose moved to his side to watch the red mass of lines. 'What is that?'

'It is the path Issy took yesterday, the last... twelve hours or so I'd say, the magic is not as strong as it would be with fresh hair.'

'So that blob there,' she pointed to it.

'She was there for quite some time,' he said.

'So we can assume that was my house,' Rose said, 'where does it end?'

'I have not untangled it all yet, but it is somewhere in this direction,' he said pointing near where Rose was standing.

She frowned and tried to think in terms of the town's layout. 'Would that be heading down the main road out of Harroway?'

'It's possible,' Nial said, 'why?'

‘There’s that farmhouse just outside, the owners were renovating it, but a haunting got nasty, and Issy dealt with it, but the owners wouldn’t go back in, and it didn’t sell, so it’s been abandoned for some time.’

‘It would be a good place to hide,’ he agreed.

‘Thank you,’ Rose looked back to Nick already halfway out of the door.

‘Sure you don’t mind coming with us?’ Nial asked Charlie as they almost had to run to keep up with Rose, who was striding along with a renewed purpose out to Nial’s car.

‘Not at all,’ Charlie shook her head. ‘Sounds like you’re gonna need the back up.’

Nial nodded. ‘More the merrier, who knows what we’re up against.’

Rose nodded in agreement taking the front passenger seat again and she glanced in the mirror, almost certain she saw someone watching.

Pressure. Maybe she was losing it.

With traffic on their side, the drive to the farmhouse on the outskirts of town only took five minutes. Nial pulled up on the road, a little way off the dirt track that led up to the building.

‘Here’s the blueprints,’ Charlie said, passing her phone to Rose.

Rose looked at the plans she’d found on the letting agent web page. Cellar, ground floor, upstairs, loft. The cellar looked like the easiest place to hide people and ward against magic, it could be reached from the kitchen by going through the back door. Simple enough.

‘I don’t want either you coming in,’ Rose said, and looked at Nial, ‘you’re human and it is full of vampires who will likely kill you on the spot, I can’t be worrying about keeping you alive as well as finding Issy.’

Nial looked like he wanted to protest, but he knew that Rose was right. ‘Be careful.’ He held his hands up as she scowled at him.

‘Just keep the car running, and if there looks like trouble, scarper.’

‘Will do.’

‘Make sure he stays put,’ Rose told Charlie.

‘Will do.’ Charlie nodded.

Rose sighed and took a slow breath, mentally preparing herself to go in then looked in the side mirror seeing a black Rolls pull up behind her. ‘Who the...?’ She climbed out the same time as Galene did.

The vampire was dressed in a red shirt, trousers and boots, hair pinned back beneath a wide floppy sun hat, with two sheathed swords that Rose couldn't identify.

'What are you doing here?'

'You cannot think that you are taking them on by yourself?'

'We don't just kill people, there are procedures I can't let you –'

Galene was already walking away. 'I was not asking your permission, and I suggest you stay out of my way.'

'Why do you care so much?'

'When they came, leaving a traitor in my court, bodies on my doorstep, that was business, they are not the first to do so and I doubt they will be the last, but when they took something of mine, they made it personal.'

'Issy is not yours, I think she made that clear when she broke up with you.'

Galene smiled. 'Forever is a long time to change one's mind.'

Rose shook her head and carried on walking. 'How does a restraining order sound?'

'While your mother is in my care?' Galene's smile widened, though it was not a warm expression as Rose stopped dead in her tracks. 'That's what I thought.'

'Listen –' Rose whirled around and grabbed Galene by the shoulder, only to have a sharp blade at her neck – she hadn't even seen her reach for it.

'It is your turn to listen, *child*,' Galene said, all playfulness evaporated from her demeanour as she stepped back, withdrawing the sword. 'Once we are in there, we will find Iris and her pet witch. You will get them out, I will deal with the vampires.'

'You can't seriously think you'll be able to take them out on your own.'

'You aren't even armed.'

'I don't need to be.'

Galene smirked as she eyed her for a moment, 'Just like Medora.'

'I am nothing like her.'

'Hm.' Galene offered the sword hilt to her. 'Do not lose or damage it.'

Rose took it and gave it a couple of test swings before nodding. 'We'll go around the back.'

‘Why the back?’

‘While we were on our way, Charlie brought up floor plans for the place when it was for sale, there’s a cellar in the kitchen which is near the back door.’

‘So you do have brains when it counts,’ she said.

‘I’ll use this on you.’ Rose warned.

‘Try it my dear and see how far you get,’ and with a blink she was away from Rose’s side and halfway down the track.

Rose shook her head and started running to catch up; she was no vampire, but she wasn’t as slow as a human. Like hell she was going to let that bitch take the credit for finding Issy, especially when they were still at odds with each other – she wanted her sister to know exactly who she owed her rescue to.

As Rose reached the back door, she found that Galene had already pulled it off its hinges and was ripping down the coverings over the windows. She left the vampire to it and went for the closed door.

The smell of damp was strong down there, but there was a faint hint of blood. Something brushed past her on the stairs, and she was about to swing when she realised it was Galene’s spiced berry perfume.

‘Don’t do that,’ she hissed.

Rose moved to the first closed door and pushed it, but it wouldn’t move so she took a good grip of the handle and shouldered it hard enough for the door to open, complete with doorframe hanging off.

‘Not going for subterfuge, are we?’ Galene said, and kicked the other door in.

Rose didn’t answer her, she went into the room and saw Maggie sat against the furthest wall, looking ready to fight or flee, it was hard to tell.

‘Maggie, it’s Rose, you’re okay, I’m getting you out of here.’

Maggie slumped back. ‘They bound my wrists with some magic dampening sigils, I think they learned from last time.’

Rose moved over to her and crouched down, ‘Are you hurt?’

‘I can move,’ Maggie assured her, not meeting her eyes; she swallowed as she was hauled to her feet by her wrists.

Rose used her blade to carefully scratch the binding sigils until they were destroyed. ‘Can you get yourself free from that?’



Maggie shook her hands as much as she could feeling them tingle as her access to power came back.

‘Iris.’

Galene’s voice from the next cell caught Rose’s attention and she went into the doorway and found the vampire leaning over her sister. She looked tense, almost shaking. ‘Iris, can you hear me?’ Galene asked, her voice sounded like it was barely restrained. She almost dared not intrude on the scene, but she moved to her sister’s other side, and saw that she was wearing one of her t-shirts, which was irritating, but it was the huge, blackened bite mark at her neck that made her pause.

Rose looked at Galene and could see in the darkness that she was half holding Issy; the vampire was even paler than usual, her lips pressed into a thin line, eyes narrowed and blazing with a fury that made Rose swallow her fear. ‘Who did this?’ Galene asked.

Issy’s mouth worked several times, as she attempted to speak, but her breathing was laboured.

‘Why isn’t it healing?’ Rose asked.

‘An undead vampire’s bite becomes necrotic if their blood is spilled over it.’

‘Helena,’ Maggie whispered from the door, slipping into the room, not wanting to be left out there on her own. ‘She’s the one behind all this.’

Galene growled, gently setting Issy’s head down. ‘Get them out and pretend you were never here,’ she said, snatching the sword from Rose.

Rose would have ordinarily agreed, but couldn’t trust Galene on her own, ‘Who is Helena?’

‘Your sister needs seeing to urgently,’ Galene said and left the room.

Metal hitting the floor made Rose jump and Maggie rubbed her wrists. ‘Sorry,’ she muttered, ‘I got them off, I can try to get Issy’s?’

‘No time,’ Rose carefully picked her sister off the floor and hauled her up bridal style. ‘Stay close.’ She warned Maggie and started for the stairs. As they reached the kitchen, she saw a path of destruction leading through the hall; all the boarded-up windows and blackout curtains had been torn down, she could smell blood in the air, but she was not waiting around to question whose it was.

Someone shrieked as they burst out of a closed door; Maggie raised her hands, fingers swirling as she flicked her wrists to fling bolts of lightning from her palms, hitting the vampire square in the chest, the shock to their nervous system making them freeze and drop in the sunlight, allowing Rose to step around them.

‘Go,’ Rose muttered, glancing back to make sure that Maggie was keeping up as they made their way down the dirt track. Rose couldn’t slow down or stop for her, if Issy was as bad as Galene suggested, she’d need immediate help. But could Rose really leave the vampire on her own? Who knows how many were in there. Galene might be good, but she was only one person, and these vampires had her exactly where they wanted her.

They reached the car and Charlie opened the back door, ‘Is she...?’

‘Necrotic bite from an undead vampire,’ Rose said, ‘Get her to the hospital, take Maggie to get checked over as well.’ She loaded Issy into the car, stepping aside to let Maggie in the back with her.

‘What about you?’ Nial asked.

‘Someone’s got to go back to help Queen Bitch,’ she grumbled. ‘Go. I’ll be fine.’

Damnit. Why did she have to have a conscience? For Galene’s safety, of all people. She didn’t wait for them to drive off before going to knock on the Rolls door. ‘Oi, Goon One, Goon Two, open up.’

The vampire in the driver’s seat rolled down the window, peering at her through mirrored sunglasses. ‘Yes Miss Winters?’

‘She needs back up in there.’

They looked at each other and laughed.

‘Does the name Helena ring any bells?’

They both stopped laughing and looked at each other, rolling the window up.

Rose kicked the car door hard enough to leave a dent in it, then turned and ran back toward the house. She paused at the front of the house as she approached, her arm covering her nose and mouth as the stench of blood, charred flesh, and death hit her. What had Galene done? She’d only been gone a few minutes.

Carefully, she stepped through the busted door and almost tripped over the first body that was charred beyond recognition, still smouldering. Rose glanced

into the first empty room that had three more similar bodies, that had also fallen to Galene's swords. She swallowed as she saw the blood trail that led up the stairs.

A thud from below caught her attention and she stepped over the next two people who had been cut down and shoved into the daylight to burn up and shook her head, doubting that it had been necessary.

She slowly descended the steps back into the basement, peering through the darkness to see Galene standing over another woman, who looked like she was unarmed.

'Galene.' She stopped short of them, not wanting to be any closer to either than necessary, needing to be able to see them move.

'I suggest you leave,' Galene said, 'I would hate for this to play on your conscience.'

'I can't let you kill her – no matter what she's done – all of those people up there –'

'They had a chance to stand down, they did not, just as you have the opportunity to walk away.'

'There are laws and processes...' Rose felt the air beside her ear move seconds before a thunk hit just behind her. She glanced back to see one of the swords lodged in the wall. A warning. She was fully aware, if the vampire had meant to hurt her, she'd likely be bleeding out right now.

She reached to grab it out of the wall but paused hearing the vampires say something in a language she couldn't understand, followed by a sickening crunch, and she turned around.

'No!'

Galene whirled around with her remaining blade, levelling it at Rose, flecks of blood splattering on her shirt. 'Go to the car and wait for me there.'

'What you gonna do?'

'You likely do not want to know,' she said, holding her hand out for the other sword.

Rose eyed her a moment, she was right about that much. She grabbed the hilt of the sword and yanked it from the wall. Could she take Galene in a fight? She was a decent fighter, but Galene was more experienced, and had survived everything the world had thrown at her; even if Rose did somehow defeat her, she wouldn't come out of it in one piece.

‘Rose.’ Galene’s voice was sharp, snapping her from her thoughts.

Rose swallowed and handed the sword over before turning away, and heading up the stairs, needing to get out of there before she changed her mind and did something reckless.

‘Wait with my car.’

She heard Galene’s voice call after her as she reached the back door, not wanting to face the carnage that she’d passed through on the way in.

She walked around the side of the building and paused to lean against it for a moment; her fist slammed into the brick hard enough to crack it. Hissing she shook her hand out and looked at the damage; scrapes that would heal themselves in no time. She pushed herself off the wall and started down the path back toward the road and glanced up to see Galene’s goons walking calmly toward the house. She didn’t bother to stop them – not that they’d listen to her if she tried.

What choice did she have? She knew the kind of people that Galene had at her disposal, she’d be able to discredit or even place the blame on Rose with very little effort. The immediate threat had been dealt with – one way or another and Sean was locked up and would face justice with the laundry list of charges there’d be against him.

She couldn’t report her mother’s murder on account of the fact there wasn’t a body, and while Issy was *technically* exempt from the Dangerous Magics Act, that immunity was for the protection of the public, and the realm, she doubted that blood magic and necromancy for personal reasons would be excused.

On reaching the car Rose stopped herself from reaching for the handle. She wasn’t just going to wait by the car. She huffed and started walking up the road in the direction of town.

Wait by the car.

Screw that.

## Chapter Twenty-Three: 2.52pm

Rose took a half-march back home, hoping that the fresh air would help to clear her head, but when she reached her front door half hour later, she was no further forward with how to tackle any of her problems.

She pulled her keys from her pocket and let herself in.

‘Hey Mom,’ she called, and froze, listening to the door falling shut behind her.

Swallowing, she forced herself to get up the stairs, shedding her bloody shirt in the vague direction of the washing bin. She needed to wash the stench of death and decay off almost as much as she needed to scrub bloodstains out of the carpet that didn’t exist.

It wouldn’t help.

Nothing would.

She sank onto her bed, and drew her pillow close and buried her head in it as the weight of the last day came crashing down on her. She fell onto her side, curling up.

No she couldn’t wallow, and have a pity party, while there were still things that she needed to do.

Sitting up, she ran a hand over her face to wipe away the tears, then stood, headed into the bathroom. She tried to wash away the evidence that she’d been crying, but the still faint bruising around her eyes made their red puffiness stand out. She washed the back of her hand where it had grazed, it was still tender, but most of the skin was already knitting back together.

She was used to everything healing fast, the pain being bearable after only a day or two. Why was everything hurting so much?

It wasn’t like her Mom was dead. If she *was* it would be easier to deal with – there’d be reports to file, paperwork to fill in, a funeral to arrange, she’d be able to keep herself busy.

But this? Being alone in the cold, empty house knowing her Mom was a vampire – something she’d said she’d never wanted for herself.

And Issy had known that, and still she'd – Rose shook her head and took a deep breath; there was no use in rehashing the same argument with herself, it was done now, and they all had to live with that.

She went back to her room and pulled a fresh shirt from her wardrobe and ran a brush through her hair, pulled it back into a fresh ponytail, then finished with a spritz of a fruity spray, in an attempt to make her seem a little brighter, even if she wasn't feeling it.

She fished her phone out.

Three messages and one missed call from Nial.

Two missed calls and one message from Charlie.

One missed call from an unknown number.

Two new voicemails.

She could guess that the unknown number was Galene. That bitch was probably pissed with her for not waiting by her car, while forgetting that Rose wasn't one of her lackeys to order around.

Rose ignored all of that for the moment, and managed to get a taxi that said they'd be there in five minutes. She waited outside and checked the messages.

Nial:

Issy is going to be okay. She's on  
Ward 10, we're with her.

Ward 10 – that was non-human critical care. They'd been in there once when Issy burned herself with a fire spell that got out of control. Nial said she'd be okay, but she couldn't be that good.

Nial:

Let me know you're okay, I can  
come and get you.

Nial:

Are you okay?

Rose sighed, by the time she called him, and he got there, it would be twenty minutes, if the traffic at the big island wasn't completely backed up like it often was, she was quicker to get a taxi to work to pick up her car, then drive to the hospital from there.

Charlie:

Are you okay?

She replied with the same message to both of them, even though they were probably in the same room.

Rose:

I'm okay, picking my car up  
then I'll be with you.

That would hopefully keep them happy enough to not bug her for a while. She kept her phone on silent and put it back into her pocket.

Issy would need glasses. As tempting as it was to leave her sister to suffer, she wouldn't do that to her, Mom'd never forgive her. She went to the kitchen and found the pair that she'd broken last night still on the side. She'd already had the spare pair – maybe there was a *spare* spare pair in the junk drawer. She had the damned things everywhere. It was an older pair Rose found, but they were in a case that should have protected the enchantment.

She pulled her jacket on and slipped them into her pocket. Wallet, phone, glasses for Issy, keys – were still in the door. She locked up and made sure that the keys went into her pocket just as the taxi pulled up outside.

She was grateful that the driver seemed to understand that she wasn't in a talkative mood, and the drive to work was quiet, with a low-volume mellow radio station playing so they weren't in complete silence.

She just needed to get her car and get to the hospital, not that she particularly wanted to see Issy, but she needed to talk to Maggie and find out what her part in all of this really was. Why did she walk away unscathed while their Mom – no that was unfair. Whatever was going on with her, she was just a victim in all this. Just like Ellie had been.

But why hadn't she been honest from the start?

'That's seven sixty-five, duck.'

Rose started from her thoughts as she realised they were at the front door of the offices. 'Sorry,' she said, digging her wallet out, handing a tenner over before getting out with a quick, 'keep the change.'

She found her car still parked in front of Sean's, luckily in a quiet section of the car park and no one had been bothered by her abandoning it all morning. She dug the keys from her pocket and piled her jacket onto the passenger seat as

she got comfy and just sat for a moment, taking several deep breaths, using every ounce of mental fortitude she had to push back against the cracks in her that had already started to break. She turned her CD player on, blasting heavy metal to clear her head of any thoughts, as she started the drive to the hospital.

By the time she arrived, she was feeling a little more ready to face the rest of the day. Rose squared her shoulders and lifted her head, striding through the corridors like she was on a mission, barely pausing to look at the signs that pointed her toward Ward 10.

She walked around the couple that were hugging in the corridor, then rounding a corner, she barely sidestepped the oblivious man carrying a car seat, who was staring at the newborn inside with wonder. Once she reached the ward, she found it was locked and pressed the button for the door.

‘Ward 10.’

‘Rose Winters, I am here for my sister, Issy Winters, my colleagues should be in with her right now.’

‘Yes Miss Winters, you are expected, please come to the nurse’s station and a doctor will be with you.’

She let herself in as soon as she heard the door was released and found a lone clerk behind a stack of paperwork. She looked around and saw Nial poke his head out of the room. At least she’d been given a side room.

‘Miss Winters.’

Rose looked at the doctor, by his complexion a vampire, she’d had just about enough of them for a whole lifetime, they were the reason her sister was in there. ‘Yes.’

‘I am Dr Banks –’

‘You’re a vampire.’

He blinked. ‘That is quite obvious, yes, necrotic vampire bites are a specia–’

‘Who do you answer to?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Who do you answer to?’

‘I am a member of both the Royal College of Physicians, and the National Association of Phlebotomists, if you doubt my qualifications, I can –’



‘I mean who do you answer to? Galene or someone else?’

He sighed as he regarded Rose for a moment. ‘I answer to the Matron if the need calls for it, however my job, and my patients come first, as does patient confidentiality,’ he said, ‘now if we could go and discuss your sister?’

‘What’s to discuss?’

He held his hand toward a door. ‘Please.’

Rose eyed him warily for a moment before heading into the room that was filled with chairs. Rooms like this were reserved for serious conversations.

‘Please, have a seat.’

‘Just tell me if my sister is going to be okay, or if I need to be looking for a casket.’

He stared at her a second before recovering and shaking his head. ‘Do you know how she got that bite?’

‘Not the details, why?’

‘Well, undead vampires were eradicated centuries ago, you still come across necrotic bites from the likes of ghouls, revenants, and wraiths, but never vampires, and that was a definite vampire bite.’

‘I don’t know what to tell you, undead vampires are still alive – or were about an hour or two ago.’

He frowned as he watched Rose, trying to gauge whether she was lying or not. ‘It cannot be possible – I was there.’

‘Look, believe it, or don’t, I don’t care, I just want to know how my sister is.’

‘Of course, I apologise. She is in a stable condition and will recover. We had to give her something to slow her natural healing processes to give us the time to operate on the bite and let the medication work – but I think that whatever magic her friend performed on the way to the hospital is what saved her life and gave her a fighting chance.’

Rose nodded slightly, biting back a sigh. Magic. Of course it was. ‘And is Maggie okay?’

‘Yes, she was checked over as well, though there was no record of her in any medical database. Not even a birth record.’

‘Yeah, I’m getting to the bottom of her,’ Rose muttered, ‘Can you send her in here, please? I need to talk to her and I’m not ready to see my sister yet.’

Dr Banks inclined his head and left her alone.

Rose wanted to throw the nearest chair across the room just to shake a bit of the frustration out of her before she throttled the witch, but she settled for pacing instead.

She barely got two turns of the room before Maggie came in, closing the door behind her, eyes fixed on the floor as she chewed on the side of her thumb.

‘Sit.’ Rose pointed at a chair and pulled one over to sit opposite her.

Maggie quietly sat where she was told, wrapping her arms around herself; she was wearing scrubs, and Rose could see the bruises on her wrists and the branding-like scars on her arms.

‘You need to tell me everything right now or so help me I will find a rift and throw you back through it.’

Maggie’s eyes widened a little and she swallowed. ‘I’m sorry,’ she whispered, ‘I never – I never wanted any of this to happen I just I..’

‘Stop it.’ Rose snapped hearing her sniffing, grabbing the box of tissues, and handing them to her. ‘What’s done is done. You screwed up, but you know what? Mom is alive because Issy screwed up even worse and turned her into a vampire,’ she said, ignoring the surprise that fell on Maggie’s face, at least it shocked her out of crying. ‘I want to know how we got to that point. So from the beginning. Who are you really?’

‘The name I go by is Maggie,’ she said, ‘but my family name is Ward.’

Rose frowned as everything fell into place with that surname, common as it was, there was only one family of magic users that would be on anyone’s radar for powerful magics. ‘You’ve got to be kidding me.’

‘Please don’t tell them you’ve found me.’

‘Why are you hiding from them?’

‘Does it really matter? I tried to open a rift that would get me outside the family home, but because I didn’t have the anchor properly set, I ended up in the Apeira.’

Rose folded her arms as she regarded the witch. ‘So your anchor was in the shop, how did it end up there?’

‘I hid it there.’

‘This it?’ She took the figure out of her pocket.

Maggie’s eyes widened and she nodded. ‘I thought I’d lost it.’

‘What is it?’

‘A chimera – it was kinda my pet before my uncle did that to it, I hid it in the shop to keep it safe.’

Rose nodded slightly and gave her the figure back, watching as she held it gently. ‘How long ago was this?’

‘Thirty years? Give or take.’

‘You look barely twenty-five.’

‘Good genes,’ Maggie said with a half-smile, ‘It wasn’t that long in there – felt like a few hours, maybe?’

‘How did you navigate it? People don’t usually last that long.’

‘I had help.’

Rose stared at her a moment. ‘Help?’

She turned her forearms over to show her identical scars in an intricate pattern that looked almost like she’d been seared with a branding iron. ‘I was anchored to the nexus so I couldn’t stray too far.’

‘Is that where you tried reaching out to people?’

‘Yes,’ Maggie nodded. ‘I would travel a little bit and find small cracks that would let me get communication through a bit easier, and I found someone who would talk to me, she was really nice, and she wanted to help.’

‘Ellie?’

Maggie looked away and nodded. ‘Yeah.’

‘What happened that night?’

‘I’d asked her to find the anchor and bring it to somewhere I’d mapped out where the barrier was quite weak. I talked her through the ritual on her side, and did what I needed to, and we opened the rift together, but something else latched onto it as I pulled myself through – then the vampires showed up – they must have been tracking the magic – everything went wrong.’ She took a breath.

‘Then Ellie fell into the rift?’

Maggie nodded, ‘I went to grab her but a vampire got hold of me first, I was too drained from the ritual to use any magic, so they just tied me up with rope, but I managed to escape and found my way to the shop.’

‘Why didn’t you say anything about Ellie?’

Maggie fixed her gaze on the floor. ‘What could I say that didn’t make me look like some sort of threat? I lured a human into opening a rift and she fell into it, it doesn’t look good for me, does it?’

‘It really doesn’t,’ Rose agreed, ‘but why didn’t you just tell Issy after a couple of days when she seemed to trust you?’

‘She’s friends with my brother, she might have told him, he’d have come straight here – I don’t know if I can face him yet – he’ll have a lot of questions and I’m not ready to answer them – I don’t think I *can* answer them.’

Rose hated to admit it, but she could understand that much at least; she didn’t want to, but she got it. ‘What did the vampires really want with you?’

‘Helena wanted me to use family magic to change the past.’

‘Is that possible?’

‘No, that power is inherited, my brother will get it – not me.’

Rose rubbed her face and nodded. ‘So what’re you planning to do now?’

Maggie shrugged. ‘Go and look after Misha for Issy, she said she still wanted me around.’

‘Okay,’ Rose said, ‘I’ll take you back there.’

‘Thank you.’

Rose got up and left the room, pausing briefly to make sure Maggie was with her. She sighed, she supposed she had to go and check on Issy, but she’d make it quick. She went to the room she’d seen Nial in, finding him and Charlie sat by the bed. Issy was attached to monitors, her eyes closed and with a huge dressing on her neck and shoulder.

‘She’s going to be fine,’ Nial said.

‘I know,’ Rose muttered, taking the glasses case out of her pocket, putting them on the table beside the bed. ‘I’m going to take Maggie back to Issy’s place so she can look after her cat, then I’ll be going to talk to Ellie’s family.’

‘Want me to come with you?’ Nial asked.

‘Please, I don’t know if I can face a family alone again yet,’ she said, and told him the address.

‘I’ll give you a ten-minute head start and join you there.’

‘Alright,’ Rose agreed, and looked at Maggie who was hanging around the door, trying to blend into the wall as much as possible. ‘Let’s get you home,’ she said.

Maggie managed a small smile as she followed Rose out, how long she could call it home she didn't know, but she needed to hear that word.

## Chapter Twenty-Four: 5pm

After dropping Maggie at Issy's, Rose continued up the road to the Jamesons' address, pulling up behind Nial's car. When she didn't get out, he came in and sat with her.

'Sure you're okay to do this?'

'I've got to. What are you doing about your case?'

Nial sighed. 'I'll say we followed the information that Sean gave us, but when we got there, they'd cleared out.'

Rose nodded slowly. 'I hate that we're covering for Queen Bitch, makes us no better than Sean.'

'I resent that. I'm better looking for a start.'

Rose managed a small laugh. 'I'll give you that,' she said and exhaled, 'okay, let's get this over with.'

'You've got this,' Nial followed her out of the car and up the garden path, 'and I've got you.'

'Thanks.' She knocked the door, counting her breath in for four, out for four, giving bad news was never easy.

David opened the door looking like he was about to say something. Then he recognized Rose and glanced back at Nial. 'Come in.'

'Thank you, is your wife home as well?'

'Yes. Have you found her?'

'Let's go and sit down.'

'Oh,' he frowned and nodded slightly, 'right, come through.'

Rose could feel her heart hammering in her chest as she walked through the bland nightmare to the lounge. 'This is Nial, he's my other partner, these are David and Jill.'

'Hello,' Nial offered his hand to them both to shake before sitting down with Rose.

'Is Terry here?'

'I don't think he should be here for this conversation,' David shook his head as he sat down beside Jill, who looked up at her husband, then across at Rose and Nial, trying to read their expressions. 'Oh no,' she muttered.

‘What was it? Vampires?’ David asked. ‘They’ve been all over the news.’

‘No,’ Rose said, ‘She came into contact with someone who was in trouble in the realm between realms, and she helped them to get out – saved their life.’

‘She did?’ Jill asked.

Rose smiled a little. ‘She did, but unfortunately there was an accident, and she fell through the rift.’

‘Well can you not go and get her?’ David demanded sitting forward.

‘I’m sorry,’ Rose shook her head, swallowing as she forced her head to stay up eyes flickering between them but not able to look at either, ‘humans do not survive long enough for a rescue, and recovering her will be impossible.’

‘No,’ Jill covered her face with her hands, muffling a sob.

‘There has to be something,’ David said, one hand coming to rest on his wife’s leg, ‘what about the person she saved?’

‘They are a non-human magic user who had some ability to navigate the Apeira,’ Nial said for Rose when she took a second too long to answer, ‘they got into a spot of trouble and reached out, Ellie was very brave when she answered the call, and helped to bring them home.’

David gripped the cushion he was sat on, knuckles turning as pale as his face. ‘Who are they?’

‘We cannot give you that information,’ he said, ‘but they are very sorry for what happened, they never meant for Ellie to be in danger.’

‘Sorry isn’t going to bring her back,’ Jill whispered from behind her hands.

‘No,’ Rose agreed, ‘we can put you in touch with counsellors to help you and Terry with your bereavement.’

David eyed her and looked down at his wife a moment before nodding.

‘I’ll have Nial arrange that for you, and they’ll be in touch.’

Nial produced a card from his pocket and handed it over. ‘My details, if you want to get in touch with me at any time.’

David took the card, setting it on the coffee table. ‘Is there anything else?’

‘I am very sorry for your loss,’ Rose said.

‘Enough of your sorrys,’ David snapped, his hand shooting up.

Rose flinched and she bowed her head, swallowing. ‘We will see ourselves out,’ she managed, standing and walking past them to the hall.

‘Hey,’ a quiet voice came from the stairs.

Rose looked to see Terry sat half-way up. She sniffed and swallowed the lump in her throat, offering him a small sympathetic smile. ‘Hey kid, beat that game yet?’

‘Nearly,’ he said and glanced toward the lounge, ‘she’s not coming home, is she?’

‘I’m really sorry.’

Terry nodded, wrapping his arms around himself. ‘But she helped someone else, right?’

‘She did, was a real hero.’

‘I know she was,’ he muttered quietly.

‘Terry.’ David called through to him.

The boy sighed and got up. ‘Thanks – at least we know what happened.’

Rose nodded, gently squeezing his shoulder as he passed by. She glanced over to Nial who was already holding the front door open, and she quickly marched outside and down the path, not stopping until she reached her car.

‘Hey,’ Nial called, jogging to catch up. He took one look at her expression; her eyes were reddening and watery, mouth juddering slightly with her breathing. He pulled her around the other side of the car, so they were shielded from the Jameson’s house and wrapped her in his arms. ‘It’s okay, I’ve got you.’

Rose closed her eyes, hands fisting into his jacket as she rested her head on his shoulder.

In all her years, there were maybe five cases that she’d had to close without bringing the victim home, three without a body, and she remembered all of their names. It would never get easier, but today it felt raw.

She needed a break.

She sniffed and looked up at him. ‘We should get back to the office I want to close this case and leave.’

Nial nodded. ‘Are you sure that’s what you want to do?’

‘I made up my mind before this,’ she said, ‘it just helps make the decision easier.’

Nial nodded. ‘Are you okay to drive?’

‘Yeah, I’ll be fine,’ she assured him.



‘Okay.’ He gave her a gentle squeeze before letting her go. ‘Hang on,’ he said and went into his car, returning with a couple of tissues and a pack of sweets, offering both to her.

‘Thanks,’ she said, pausing to look at the cartoony Halloween tissues, ‘Really?’

‘I have two kids,’ he shrugged.

‘Fair,’ she nodded with a small smile, heading back into her own car, wiping her eyes and opening the pack of sour worms.

Rose reached her office and paused, looking inside – it was too *Sean* in here; she’d been the one to move into his office when they were assigned as partners and she’d never bothered to personalise her corner, so it had never felt like her space.

Nial caught up with her at the door. ‘If you start sorting your things out, I’ll go and grab a box.’

‘Thanks,’ she said, though didn’t move until he returned with a box and nudged her into the room so he could get by. ‘Sorry,’ she muttered, shaking herself.

‘You can borrow my computer to do whatever you need to, if you don’t want to work in here,’ he said.

‘Thanks.’ She started going through her desk, packing away her notes and files, looking for any personal items that she’d bought, filling the box, mostly with stationery.

She logged in to her computer, sending herself copies of documents to her home email address, just in case they tried to tamper with her files after she left.

Nial helped in a fashion, though he was more indiscriminate over ownership, and happily raided the supply cupboard down the hall for things she might need. ‘A parting gift,’ he said, adding a third pack of pens and a whole ream of printer paper.

‘What am I going to do with all that?’ Rose shook her head and peered into the box as she turned her computer off again; they were decent pens at least – there were never any good pens when she went looking for them.

Nail shrugged. ‘Was this yours?’ he asked looking at a dead plant in the corner, ‘looks like it should be.’

‘Funny,’ she flicked a rogue paperclip at him, ‘No it isn’t.’

‘Okay,’ he said, ‘anything on Sean’s desk you want?’

‘You really would take anything not nailed down, wouldn’t you?’

‘Not *anything*, just the stuff I could get away with,’ he said and smiled as she rolled her eyes, glad to see his attempts to lighten the mood were working.

Rose put the last of her things in the box and sighed. ‘I think that’s it,’ she said, ‘unless you want to unhook the kitchen sink?’

‘We’d need a bigger box.’ He grinned as she shook her head and smiled. ‘I’ll take it out to your car while you go and settle in my office and start doing whatever you need to.’

‘Thanks,’ she said, handing him her keys and grabbed the Jameson casefile.

She took herself to his office and made herself comfortable before logging in to the case file to type up a summary report.

*Ellie Jameson, aged 18 years old, human, disappeared Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> October 2012...*

It took her about an hour to get through the report, having to stop and start, and think about how to omit certain details without seeming like she was omitting anything; she didn’t really want to bring Maggie into it, because the blame would be placed on her, and she’d be done for who knows what, and sure what she did was really stupid, but she’d not acted out of malice.

No more than Issy had.

She printed the report off and attached it to the file and submitted the digital one, then opened a fresh document.

‘You okay?’ Nial asked from Charlie’s computer where he was filling in his own report.

‘Yeah,’ she nodded. ‘Just thinking how to word my resignation.’

‘I can think of a few ways.’

Rose managed a small smile and shook her head. ‘Can you look up to see who’s working medical today?’

Nial returned to the screen a moment. ‘Cara, why?’

‘I might get her to sign me off with stress for a couple of weeks, so I don’t actually have to work my resignation.’

‘Didn’t he technically suspend you?’

‘Yes but we both know he’ll take that back if he thinks it will make my life more miserable.’

‘True,’ he said, ‘okay, you go and get yourself signed off, I’ll write that letter for you.’

‘Really?’

‘And I’ll make it entirely professional, promise.’

‘Thank you.’ She stood and left the room, checking her phone and found six missed calls from an unknown number.

It had to be Galene.

She dialled it.

‘Hello my dear, I was beginning to wonder if you were ignoring me.’

‘I was trying to, but you’re insisting on blowing up my phone, what’s up?’

‘Are you alright?’

‘I can’t believe you’re actually calling me to check I’m okay,’ she said, ‘what do you really want?’

‘Hmm,’ Galene sounded amused, ‘there is no evidence of those vampires ever being there, nor that your sister or that little witch was held by them.’

‘Good.’ Rose muttered taking the stairs two at a time.

‘Your mother is doing well.’

Rose stopped at the bottom of the stairs. ‘She is?’

‘She’s responding to her name at least, a little feisty if the wrong person gets near, but that is common when they are new.’

‘Issy is going to live.’ Rose said, supposing that she should give her something in return for that information, if the vampire did actually give a damn about her sister.

‘Good,’ she said, ‘as for Sean –’

‘Already told you, can’t give you him, he’s going to face justice for a lot of things, after criminal courts are done with him, you can have at him all you want.’

‘I am rather disappointed in you.’

‘Take a number and get in line,’ Rose said, ‘was there anything else?’

‘Not for now, I will contact you about your mother’s condition when there is an update.’

‘Thanks,’ Rose hung up, ‘bitch,’ she muttered and carried on down the corridor to medical. She hesitated outside the door, but the second she dithered it swung open and Cara took one look at her and her expression softened.

‘Come on in here,’ she said, holding the door open for her. ‘What’s wrong? Are you okay?’

Rose felt the tears stinging in her eyes and she swallowed. ‘I had a really bad case outcome again today,’ she said, trying to stop her voice from shaking.

Cara nodded slowly, pulling chairs over for them both to sit. ‘You’ve had bad outcomes before, why is it worse now?’

Rose shook her head a little and exhaled, where did she even start with that one?

‘It’s okay, take your time,’ Cara said in that soft, gentle tone of hers.

‘It’s my first case back after the last one, and Mom was hurt in a home invasion last night– and Issy’s since gone to hospital with severe injuries – it’s all just...’ She closed her eyes trying to fight back the tears again as everything that was wrong finally found a voice. ‘I can’t keep doing it,’ she whispered.

Cara nodded, reaching over to squeeze her hand with one hand, the other reaching for her tissues. ‘It’s okay, you can let it all out in here.’

‘I’ve cried more in the last few hours than I have all year,’ she shook her head, swallowing the lump in her throat. ‘My partner is behind so much that’s happened recently – I know Reynolds is gonna try covering it up to save his own skin, probably throw me under the bus.’

Cara nodded and considered for a moment. ‘It sounds like you’re really stressed, and you’re needed at home. Do you want a month off so you can take the time to clear your head and get a little mental distance with everything and decide your next steps?’

‘Please.’

‘Okay,’ Cara nodded. ‘I’ll write it up in your file and send it through to HR right now, you go and do whatever you need to, contact whoever you need to, okay? Don’t worry about this place.’

‘Thank you.’ She wiped her eyes and sighed.

‘Do you need a hug?’

Rose didn't get the chance to answer before she was pulled into a tight embrace, whether she liked it or not, but Cara's naturally gentle energy was soothing, and it helped her to calm down.

'Thank you,' she said again as she was let go and left the room, taking herself back up to the office to make sure that Nial hadn't done anything stupid with her resignation letter – she trusted him, but she also knew him.

'Good?' Nial asked as she walked in.

'No but yeah,' Rose said, 'did you finish it?'

'More or less, if you want to take a look,' he turned the screen for her.

Rose nodded a little as she read it, surprised to find it was on a relatively neutral note, given everything that had gone on; Nial was obviously projecting his own desire to leave, but he had far more to lose than she did; at least her parents had paid off their home so she didn't have to worry about a mortgage, or rent.

'Okay,' she agreed, 'print it.'

Nial hit print and got up. Rose went into the computer and looked at the agency directory, copying a list of email addresses and sending them to her home email before logging out of her work account for the last time. When he returned, she signed the letter and folded it into an envelope.

'I'll make sure your leave note is up and in effect before handing it in,' Nial said.

'Thank you.'

'Sure you're going to be okay?'

Rose nodded, smiling to him a little. 'I will be.'

She didn't know exactly what she planned to do, but she had plenty of time to figure it out. Her first step was to email every person who was above Reynolds and let them know exactly what he'd let happen. Internal Affairs would have a field day with that.

It was almost a shame she wouldn't be there to see it; she had little doubt that she'd be called in, her name was on a lot of Sean's things, but she'd always kept clear logs of everything. She had nothing to hide.

She didn't even glance back to the building as she left, feeling nothing but emptiness toward the place she'd built an eighteen-year career on, but then she was completely spent on emotion, and she wondered if she'd ever feel anything other than this overwhelming aching pain in her very core.

Medora had always said pain was part of the human experience, something that she'd had to learn how to feel, and it should be cherished as much as joy. Perhaps someday it would be easier to bear. She might be able to at least stand the thought of being in the same room as her sister, maybe even forgive her.

For now though, taking things one day at a time would have to be enough.

She would have to be enough.

Alone.

## **Ethics ETH1920-2264: Lauren Hopkins**

Date Created	11 Feb 2020
Date Submitted	11 Feb 2021
Date forwarded to committee	11 Feb 2021
Researcher	Lauren Hopkins
Student ID	100058043
Category	Postgraduate research student
Supervisor	Matthew Cheeseman
Project	Sisters in Arms: A Creative Study of Queer Female Protagonists in Urban Fantasy Fiction
College	College of Arts, Humanities and Education
Current status	Approved

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## **Ethics application**

### **Project information**

#### **Project title**

Postgraduate research project: Who is the Queer Female Hero and What is Her Place in Fantasy Fiction?

#### **What is the aim of your study?**

This investigation aims to portray queer female characters in a novel, without problematising their sexual or gender identities as a fundamental plot device, and set the novel in the local Midlands area.

#### **What are the objectives for your study?**

To produce a novel titled Sisters in Arms suited to publication within the urban fantasy genre.

To represent the local area within the fantasy genre.

To explore allegory with the supernatural as a creative solution to writing a novel featuring queer characters, without their identity being a central plot issue.

To create a bibliography of fantasy fiction which feature queer female protagonists.

To create a reflective critical commentary for Sisters in Arms and compare it with the novels in the bibliography to expand the genres treatment of queer female characters.  
To explore the concept of the queer female hero and compare her to the archetype of the heroine.

**Are there any research partners (NOT including your supervisor) within the University of Derby involved in the project?**

**Are there any research partners external to the University of Derby involved in the project?**

No

**If yes, please provide details**

## Initial screening

**Does this project involve human participants?** No

**If yes, should your research adhere to the British Psychology Society (BPS) code of ethics and conduct?** No

**Does your study involve data collection with any persons who could be considered vulnerable (under 18 years or the elderly, or those with physical or mental disabilities)?**

No

**Does your project involve collecting data within NHS organisations or from any NHS employees or patients?** No

**Does it involve collecting or analysing primary or unpublished data about people who have died, other than data that is already in the public domain?**

No

**Does your study involve direct access to an external organisation?**

No

**Does your study involve species not covered by the Animals Scientific Procedures Act (1993)?** No

**Does your study involve ionising radiation?**



No

**Does your study involve the evaluation of medical devices, or the testing of medicinal and pharmaceutical products?** No

**Does your study involve Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service?**

No

**Does your study involve serving offenders, professionals who work with them, or questions relating to criminal offences?**

No

**Does your study involve a need to see, acquire or store material that could be viewed as illegal or that may attract the interest of the police, security or intelligence services?**

No

**Will your study have any impact on the natural or built environment?**

No

## Funding and previous applications

**Has this research been funded by an external organisation (e.g. a research council or public sector body)?** No

**If yes, please provide the name of funder:**

**Has this research been funded internally?** No

**Name of internal fund**

**Funding amount**

**Term of funding**

**Date funding agreed**

**Have you submitted previous requests for ethical approval to the Committee that relate to this research project?** No

**If yes, please provide previous application reference:**

## Study

### **Brief review of relevant literature and rationale for study**

This work draws on three disciplines: English literature, queer studies, and creative writing. In terms of the first, Mendlesohn (2009) is the leading writer on the history of the fantasy genre. The aforementioned edited collection (Campbell, 2014) investigates the qualities of female ‘archetypes’ in fantasy fiction, and how heroism is portrayed in women. A distinction is made between the female hero who is a character that has to go through her own journey and transformation. In *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors*, Stuller (2016) states that the female hero’s journey is based on love, collaboration, and redemption. This is different to the male hero’s journey which often has more materialistic objectives, particularly in fantasy fiction, such as a quest to destroy something, or bring back a trophy of a slain being; these physical feats of prowess is often considered more of a masculine trait, rather than a journey that is based on feelings, which are seen as feminine traits.

Does this mean that the female hero cannot undertake the same kind of journey as the male hero? This is something that I will explore both in my reading and my creative fiction. The heroine, in contrast to the female hero, does not go on her own journey and is often a side character who needs rescuing by the hero. Though Stuller only focuses one chapter on the female hero, her concentration is on characters through different media, such as television shows and comic books, she shares Campbell’s sentiments that the female hero and heroine are entirely different characters because of the different paths that their narratives take. While I cannot see how the female hero can step down into the role of the heroine, is it possible that the heroine can organically change her journey into becoming a hero in herself?

The chapter ‘Hiding in plain sight: The invisibility of queer fantasy’ by Stephen Kenneally (2016) in

*Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Popular Fantasy: Beyond boy wizards and kick-ass chicks*, Kenneally highlights the difficulties and different approaches that researchers have used to try and identify queer fantasy novels, as well as exploring the theoretical concept of queer fantasy. Kenneally (2016) states that ‘fantasy is typically heteronormative’, and that any queer aspects that can comfortably exist in fantasy are ‘elided to maintain normative frameworks’ (p8). This makes it challenging to identify and define queer fantasy novels, particularly in those earlier works that came from an era where queer elements were hidden within the subtext.

In terms of creative writing, I am well-versed in urban fantasy novels and am aware of the formulas that many of these novels follow, which enables me to identify any queer elements and instances where queer women are written as heroes. Robert Mark Francis (2018) thesis on queer literature set in the Black Country informs my work. Francis's research focuses on psychogeography, and discusses the sense of place for the queer community and liminal spaces in the post-industrial Black Country area.

**Cited references for any sources in the sections on rationale, methods etc.**

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McFarland & company Inc.

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*Beyond boy wizards and kick-ass chicks*. New York: Routledge.

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Mendlesohn, F., James, E., 2009. *A Short History of Fantasy*. Oxford: Libri Publishing.

Stuller, J. K., 2010. *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors: Superwomen in Modern Mythology*. New York: I. B. Tauris.

**Outline of study design**

This research project is concerned with queer women. The aim is to produce fiction with queer protagonists, whose queerness is not integral to story, plot, or character. My use of the term queer is inclusive of women across non-heterosexual orientation and non-cisgender identity spectrums. While I am inclusive of other sexual and gender identities, I am allied with a lesbian perspective, as it is where my experience is founded.

Theoretically, my work draws on and updates Stephen Kenneally's (2016) study on queer fantasy fiction 1987–2000, integrating it with Lori Campbell's (2014) work on non-queer female heroes.

Artistically, there are no previous works in its specific genre of urban fantasy. However, it is part of a movement in publishing towards fair representation of class, ethnicity, sexual preference and gender identity.

This work will also rely on the psycho-geographical location of being in the centre of the Midlands, between the East and West, and the local influences of folklore and magic from both areas with play their parts in both the novel and research.

### **Outline of study methods**

This research project is framed as practice-based exploratory research. It is practice-based because the research will primarily be carried out by writing a novel. The creative work will be supported by a theoretical component to form an integrated research project. I will write the novel *Sisters in Arms* and keep an ongoing reflective log that will record my creative processes and reflect on my practice. This log will inform the production of the theoretical component. The research is exploratory as there is relatively little work queer fantasy fiction, and none in queer urban fantasy.

In *Research Methods in Creative Writing*, Lasky (2013) underlines the centrality of poetics as a research method in creative writing. This is the writer interrogating the way that critical ideas and attitudes are formulated in their creative work. The critical idea I am interested in is the representation of queerness in fantasy. In writing my poetics, I will consider the social and political context alongside genre traditions before considering whether queerness ever should or could be ‘merely’ representational, and not the focus of plot, character, and metaphor. My poetics will explore the limits of a metaphor, a recurrent theme in imaginative writing. Through Campbell and Stuller, I will identify both archetypes and their qualities by reading other creative works and completing my own novel. I will explore the idea of the queer female hero and the journey that she must take; I will write her alongside a more heroine-like figure to experiment with the differences in archetypes of queer women, and I will explore the limitations of writing the hero, or heroine within my poetics.

In terms of my creative work, following Francis (2018) I will set my novel in the Midlands, Not only is this an everyday, familiar setting, it is distinct to other urban fantasy novels set in larger cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and London. While I am not aware of many novels that explore queer female characters in urban fantasy, I will compile a bibliography of novels and short stories that do feature queer female characters within the urban fantasy genre. I will notate the features of each novel: how are queer characters portrayed? Does queer identity play a central role in the plot? I will use the results in producing my creative work and situating it within the queer fantasy publishing field.

**Do you propose to carry out your project partly in a non-English language?**

No

**If yes, please provide details**

## Ethical considerations

**Research undertaken in public places**

I am not conducting any research in public places, or that involves other people.

**GDPR - collecting personal**

**data** I am not collecting any personal data.

**Basis for collecting data**

Not applicable (only use when no data is being collected)

**Data retention**

I am not collecting data so I do not need to retain it.

**Rights of data subject**

This is not applicable as I am not collecting data from people.

**Commercial sensitivity**

This is not applicable to completing the practice-based creative research I am completing.

**Are you using non-standard software to store or analyse data?**

No

**Are there other ethical implications that are additional to this list?**

No

**If yes, please provide details**

**Have/do you intend to request ethical approval from any other body/organisation?**

No

**If yes, please provide details**

**Do you intend to publish your research?** Yes

**Have the activities associated with this research project been risk-assessed?**

Yes

## **Attachments**

**Informed consent from other parties/organisations**

**Relevant testing materials**

**Other**