

THE DARKFERN LEXICON

BOOK 1

WEBWAY

BENJAMIN FERAL

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BOOK 1

WEBWAY

FROM THE MIND OF

BENJAMIN FERAL

DEDICATION

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

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BOOK 1

WEBWAY

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

CHAPTER 1

PERCIVAL'S OBLIGATION

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

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

And so it began...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Splash!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 2

HARMONY'S LETTER

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

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

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

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

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

"MUM! Slow down!" Harmony yelled over the deafening composition.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Humph."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"*Stop!*" Harmony screamed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Where did it come from?” she questioned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My dearest Harmony,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Yours in spirit,
Nova Ryder*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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