

# THE DARKFERN LEXICON

## BOOK 2

# SANCTORIUM

BENJAMIN FERAL

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Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

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*FROM THE MIND OF*

BENJAMIN FERAL

## Dedication

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

ALSO IN THIS SERIES

# THE DARKFERN LEXICON

BOOK 1 - [WEBWAY](#)

# CHAPTER 1

## LONELY ROSE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ms Ryder?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# CHAPTER 2

## THE LOYAL LION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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