

Urban Magic: an urban fantasy novel, and ‘Link
Me Out of Here: escaping the closet of the
academic essay’

by

Amelia Heffernan

BA (Honours)

Thesis Submitted to Flinders University for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences February
2024

Table of Contents

Title Page	1
Table of Contents	2
Abstract	3
Declaration	4
Acknowledgements	5
Manifesto	6
Part i	7
Part ii	16
Part iii	29
Part iv	33
Part v	45
Urban Magic (novel)	47
Prologue	48
Chapter 1	51
Chapter 2	59
Chapter 3	74
Chapter 4	89
Chapter 5	101
Chapter 6	116
Chapter 7	130
Chapter 8	144
Chapter 9	159
Chapter 10	171
Chapter 11	183
Chapter 12	201
Chapter 13	212
Chapter 14	227
Chapter 15	239
Chapter 16	258
Works Cited	272

ABSTRACT

Urban Magic: an urban fantasy novel and 'Link Me Out of Here: escaping the closet of the academic essay' radically reimagine the traditional Creative Writing thesis by integrating hypertextual, nonlinear pathways into the novel to create a multilayered, hypermedia exegesis that hybridizes the scholarly and creative. *Urban Magic* and 'Link Me Out of Here: escaping the closet of the academic essay' refuse the rigid hegemony of scholarly discourse by breaking out of the traditional academic essay form and embracing the 'outlaw' exegesis, an experimental form that, in this case, challenges the exclusivity and inaccessibility of high theory. The creative artefact consists of an urban fantasy novel about magic users in a close-to-ours world, where magic has been recently uncloseted. *Urban Magic* rebels against the idea of 'secret magic societies', removing the narrative magical wainscot and integrating the magical with 'normal culture', embodying refusal of 'closets', drawing from the work of Eve Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* and my own queer experiences. The links from the otherwise traditional novel to individual sections of the exegesis, presented on webpages, is inspired by Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*; the embedded exegesis refuses the traditional exegesis structure and instead embraces Halberstam's core tenants of resisting mastery, privileging the naive, and suspecting memorialization. Individual sections that you will encounter include mini chapters on various theoretical approaches and the context of my refusal to pursue them in a traditional exegetical format, and a series of subverted explorations of the theory that explore questions of boundaries between author/text/reader and undermine the binary of scholar/fan, serious/fun and the limits of how knowledge can be understood and conveyed: a quiz, D&D stat blocks, a Choose Your Own Adventure, book lists, playlists, and other digital pages.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis:

1. does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university
2. and the research within will not be submitted for any other future degree or diploma without the permission of Flinders University; and
3. to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Signed:

Dated: 10/06/2023

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge that I live and work on the land of the Kurna people, the true custodians of the land. I honour their Elders past and present and emerging.

My eternal thanks:

To Amy and Tully, for their unending patience, kindness, and willingness to let me experiment. I never would have made it to this point without your guidance and your push to take the leap to outlaw. My project is richer and fuller for having had your supervision.

To Riley, always.

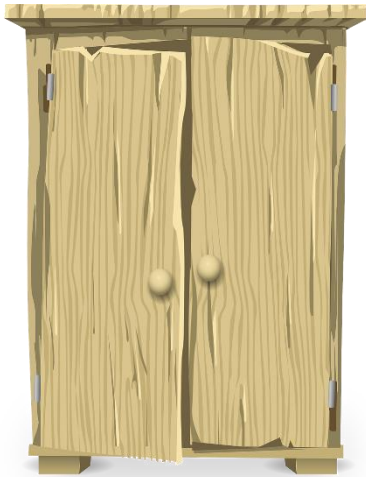
To my lads, Rebekah, Lauren, Ash, and Kelsey, for our quiet times as well as our adventures. They've kept me sane these past four years.

And to Adie, Luci, and Liam, for unknowingly inspiring the change that led to this radical project.

I am grateful for the contribution of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship that allowed me to undergo this project.

manifesto

Academia is an exclusive place and I refuse to buy into the existing hegemony that keeps that closet door locked. Instead, this thesis will reject the scholarly voice, embrace play and whimsy, and fail to



conform to as many rigid traditions as possible. It won't stay within the lines. I've felt excluded from the scholarly club and uncomfortably torn between my creative and academic selves for too long. This thesis isn't meant to make you comfortable. It wants you to squirm in your academic chair, to *step out* of the chair and try it my way. I've been a prisoner of the scholarly voice for a long time and after fourteen years of writing academic essays, it was the exegesis for my Creative Writing PhD that made me ask: why do I have to write it this way?

Why do I have to split myself into two voices, academic and creative, to be taken seriously in a field that's built on creative practice? I'm not the first to question the split between creative practice and research: *TEXT* has published more than one special issue on the topic of the exegesis ('Illuminating the Exegesis'; 'The Exegesis Now') which are full of questions on the form of the exegesis, past and present. The split between creative and scholarly voice is brought up again and again (Kroll; Webb et

"Why should the exegesis in a doctorate of creative arts use the language of expository or discursive prose when it has at its disposal the myriad voices and techniques of the very discourse it is attempting to justify?" (Williams "The performative exegesis" 2)

al; Finlyason et al) as well as the question of creative practice as new knowledge on its own merits (Bolt; Batty and Holbrook). I join a proud legacy of creative researchers who have asked the question: How can I challenge this discourse in my own way, and break out of the academic closet I find myself in, with all its rigidity and traditions?

The answer is to do away with the exegesis form completely and create something radical.

My exegesis takes the form of sixteen segments, each presented on a webpage and accessed through my creative work, a novel titled *Urban Magic*. These segments will ask you to engage in their ideas in a playful way, oftentimes in a truly interactive way. By moving away from walls of text in a PDF, I'm able to share my research with you in a way that's creative, fun, and 'out', while still communicating the knowledge I've gathered, analysed and produced over the length of my project.

To do this I call upon the metaphor of the queer closet, and embrace Jack Halberstam's concept of queer failure, which posits that by failing at the traditional or accepted methods of learning, we can travel new, unexplored ways of creating knowledge (Halberstam 3). By failing to conform during my PhD, by resisting the existing hegemony, I broke free of the academic closet and gained ownership over my project and my ideas. Using hypertext, the shift from word document to webpage, was the final link in creating my hybridized exegesis that combines the scholarly/creative and finally embodies the themes of my thesis.



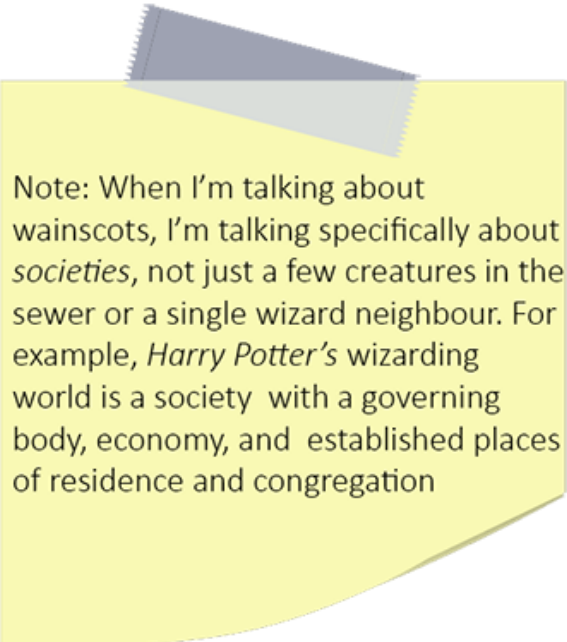
([prismatic-bell](#) on Tumblr)

part i. *urban magic* and the wainscot closet

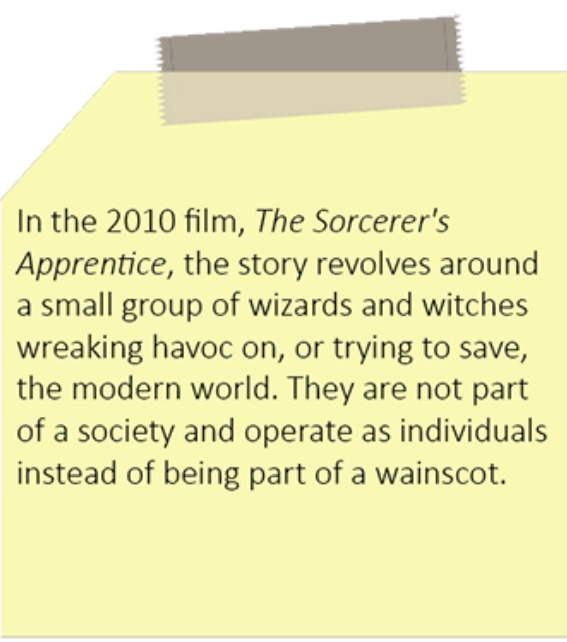
Although I wouldn't embrace queer failure as a framework until a few years into my PhD, the queering of my project started with *Urban Magic*. My novel was inspired by a love of genre, urban

fantasy specifically, but was also influenced by my research into colonial ideals of exclusivity and binary oppositions at the start of my PhD. I already had an outline for the novel when I started, born out of the desire to play with the defining features of urban fantasy (the hidden or unseen magical factions in our world, a city setting), to differentiate between modern fantasies (Meyer's *Twilight* series or Grossman's *The Magicians*) and urban fantasies (Butcher's *Dresden Files* or Aaronovitch's *Rivers of London*), and to see how far I could stretch its tropes while staying within the genre.

The genre stuff is included in my collection of webpages and goes into further detail about what I was doing. It discusses the core tenant of [urban fantasy, the Unseen](#), the magical/supernatural people and/or creatures who are hidden from the ~~normal people dominant culture~~ mainstream world in the nooks and crannies of (usually) a city. It also goes into detail about [wainscots](#), which are societies made up of these people and/or creatures and are one way of representing the Unseen in urban fantasy (as well as other genres). I wanted to write a novel that did away with the secrecy of the secret magical society, to see what might replace the usual plot of an urban fantasy if secrecy wasn't the driving force behind the characters' actions. By forcing the hidden magic into the open, I could explore a world where magic and mainstream had come together to create a new world, focusing the plot on what problems might arise from this mash up.



Note: When I'm talking about wainscots, I'm talking specifically about *societies*, not just a few creatures in the sewer or a single wizard neighbour. For example, *Harry Potter's* wizarding world is a society with a governing body, economy, and established places of residence and congregation

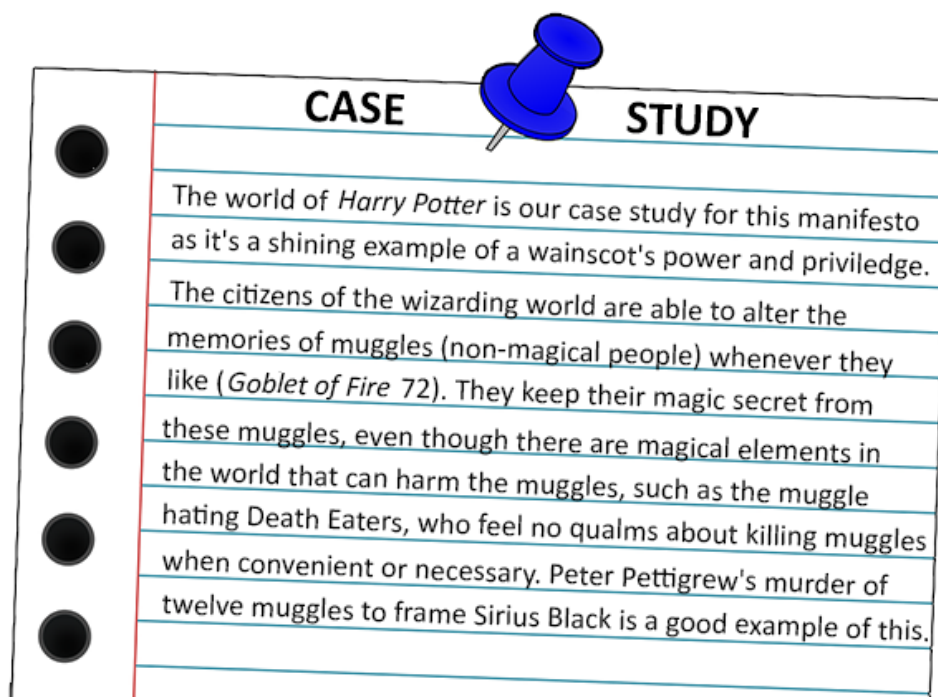


In the 2010 film, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, the story revolves around a small group of wizards and witches wreaking havoc on, or trying to save, the modern world. They are not part of a society and operate as individuals instead of being part of a wainscot.

Genre was a *huge* motivation for writing *Urban Magic*, but when I went away to engage in some practice-led research, I realised there was something else to it as well. The notion of coming out of the closet was so familiar and so recursive to me that it was only natural that I apply that binary to my fiction. Coming out of the closet is a fact of life for so many queer people, and it's a never-ending process. "Even an out gay person," Eve Sedgwick argues in her 1990 ground-breaking text, *Epistemology of the Closet*, "deals daily with interlocutors about whom she doesn't know whether they know or not" (68). Meeting new people? You have to decide whether to come out or not. Someone asks you a heteronormative question? You have to decide. And with each reveal, you run the risk of a negative reaction to the news. Even a positive reaction can induce questions like 'why didn't you tell me sooner?' and insinuations of hiding.

This is what Sedgwick calls the "double bind", a contradictory system that undermines gay people's very being through "constraints on discourse" (70). Her example is the story of a teacher in the 70s who was fired when it was discovered he was gay. The courts first decided that he couldn't sue because he'd brought the attention on his sexuality, then another court decided the public disclosure of his sexuality was protected speech but wouldn't let him return to teaching or sue the Board of Education because he had "failed to note on his original employment application that he had been, in college, an officer of a student homophile organization" – which, school officials admitted, wouldn't have prevented him from being hired anyway (69). The point is – neither way is a win. You either stay in the closet and risk your secret "leaking" at any point, or you come out and face possible disastrous results anyway. It's odd to think that a space, not so much a physical space but a metaphorical one, a complex system of knowledge and/or power, can also be the space that queer people come to be known as their authentic selves. Which is not to say that every queer will or *should* come out; even in 1990 Sedgwick knew that, while the closet itself should be scrutinized, those who inhabit the closet shouldn't be (69). I can speak on no other experience except my own and would never comment on someone else's decision surrounding the closet. Wainscots, however. Well... that's a different story.

All of this to say: I was looking at pulling a narrative wainscot out of its closet for my novel. The closet metaphor is obvious here; magical wainscots stay hidden from the mainstream world because they're afraid of what the dominant culture would do if their secret was revealed. But I'd found in my reading that wainscots often had way more power than the culture they were afraid of (see the case study below). In the heterosexual/homosexual binary, where heterosexual=Term A and homosexual=Term B, the half of the binarism that's in the closet (B/the homosexual) is subordinated to the other term in the binary (A/the heterosexual). A has the power in the binary, is prioritised over the other, or is considered more acceptable than B (Sedgwick 10). Despite that, in an interesting turn of events, A actually relies on the exclusion of B for its entire identity to make sense. As discussed in my [chapter mark-up](#), the wainscot is actually the Term A in the equation, while the mainstream culture of the world is Term B. Wainscots hold power over these mainstream cultures in many ways: by literally having magic powers that can harm, kill, change the memory or personality of non-magical people, by having super strength or other damaging powers, and by working to keep all these things secret from the mainstream world, they endanger the non-magical people around them.



CASE STUDY

The world of *Harry Potter* is our case study for this manifesto as it's a shining example of a wainscot's power and privilege. The citizens of the wizarding world are able to alter the memories of muggles (non-magical people) whenever they like (*Goblet of Fire* 72). They keep their magic secret from these muggles, even though there are magical elements in the world that can harm the muggles, such as the muggle hating Death Eaters, who feel no qualms about killing muggles when convenient or necessary. Peter Pettigrew's murder of twelve muggles to frame Sirius Black is a good example of this.

How does this affect the use of the closet metaphor, then, if the culture that's in the closet is actually on the more privileged side of a binary? It turns the position of the closet into one of power.

This isn't a resistive act, like it is for queer folk who remain in the closet. Minorities in



CASE STUDY

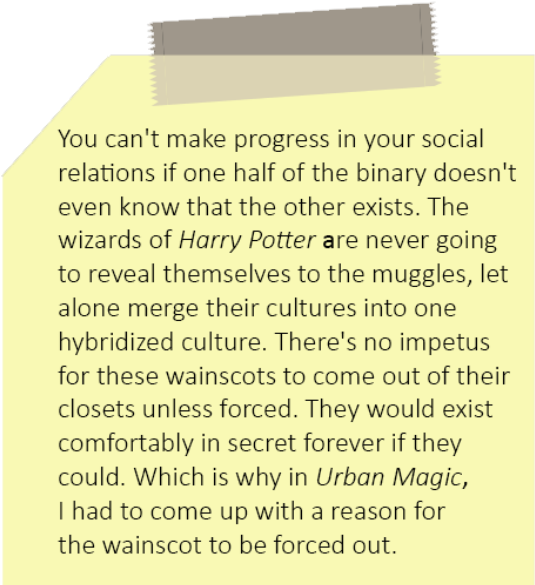
Harry Potter's wizarding world has a magical law called the International Statute of Secrecy that's been in place worldwide since 1689 (*Deathly Hallows* 353). Breaking this law can have serious consequences, such as Harry nearly being expelled from Hogwarts in the *Prisoner of Azkaban*.

the real world stay in the closet to maintain a feeling of safety, whereas wainscots stay in their closet to maintain power. Think of it as an act of containment; the wainscot is locking its power behind the closet door to keep the power to itself and to refuse access to anyone outside the closet. Their closet helps them retain their position as Term A in the binary: wainscot/mainstream culture. Mostly, this made me want to take them out of the closet more. If the closet is a performance of silence,

the "speech act of silence" as Sedgwick refers to it, a wainscot's secrecy is certainly that. They deliberately avoid telling the mainstream world about their existence and may even have strict laws about any interactions their citizens have with non-wainscot people. The silence of the queer closet, however, is characterized by the "fits and starts" that it accrues, "in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it" (Sedgwick 3). Someone might interrogate you in your daily life as to your queerness; asking after partners, dating status, hobbies, or group affiliations; there are a myriad of ways that a conversation can 'fit and start' as you try to cover your reactions and not reveal yourself as queer. But no one is going around interrogating whether you're magic or not. The closest thing to that in real life might be trying to hide your association with a secret club or organisation. That was when I realised how similar wainscots are to real-life secret societies, plus or minus a little magic. That propelled me into another chapter in my original first draft exegesis, [secret societies](#), which explored the similarities of wainscots to groups like the Masons, or the KKK.

Sedgwick is concerned with breaking down the binary of the closet, not necessarily reversing it. Like with [Derrida and his binaries](#), it's clear that reversing Term A and B continues to uphold the system that created the binary in the first place, which still leaves you with one subordinate term and no real equality. It might have been fun to reverse the positions of the wainscot and the mainstream culture in my story. It would have been possible to have the magic people living openly in the world, and a secret society of non-magical people living beneath them or amongst them, relying on technology to hide their non-magical status. There's potential for a story there but it would have upheld the kind of system and binaries that I was trying to do away with completely. There would have still been someone in the closet and I was trying to explore an urban fantasy story where there was no closet at all. The closet, or the secret of the wainscot, is what creates the schism between the magical and the non-magical. It creates the binary that I'm trying to get rid of, and so to get rid of the binary (and its accompanying power relations) we have to get rid of that closet.

Sedgwick argued that no real progress could be “mobilized from within any closet” (58) and that a shift in power relations, or specifically in garnering rights for queer folks, would rely on people from that minority to make risky moves of “the most explicit self-identification” (58), which absolutely sucks as a minority, but really rang true for me in regard to these wainscots. No real progress could be made in their in-story relations with non-magical people unless they came out of their closet and identified themselves. And no progress could be made narratively unless one of these wainscots was forced to identify themselves, since there's no motivation for them to do so otherwise. And that conclusion led me to writing my prologue: just two pages to explain how magic was revealed to the greater world by accident. It was the only way I could think to have them be forced out of their comfortable closet, because



You can't make progress in your social relations if one half of the binary doesn't even know that the other exists. The wizards of *Harry Potter* are never going to reveal themselves to the muggles, let alone merge their cultures into one hybridized culture. There's no impetus for these wainscots to come out of their closets unless forced. They would exist comfortably in secret forever if they could. Which is why in *Urban Magic*, I had to come up with a reason for the wainscot to be forced out.

they certainly wouldn't choose to do it themselves! The bulk of the novel is set decades after this reveal and follows Sam Haid as she navigates a world that is now hybridized with magic. She's swept up in the drama of Rani, someone who is being chased by the government for apparently being a renegade magic user. Pulling the wainscot from the shadows and assimilating the magical culture into the wider, mainstream culture, gave me the opportunity to play in a world where the protagonists weren't concerned with keeping their magic use a secret. If everyone can access magic, even if it's not to the same degree (i.e., some folks are more powerful than others), then magic stops being something secret and exclusive.

In the original draft of my exegesis, I wanted to talk about the exclusivity and elitism of wainscot societies, to justify why I wanted to force them out of their closet. From there, my practice-led research led me down many roads. I delved deep into Derrida's deconstruction and the idea of breaking down the wainscot/mainstream culture binaries in several books I'd read (the *Harry Potter* series, *The Mortal Instruments*, *The Magicians*, *Vampire Academy*). I got stuck on some threads of post-colonialism (Said and essentialism, Bhabha and hybridity, Spivak's use of deconstruction in the colonizer/colonized binary) and the way these wainscots upheld colonial (racist, classist, sexist) values. I tried to write the chapter comparing wainscots to real-life secret societies (the Freemasons, the KKK, the myth of the Illuminati) based on the writings of Norman Mackenzie. Something wasn't clicking, though. I kept coming up against frustrations with the form of my exegesis; the academic essay has been engrained as the ultimate form of academic writing since I was in high school, but it felt wrong to be writing about the exclusivity of special clubs and the elitism of institutions in the language that had been given to me by those institutions. Scholarly language is not the most accessible thing in the world. The language of the theorists that I was reading (especially people like Derrida and Foucault), and the language that I was using to write about their theories, isn't accessible to someone like my mum, or my younger siblings. It didn't make sense to me that they could read my novel but not necessarily the corresponding exegesis. How could I write about forcing wainscots out of their exclusive closets but remain locked inside an academic one myself? Did I stay,

just because it felt safe and familiar? Just because it was a surer route to passing my PhD? By remaining in my box and following the tried-and-true path, I was reinforcing the hegemony and allowing my work to slot neatly into the hierarchy of academia that I felt so excluded by. The fear of failing my PhD had kept me in line for all that time, and the fear of becoming illegitimate or unscholarly in the eyes of my fellow academics was only helping to maintain the existing structures of power and exclusion. The threat of losing my access to the scholarly world, losing access to my role as a PhD candidate or my future doctorate, kept me cowering in the closet. But in the same way that no progress could be made from within the queer closet, I couldn't challenge the existing hegemony without stepping out of my academic closet.

On the other hand, how could I refuse the scholarly voice and form that I knew so well, and which so easily fulfilled the requirement of a Creative Writing PhD? And what would I replace the scholarly voice and essay form with? If I wrote in my creative voice, colloquialisms and informal language included, could I still meet the requirements of a scholarly exegesis? And if I refused the form of the essay, would my exegesis meet *any* of the requirements? At what point would my radical be *too* radical? And more worryingly, what if what I produced wasn't radical *enough*? What if I never succeeded in breaking free of the academic closet and couldn't get out? What if it was just another failure? I decided I would rather fail at trying to break free than succeed but remain shackled.



They say the hardest part of academic writing is the writing

([academicssay](#) on Tumblr)

We're a far cry from the 1990s, when the exegesis was simply considered a kind of "critical journal, a reflective account of processes undertaken while creating the accompanying work" (Krauth 2011). These days the exegesis must justify the creative work and contextualise it in a "theoretical,

historical context of artistic practice" (Williams "Exegesis as Manifesto" 66) which usually means a "long critical-reflective essay" (66). This is a swap from reflective account to what Krauth calls an "imposition from contextualising, 'more authoritative' disciplines" (2011 7). What this did do is provide the opportunity to write an exegesis that had an implied relationship to the creative work, instead of a direct reflective account, and so the writer could address "added or alternative" research outcomes that came by way of the creative research. While this offers an alternative to writers who might not like the reflective, critical journal approach to the exegesis, it creates a kind of schism between creative work and exegesis. The creative work is, by nature, creative, while the expectation of the exegesis is an academic essay. This splits the writer into two entities: the creative and the scholar. I was not a fan of the split.

The Creative Writing discipline has also had a history of uncertainty around the exegesis. In 2008, a study conducted into the policies and examination guidelines of creative theses revealed that, across the twenty-eight Australian universities surveyed, there was little uniformity in what the guidelines for examination actually were (Carey, Webb & Brien 2008). There was even contention over what the critical element of the thesis should be called, although exegesis was the most common preference (6). Five years later in 2013, Hamilton and Carson found that universities greatly varied in the level of experimentation they encouraged in the exegesis (qtd. in Batty and Brien 2017). My own level of experimentation, which I get into a little further down, is inspired by the positions of people like Nigel Krauth, who argues for the existence of combined artefact and exegesis, woven together to create one single object for examination (2011, 2018), and Joanne Yoo, who argues against the split between scholarly and creative voice in the name of objectivity (2017).

I'm not here to argue the existence of the exegesis but to situate myself in its history and to present my own as an alternative to the rigid nature of the academic essay, or the "explanatory research statement written in academic prose" (Krauth 2018 2). My exegesis takes these restrictions and breaks free of them by literally breaking free of the form.

This friction in my academic life was happening around the same time that I got sick in my very real life; my illness led to fatigue and an inability to read and write for the long hours that I used to indulge in. It was very easy to think that I was going to fail my PhD because I didn't have the energy to force myself to write from within that closet anymore. I was stuck, and it wasn't until I returned to queer theory that I found the answer to my problem: embrace that failure and use it to shape my exegesis.

part ii. embracing failure and becoming an outlaw

Failure is an active alternative to the traditional ideas of legibility and convention, and that's a good thing! I didn't always think so, but the works of queer writers like José Esteban Muñoz and Ocean Vuong rapidly changed my way of thinking. Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* argues for queer failure specifically as a kind of escape and virtuosity "from the stale and static lifeworld dominated by the alienation, exploitation, and drudgery associated with capitalism or landlordism" (2009 173). Queer failure is the result of being unable to, or refusing to, conform to normative ideas and values like heterosexuality. So, queerness and failure (or, the politics of failure, as Muñoz called it), are linked because they're about doing and being "something else," not even necessarily in opposition to the norm but simply outside of it (154). This failure is linked with queerness specifically because of that disconnect with heterosexuality. When you can't make yourself fit the mould, you have to find another way of existing. Another path, Vuong says, that we so often have to make ourselves. He talks in his 2022 interview with *Louisiana Channel* that, like the rules of writing, it's almost comforting to know what the rules are and where the rules (heterosexuality) lead, but that means you'll never discover paths that haven't been explored. Vuong is a poet and so it makes sense to me that he can sum up such a complicated jumble of feelings in a beautiful quote:

...after a while, you realize that this road was never made with me in mind. And I have to stop the car, get out of it and climb over this guardrail. And now I'm

wandering far away from everything that I've known, so far away from anything that has a name or a sign or a road signal. And I'm in the middle of the forest or the meadow, and I'm terrified. I'm washed with confusion and fear. And it's almost electric, ecstatic terror that comes over me because I'm truly lost. But I'm also perhaps the most free I've ever been. And everything I feel, every step I take is something new to me. It is a discovery. (Vuong 2022)

This is where I found myself: travelling the well-known roads had led me to the closet I found myself in, and I was wondering what would happen if I opened the door and tried something new. This was when I came across Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*. Building on this concept of queer failure, Halberstam's 2011 book looks for alternatives to conventional understandings of success by embracing failure, getting lost, forgetting, and silliness. Failure, he argues, can allow us to escape the "punishing norms that discipline behaviour and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods" (3). Orderly and predictable was exactly what hadn't been working for me, so I eagerly consumed this book and its concept of queer failure in the face of heterosexual norms.



([MichellCClark](#) on Twitter)

Heterosexuality is only normalised in our culture because of what Foucault called disciplinary power. He believed that the individual was an effect of disciplinary power, not something that power had an effect on (Hoffman 28). "Discipline 'makes' individuals," he said in *Discipline and Punish*, "it is the specific techniques of a power that regards individuals as objects and as instruments of its exercise" (170). It's a modern power, able to legitimise or delegitimise by defining what is normal, conventional, or traditional. Heterosexuality has been legitimised, so much so that queerness is considered a failure in convention or tradition. And it's not the only thing.

Halberstam uses Foucault's theory of disciplinary power to explain how "experts and administrative forms of government are produced" to the point where we trust their opinions as authorities on certain subjects (8). He quotes Foucault on the power of disciplines to decide what is acceptable or not: "Disciplines will define not a code of law, but a code of normalization" (*Society Must Be Defended* 38). By normalising the use of high theory, by legitimising legibility, seriousness, and rigour, these things become convention. It may not be written into law, but it is what's normalised and therefore deemed acceptable or deserving of reward.

Halberstam lists the university as one of these "administrative forms of government" (8) and calls for a radical take on disciplinarity and the university. Citing Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's 2004 manifesto titled "The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses", Halberstam makes the argument for refusing the form and content of traditional canons and instead embracing modes of thinking that don't line up with "rigor and order but with inspiration and unpredictability" (10). Moten and Harney put particular emphasis on stealing from the university, on "abusing its hospitality" and "being in but not of [it]" (101). They instead want to bolster outcast thinkers who "refuse, resist, and renege" on the demands of rigor, excellence, and productivity (Halberstam 8). The politics of failure rejects this very legible and serious approach to knowledge and academia, with good reason. Halberstam summarises this beautifully:

The desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production... Indeed terms like serious and rigorous tend to be code words, in academia as well as other contexts, for disciplinary correctness; they signal a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods. (6)

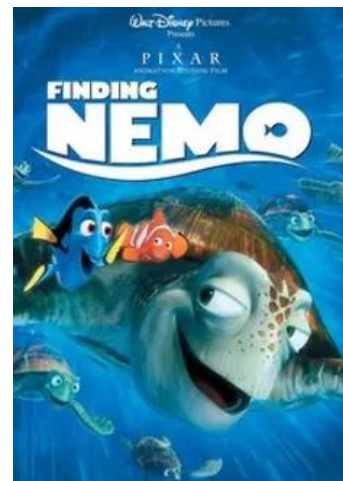
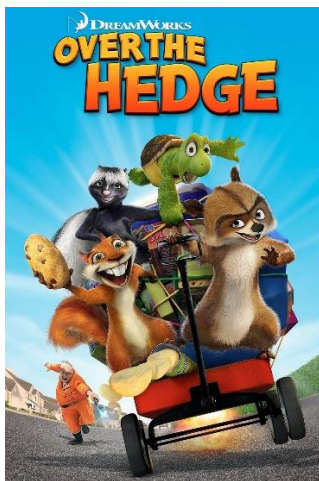
Regarding disciplinary correctness, I return to Nigel Krauth's 2011 article outlining the trajectory of the Creative Writing PhD in Australia, in which he laments that the exegesis wasn't a home-grown resource for the Creative Writing discipline but instead, an imposition from other "more authoritative" disciplines (7). We swapped the reflective journal for the kind of academic writing that's seen in other Humanities disciplines. Tess Brady uses the metaphor of the bowerbird because unlike researchers from the more traditional disciplines, we must "acquire a working rather than specialist knowledge, not in one area but in a range of areas and disciplines." (2) To use a queer metaphor, it's like dressing up and putting on a drag performance. Judith Butler talks about drag as a subversion of the hegemonic gender structure only as far as it imitates the binary genders and "disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality" (*Bodies That Matter* 85). More often, she claims, drag is used both to denaturalize and idealize "hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms" (85). The discipline of Creative Writing is stuck in this kind of drag state: performing the ideals and language of other disciplines, in order to imitate them without really creating a new, radical voice for itself. All it does is speak to the existing hegemony, the elitism that places scholarly/fun in a binary that prioritizes the scholarly without leaving room for the possibility that our work can be both. To realize the possibilities of our work, we have to step outside of the performance and seek an authentic voice for our discipline. My exegesis is my refusal to get into costume, to step onto the stage and perform an exegesis that looks like it would belong to another discipline. Breaking out of the closet would be useless if it just led to me performing something that wasn't my true, authentic self.

But it wasn't immediate. The desire to be taken 'seriously' was something that stalled my work. By becoming so focused on the high, academic people, who would eventually read my thesis (you, the examiner), and whether my thesis was serious and legible enough, I neglected the original spirit of my thesis: challenging exclusivity. But I hadn't known how to break that loop I found myself in, how to break out of the closet that kept me thinking and working those well-travelled paths. The thought of leaving that closet was accompanied by fears of being named illegitimate or being accused of a lack of rigour. In *The Queer Art of Failure* Halberstam encourages us to find alternative ways of knowing and being by failing, getting lost, and thinking about media that might seem silly or inconsequential because it's not considered high culture. Halberstam uses low theory, which is less 'read textbooks' and more 'watch Pixar movies'. The term is adapted from Stuart Hall's proposal in his 1991 essay 'Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities', and is inspired by the idea that theory isn't the be all and end all; it's not necessarily the goal but something to be found and used on the way to something else (42). Scholarship doesn't have to be all theory all the time. It doesn't have to be an exercise in learning existing works of theory, only to create more theory. A PhD is an opportunity to be a real-world force, for its writer and its readers. My PhD changed the way that I thought about academia, my place in scholarship, and the diversity of ways knowledge can be produced. I used the theory I studied to get there, but the theory wasn't the *goal*. My PhD will be the first thesis my mother or my sister will read. *That* is a real-world effect. I share my work with other candidates and hear about their own experimental theses. That is taking theory into the world and making it tangible. A thesis is more than just its theory, and the journey can be about more than just mastery of the theoretical.

By trying to articulate my research and the theory I'd covered in a standardised, scholarly voice via standardised, academic essay, I was completely betraying the content of my PhD. My scholarly voice felt like an arcane language and I was stuck in the illusion that if I could just say the right thing in the right way, it would unlock a world that was hidden to me, inaccessible behind a locked door. It was almost as if academia was a whole secret society with its intricate rituals and its

secrets kept behind closed doors. If I refused to follow the rules, would I even be allowed in the club? Even when I was using the language of academia, I still felt like I was performing in drag. The performance could never make me feel included, no matter how good of a performance it was. It was time to put down the arcane language and get through that door with my fists: using low theory as my door-breaking method.

Low theory is theoretical knowledge that “works on many levels at once” (Halberstam 15) because it prioritises accessibility to reach a wider audience. Halberstam achieves this accessibility by drawing on popular culture, more specifically animated Pixar films like *Finding Nemo*, *Chicken Run* and *Bee Movie*, as well as the 2000 film *Dude Where’s My Car*. Halberstam refers to the Pixar films specifically as a genre he calls “Pixarvolt”, linking “the technology to the thematic focus” (29) and these are the Pixar films that deal in storylines that wouldn’t appear in films made for adults (such as a group of chickens trying to escape their farm) but that are pivotal to the “success and emotional impact” of these stories (29). Pixarvolt films also make connections between “communitarian revolt and queer embodiment” (29) to portray the struggle between queerness and socialist struggle in a way that, Halberstam argues, theory and popular narrative have failed to do so.




Chicken Run is a story about escape to utopia (by chickens), rejecting the primacy of the individual for group logics (working together on the plane instead of following the individualistic Rooster), and envisioning utopia as queer and feminist (all the chickens, bar one, are female) (32).

Pixarvolt films also challenge the nuclear family: *Monsters Inc* draws on the bond between child and monster where the child has chosen the monster as an adoptive parent; *Over the Hedge* sees a collection of different species coming together to survive; *Finding Nemo* is the story of a father and son after the loss of their nuclear family structure (44-45). These films have an emphasis on collectivity that separates Pixarvolt films from their non-Pixarvolt counterparts: they “offer an animated world of triumph for the little guys” (47).

Halberstam rejects the lineages that most "avant-garde and queer writers" (here he lists Janet Adelman and Leo Bersani) would go to, such as Jean Genet, Alfred Hitchcock, or André Gide (“Jack Halberstam on Queer Failure”). These Pixar movies are the kind of popular culture that most academics wouldn't source for their discussions on rebellion and socialism, and that's exactly why Halberstam uses them. His case studies are deliberately chosen from sources that don't foreground their politics. To make rebellion and revolution seem like an immature and silly concept, we "contain [it] by casting it as childish" (Halberstam "Jack Halberstam on Queer Failure"). Casting rebellion as childish encourages a confidence that "no political subject ... will emerge from watching those films" (Halberstam "Jack Halberstam on Queer Failure"), making them an untapped source for discussing the politics they embody. The innocuous safety of these films, and the seemingly apolitical nature of low culture in general, are a Trojan horse for the complete opposite: serious and intensely political themes. Halberstam's use of Pixarvolt films is the kind of low theory that works on many levels at once: drawing on sources that are considered silly or non-academic, using popular culture to discuss complex ideas like feminism, socialism, queerness, and humanism. Low theory can act as a kind of code, presenting these ideas in a 'safe' medium, so they're purpose isn't completely obvious and may only appear to those who need it, or know the code. Think of queer women "reading themselves" into otherwise straight literature because an author has included a section that might hint at the heroine's willingness to "deviate from the status quo" (Lynch et al. 3). I certainly did that as a young queer, writing essays of text about how the subtext of Xena actually proved that Xena and Gabrielle were in love.

As someone who was already using popular texts to discuss topics such as racism, elitism, and classism, I connected with low theory in a powerful way. I felt completely validated in my desire to speak in low theory, to use silly or non-academic ways to discuss the complex, high theory I'd been immersed in for so long. If Halberstam could use Pixar movies to discuss socialism and queerness, I could use Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) to talk about deconstruction and essentialism.

At its base level, low theory aims to be accessible, but also manages to operate under the radar in the sense that it's made up of unexpected texts and doesn't draw its theory from the "hierarchies of knowing" that put the "high" in high theory and render it inaccessible to someone who doesn't have access to that genealogy of knowledge (Halberstam *The Queer Art of Failure* 16).



I am singularly occupied with accessibility and so I love this. From day one my goal has been to create something that I could share with the people in my life.

There's just no point otherwise. These are the people that I love and want to talk to about the topics that matter to me. Being trapped in the language of academia and having no other way to express the research I was doing felt like being silenced, like being controlled. Not everyone has had the chance to undertake a university degree, and even fewer of them have had the chance (or the preparation) to engage with theorists like Derrida and Foucault. I want my younger sister (who is dyslexic) and my younger brother (who is interested only in D&D and video games) to be able to read and comprehend my exegesis as well as my novel. I want to be able to discuss my research with them, without them feeling like they need a university degree or that they're somehow lacking for not having one. They're smart kids and I think if they could learn that information in a way that wasn't a block of text, they'd be able to take me to task on some of my ideas. I've struggled with this goal my entire candidature. It's easy to fall into old habits picked up in undergrad, like the rigid essay structure and the banned use of "I" in academic writing.

So, I decided to do away with the idea of a three argument, effaced essay, or a highly structured breakdown of my process with tie-ins to nothing but the highest academic canon. These elements would have fit neatly into the rubric but would have proven dishonest to my PhD journey. Like *Community's* Dean Pelton advises Abed:



"Intro to Recycled Cinema." *Community*.

The only way for me to survive was to quit trying to conform to rigid traditions of high theory and academic voice. Instead, I decided to use Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* and his concept of low theory, particularly the idea that knowledge can come from unexpected places, and that academia takes itself too seriously sometimes. This framework includes three main steps as outlined by Halberstam: **resist mastery, privilege the naive or nonsensical, and suspect memorialization.**

These steps are in addition to Moten and Harney's encouragement to "worry about the university, refuse professionalization, forge a collectivity, and retreat to the external world beyond the ivied walls of the campus" (Halberstam 11).

The steps outlined by Halberstam aren't rules. I think that would prove dishonest to the concept. In fact, despite his outlining of these steps in *The Queer Art of Failure*, there is a fair amount of vagueness to these guidelines.

Resisting mastery means looking for knowledge from sources outside the accepted academic pool of knowledge. It includes critiquing, and in some cases refusing, the "code of normalization" (Foucault *Society Must Be Defended* 38) that disciplines use to validate and invalidate ways of knowing. It means being critical of the global theories that are considered the more legible or legitimate kinds of knowledge and instead embracing knowledge from unexpected places or in unusual forms. Halberstam resists mastery by using "counterintuitive modes of knowing" such as failure and stupidity (*The Queer Art of Failure* 12). As a resistance of mastery, failure refuses to conform to acceptable, capitalistic requirements of success and profit. In a similar way, stupidity refuses to conform to common forms of knowledge and ways of "inhabiting structures of knowledge" (12). Jean-François Lyotard considered mastery the act of making language "work exclusively for answering" (Olson & Lyotard 405). He claimed that what was necessary in philosophy, the sciences, and life, is a "perpetual displacement of questions" so that "answering is never achieved" (404) because it should be good enough to ask the question without expecting an answer. "A question is not naive," he said, "it comes from the previous answer" (405). He was saying that being on the journey and asking the questions should be good enough, the goal doesn't always have to be a complete mastery of the subject. Is complete mastery even truly possible? Halberstam's embracing of failure exists along similar lines, that success and mastery at the acceptable level (decided by capitalism, academia, heteronormativity etc) doesn't have to be the goal. The journey itself can be enough.

Privileging the naive involves being silly, embracing play and whimsy, and engaging with knowledge in a way that might seem less serious at first glance. It argues for the “nonsensical or nonconceptual” instead of the more traditional sense-making modes because these can lead to different ways of knowing (Halberstam 12). This makes room for those who might be beyond traditional teaching. Those who, like me, have developmental or learning disorders and might struggle to retain information, no matter how many times we read it over. Like Halberstam, I find that what I learnt in school was difficult to retain and it was instead the things I learnt in my own time that stuck with me. Information I’ve absorbed through fiction, movies, YouTube videos, even through fanfiction, have had more effect on me than the material I was taught at my desk in school, and the information is no less valuable. Halberstam aims to prioritize the kind of learning that can occur outside the classroom. That way, we can learn without internalizing a system that relies on a hierarchy of superior/inferior knowledges or intelligences (14), where the ‘superior’ knowledge is represented by whiteness, heterosexuality, cis-maleness, able-bodiedness, and Eurocentricity. This system produces knowledge that fits this already determined hegemony and excludes other ways of knowing, such as disability discourse, Indigenous ways of Knowing, queer histories, and anything outside of its Eurocentric hegemony. By seeking knowledge and ways of learning outside of this existing structure, we don’t have to rely only on supposed great minds to teach us things; we can teach ourselves as well, and knowledge found in these ‘low’ places isn’t automatically worth less. In this way, we can transform the knowledgeable or teachable ‘us’ from just scholars and academics to *anyone* who wants to learn: queers, people of colour, those with learning disabilities like dyslexia, those of us with developmental disabilities like autism or ADHD, and anyone who feels stifled by the rigid structure of academic learning. This doesn’t mean throwing away high theory, just that it doesn’t have to be our only source of information, or the most important; it is one voice among many.

Suspecting memorialization is about embracing nonlinear timelines instead of being singularly obsessed with perfect memory and record keeping. It suggests certain kinds of erasure

over relying on memory because our memory tends to clean up disorderly histories when we try to retell them. Halberstam considers memory an agent of disciplinary power, as termed by Foucault (*Discipline and Punish*), because it picks out the important bits and creates a cohesive narrative out of a story that's actually full of contradictions (Halberstam 15). People like a story that makes sense; the true retelling of history (even a personal history) is far more complicated than a neat and tidy story. Suspecting memorialization and instead advocating for forgetting, as Halberstam does, provides a way of resisting the "heroic and grand logics" of recall (15) which can lead to new forms of memory, or in my case, unusual ways of representing this memory. Forgetting advocates for spectrality over hard evidence, lost genealogies over inheritance, and erasure over inscription (15).

Initially, I created sections of an exegesis that fell under one of these three categories but still explored the theory I had been working on. [A page of playlists](#) that I was listening to while I worked on the novel and the exegesis, [a quiz](#) that would tell you whether you were in a wainscot or not, I even turned my major theorists into [D&D wizards](#). These fun segments were going to be placed in a kind of appendix, located at the end of an exegesis that explained my queer failure framework. This exegesis would be completely separate from the novel of course and would still resemble what Nigel Krauth calls a parallel exegesis ("Evolution of the Exegesis" 7). This version of my exegesis was the reflective "how I wrote my novel" sort of text in which "the candidate might be seen to stop being creative writer, becoming instead the more disengaged and critical humanities academic" (Krauth 7). Critical academic was the opposite of what I wanted. I wanted my exegesis to be radically subjective, less academically rigid, and more fun: how writing the novel made me feel. The parallel form of the exegesis made my novel and exegesis feel too far away from one another, like two completely separate projects instead of two texts that spoke to one another's themes and concerns. This kind of gap between artefact and exegesis forces the creative writer into playing the role of the distanced critic, Krauth argues, instead of embodying the "critic inside the process" (7).

I was delighted to learn that I wasn't alone in feeling the friction between my academic and creative personalities. My own supervisor wrote in the opening of her exegesis-turned-book that she separated herself into her research role and her creative role, with the personal role "sandwiched between both of them" (Matthews 2). Joanne Yoo writes about how she "rebel[s] against the institutional discourses that silence [her] own voice" (446) and talks about how so much academic writing is about 'writing up' data instead of engaging in the "creative meaning-making process", which renders the writing a means to an end. I wanted the process to matter as much as the content, like how resisting mastery argues that the journey itself can be enough. There are plenty of risks to embracing a non-traditional exegesis. There are still questions of how to examine a project that is woven exegesis and artefact (Krauth "Exegesis and Artefact") when as recently as 2013 there were still questions of how to examine a traditional exegesis and artefact (Brien et al). I decided to accept the risks that came with an experimental exegesis. I was *only* interested in radical subjectivity from here on: forcibly reminding you that I am the author and I exist inside and outside of my writing. I take inspiration from other creatives who have lived queer, non-linear paths, like Quinn Eades, who writes with this kind of radical subjectivity because he finds it "difficult to extricate [him]self from [his] writing" (Eades and Martin) and wants to remind people that there is a person, an *I*, behind the writing, and very specifically that the *I* is queer!

I wanted to move away from that distanced critic role and towards something else. I considered the plaited exegesis, which is when the exegesis and artefact are blended together in a kind of braided form, an "alternating, mirror-image, theory-then-fiction-then-theory" form (Krauth "Evolution of the Exegesis" 7). This appealed to me for the possibility of making the exegesis just as creative as the artefact but my novel, traditional in form, didn't lend itself to the fiction-then-theory chapter pattern. I wasn't about to bend my novel in that way, not when I'd been so practice-led about my methods so far. I turned my attention to a third option, what Krauth calls the "exegesis as outlaw" (8). There's no succinct description for this kind of exegesis except that it's experimental, meant to stretch "the laws of status quo" and "challenge existent forms" (8). Outlaw exegesis feels

like the best fit for my exegesis because it doesn't fit in the other boxes. By embedding hypertext into my novel, it's almost a whisper of a plaited exegesis, except that my segments aren't in direct conversation with the novel and aren't accessed right there in the document. They also aren't in conversation with one another, each page can be viewed independently of the others. They refuse integration and remain open to interpretation. My exegesis also isn't parallel because it's not in the form of an essay: it's broken up into individual webpages, only accessible through the novel, and while these segments are reflections on my novel and its themes, they're also a comment on the exegesis form itself.

Using hypertext (in the form of pictures of doors embedded with hyperlinks) and hypermedia webpages to link away from the novel, even while making the exegetical 'diversions' the centrepiece of the project, became a productive framework for me to express my frustrations with the academic essay and high theory and, more importantly, helped me to pin down that metaphor of breaking out of the academic closet. You and I are literally breaking out of the document (my thesis) and into the world of hypertext and hypermedia.

part iii. hypertext, the missing link

I use the definition of hypertext and hypermedia set out by George Landow in his 2005 *Hypertext 3.0*: hypertexts are blocks of text and links that connect them, and hypermedia is an extension of hypertext with includes other forms of data like audio and video (3). For example, this document is a hypertext. Links are embedded into my novel that will lead you to other segments of text. The pages that they link to are hypermedia because they utilise text, images, and video in some cases. It's important to specify that my exegesis and novel aren't hypertext fiction; a lot of scholarly work has been done on hypertext and digital fiction specifically (Alice Bell; Astrid Ensslin; N. Katherine Hayles; Stuart Moulthrop). A lot of the core principles still apply, as I'll discuss below, but hypertext fiction is, as the name suggests, a fictional story told by using networked blocks of text. The story offers

readers multiple pathways to choose from at each new block. Although my exegesis tells a story, it's not hypertext fiction in this sense.

However, if these sorts of stories interest you, there are numerous different options to check out.

Some pioneers of the genre are [Victory Garden by Stuart Moulthrop](#), [afternoon, a story by Michael Joyce](#), and [Patchwork Girl by Shelley Jackson](#). These were created with Storyspace. Twine is another tool for creating hypertext fiction specifically through web pages. Some of the notable stories from that platform are [Queers in Love at the End of the World](#) by Anna Anthropy and [Howling Dogs](#) by Porpentine. I recommend all of these: *Queers in Love at the End of the World* made me cry!

A long-standing claim of hypertext optimists is that the form "blurs the boundaries between reader and writer" (Landow 4) which ties into the ideas of Roland Barthes' ideal text (Barthes 2). Probably most well-known for his essay 'The Death of the Author', Barthes argued against the interpretation of a single, unwavering meaning "(the 'message' of the Author-God)" (146) of a text, advocating instead for a reader's ability to derive many interpretations from that text. If a text has an Author-God, he claimed, it would "impose a limit on that text" (147) and close it off to all possible other interpretations. How boring that would be! Hypertext was supposed to embody what Barthes considered the ideal text, one that got rid of the "unwelcome figure" (Brooker 8) of the author and handed power over to the reader.

Adam Hammond's *Literature in the Digital Age* details the timeline of hypertext's arc from heralding "a new democratic age" to being largely considered a dead form in the present (2016 155). Early hypertext theory was optimistic about this idea and its links to poststructuralism (Bolter 1991; Landow 1992) but there's also been a more pragmatic review of hypertext's (and specifically hypertext fiction's) potential to involve the reader and give them power over the text or story (Hammond 160-63). Even if a reader has the option of multiple pathways (hyperlinks to other webpages a la Wikipedia, or choices in a 'Choose Your Own Adventure' type story), they are still choosing from pre-written, pre-selected pathways created by the author. Hypertext may give them

some choice in what they read or don't read, but some would argue that it doesn't remove the author in the way that Barthes' ideal text envisioned.

I'm not here to argue either way. I think there's space for all these things to be true; hypertext does have the potential to be a form that is freeing, even if it doesn't live up to the expectations of the early optimists. When I'm twenty-five hyperlink clicks deep into a Wikipedia rabbit hole, I feel like I have endless choices on where to go next on my journey, while also understanding that I can only travel to pages that exist and have already been authored; I'm not creating new pages as I travel through Wikipedia, but I *am* creating my own path through the hypertext. We can't choose what lies beyond the closet, but we can choose to break out of it and forge our own path. I can't change the existence of wainscots, but I can choose to break away from the traditional use of the wainscot and forge my own narrative path in *Urban Magic*. There is still an agency created for the reader through the use of hypertext, even if the pages that they lead to have already been authored.

I appreciate the way Sam Brooker describes this relationship in his article 'Proposing, disposing, proving': that the reader is in conversation with the author in a hypertext situation. Brooker says that "selection of a link guides the reader to a particular place, and the reader asks: why am I here? What logic connects this passage to that which preceded it?" (17) He suggests that there is a leaning towards links with an ambiguous connection between destination and source because of this conversation between author and reader. He invokes Mark Bernstein's article 'On Links that Readers Don't Want to Follow': "if links lie no one will trust them, if links are candid no one will follow them" (Brooker 17). My links give clues as to what lies beyond the door but don't give all of that information up front.

Mostly I'm not going to argue either position because I purposefully used hypertext in my project in a way that does *not* embrace Barthes' idea of the ideal text. By embedding hyperlinks into my novel, I'm (almost forcefully) reminding the reader that an author exists. And isn't that what an

exegesis does? It's a little hard to divorce the author from their work when they're (often directly) commenting on their work. What my use of hypertext does, though, is refuse structure and hierarchy. It refuses to place my ideas, the sections of my exegesis, into a hierarchy and instead situates them in a network instead. The use of hypertext links, leading away from my novel to fun segments instead of chunks of essay, also gives the reader agency as they move forward. They control how they read my exegesis; they could even refuse to read it! That is the agency that I offer them through my use of hypertext.

Hypertext performs what Landow calls "decentering the text" because one of the fundamentals of hypertext is that it is groups of linked text that aren't organised in any particular hierarchy or organizational structure (58). Decentering links back to Derrida, who you'll encounter in my exegesis, as deconstruction was one of my attempted theoretical frameworks. Derrida wrote about decentering in the context of culture and European logocentrism (European culture setting itself up as the centre or most important) and said that decentering would occur when that culture stopped "considering itself as the culture of reference" (*Writing and Difference* 356). That is, when the culture stopped considering itself the centre of all things, the place that is constantly being referred back to. In hypertext, no lexia, or block of text, is prioritised over another and none of them are made out to be the centre, a place where you enter the hypertext and access all other lexias from. The idea of a hypertext is that it's a "recenterable system" (Landow 56) because the centre is going to change depending on who's doing the reading.

My project is a subversion of this idea, because I make my novel, though not part of the hypermedia exegesis itself, the centre of my hypermedia. The hyperlinks to my webpages are only accessible from the novel, the most essential element of my Creative Writing PhD. But by making the novel the centre, and prioritizing none of the links, I avoid placing the segments of my exegesis in a hierarchy. The mini chapters on post-colonialism and Derrida are just as important as the pages that contain [my booklist](#) or my [thesis proposal remix](#).

The only kind of structuring of information is when I link from one of my webpages to another page. These links act as a third layer to the exegesis (if novel is first and hyperlinked webpages are second) and, as well as embodying the nature of hypertext (clicking on links to reveal more of the information or story), they act as another kind of door that I ask the reader to walk through with me. If following the hyperlinks from the novel is the first instance of opening the closet door and jumping out, these links are a further step. I ask the reader to click on a link that will take them from the safety of the webpage (only one click away from the novel) and onwards, sometimes even to a new site like Tumblr or WordPress, to take them further down the rabbit hole and farther away from the academic closet we started in. The reader may not have a choice where that link takes them, but they do make the choice to follow that link, which I like to think puts them in conversation with me, as Brooker suggested.

My exegesis is born-digital. It was constructed to be read and experienced on a computer and through the web and would absolutely lose its aesthetic and "semiotic function" if I tried to present it in another medium (Ensslin 2022). The fact is my exegesis couldn't have taken any other form than the one it does now. It wouldn't serve the same purpose, or make the same comments on, or be able to embody the scholarly discourse and low theory if it existed in any other form. Hypertext was pivotal to the final form of my exegesis.

part iv. the webpages, a brief summary

The segments of my exegesis are all inspired by Halberstam's framework of queer failure.

Breakout page: This page was born out of the desire to do something silly but to also embrace the closet metaphor. It's a lot harder to get a door opening to a link than you think! I also love it when articles or books start with a dictionary definition of something because it's such an easy way to set the tone and theme of your text. Breaking out of the closet is my main theme across my

novel and exegesis, so it seemed only right to give a dictionary definition of what that means to me, piggybacking of a real dictionary definition of 'come out of the closet' of course! On the same wavelength, I wanted to represent the entire exegesis with a word cloud. I put every single word from every webpage into a word cloud generator and uploaded the result. My thesis is about seeking multi-modal approaches to representing my research and a word cloud is a very simple way to encapsulate the most important themes of my research in a visual way. It allows you, the examiner, to very quickly get an idea of the topics you will come across in my exegesis. Unlike an index, which can be used to the same purpose, a word cloud denies you the ability to scan the words and find the relevant pages without experiencing the whole exegesis in a more organic way.

RESIST MASTERY

Deconstruction: As well as being the inspiration for the D&D page, deconstruction was the theory which convinced me to make the mini chapters into webpages. There's a real sense of achievement you feel when you've not only read and understood what Derrida's talking about, but you can write it down and explain it to others or apply it to your work. Deconstruction was a mountain of a theory for me, and I wanted a way to convey that without falling back into the trap of the academic essay and trying to "master" everything. So, I took the information I had and put it into coloured bubbles, splitting them across the page. I added a colourful background to detract from the seriousness of Derrida, from the anxiety that surrounds his work (discussed on another of these pages). I also added a picture of my dog to drive home one of the points because that's not the kind of thing you add to your academic essay. Making the background rainbow squiggles, adding pics of my dog, and placing the text into colourful text boxes make the theory feel less serious and rigid. The important parts of the theory are still there but they're broken up, nicer to look at, and less intimidating.

Post-colonialism: The branches of post-colonialism that I followed (Edward Said, Homi. K Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, but also Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Joanne Sharp, David

Cannadine, Patrick Chabal) are probably the branches I struggled with the most, which I discuss on one of the other webpages, and it was the one I had the

most trouble putting on a

webpage. I wanted to

show that I had taken

the theory very

seriously, and greatly

respect the theorists I

read, without ignoring the

difficulties I had with it. I

was using these threads of

post-colonial theory (essentialism,

deconstruction, stereotyping, borders and boundaries) to interrogate the Eurocentric, exclusionist

nature of narrative wainscots. The background of lined paper, compared to the silly patterned

background of the deconstruction page, is meant to hint at how seriously I took it. The background

also suggests the role of a student, still taking notes in class, instead of a master. I never quite felt like

I'd mastered these threads of post-colonialism. The inclusion of some of my notes break up the

would-be-essay-format and injects a little bit of levity into the page. By breaking out of the wall of

text and including half-finished thoughts or mind maps.



Harry Potter and Post-Colonial Theory

Discussed further in my Chapter Mark-Up, *HP* is the prime example of wainscot=colonial mindset. They stereotype anyone they don't like to control their image and maintain power over them, they guard their borders fiercely and meet intrusions with force, they have a slave class for pete's sake! The house elves are a literal slave race and most of the wizarding world thinks that's cool. They prioritise whiteness, abled-ness, heterosexuality, Britishness, wealth, and class, and other forms of race (ie fullblood vs mudbloods and halfbreeds).

- **Race in Fantasy (subpage):** As suggested by one of my examiners (yes, I'm writing to you from beyond submission!), this is a page that addresses some contemporary theory on race in fantasy. As you will notice later, *Urban Magic* didn't end up engaging with post-colonialism as obviously and thoroughly as I'd imagined. It was appropriate to dig a little bit into the historically White background of fantasy, the genre I was writing in, to acknowledge the tradition that I'm adding onto. Another excellent point that the examiner made was that there was a non-academic space

where people could be having conversations about race in their favourite fantasy books, tv series, movies etc.: fandoms! I've been involved in fandoms all my adult (and much of my teenage) life, so I had to acknowledge that I was influenced a lot by what I saw and read there. I've included some scholarship on fandom studies, which acknowledges that a fandom whose genre is rooted in whiteness, may also have problems addressing race. An important addition, and I'm grateful for my examiner's suggestion!

Secret Societies: After I'd put the basic text up on this page, I knew there had to be more to it. It wasn't enough to just say that one of the books felt rigorous enough to use, or to talk briefly about Mackenzie's *Secret Societies*, but I'd been so excited when I first started writing this chapter and the webpage didn't feel representative of that excitement. I decided to utilise some of that hypermedia multilayering, giving the reader another "door" to open once they were on the page. I chose a Wordpress blog post to represent each characteristic that secret societies and wainscots share because I wanted to link to another place on the web entirely, as if taking the reader into another world. Wordpress themes are very sleek and professional looking, which I thought complimented the stylised ideas of secret societies. They're sleek and mysterious to those of us who are outsiders, even if they might look like a complete mess in reality. I liked the idea of blog posts that reveal the qualities and characteristics behind the curtain of the sleek and stylish secret societies because blogs are in opposition to the scholarly prose of academic articles and books. Anyone can start a blog and publish a blog post, they're most often written in informal language, and really exist as a form of easily consumed low culture. Blogs are a chance for readers to seize control and have their voices heard, outside of journals and websites with strict submission requirements. These stricter journals may provide a level of quality control, but they also silence voices that might otherwise have good points to make, because they don't fit the requirements. The blog entries on this page are based on the draft chapter I had written up on secret societies, with discussion points and further research I wanted to do into the real-life societies.

Chapter Mark-Up: For the chapter mark-up, I've taken the first full chapter that I completed for my original thesis idea, and I've used the version with all the feedback that my supervisor gave me on the first draft. On top of that, I've scribbled notes and answered some of her comments, without actually editing the draft itself. The notes are a mix of things that I would have done had I gone through with an edit, thoughts on why I didn't do things I wanted to do, and some are thoughts on the process of writing the chapter. By making these notes on the draft instead of editing it directly, I'm revealing the messy process of the work and foregrounding the outlaw nature of failure. The traditional idea of the process is to edit and perfect, to take or leave the feedback, but to make the comments disappear, and for the end result to look like it was always polished: a success. The draft I submit via the hypertext shows my ideas in their raw, unpolished form, and my supervisor's notes are a testament to the things that didn't work or needed to be fixed, and a nod to the fact that scholarship never happens in isolation! Whether there's a direct exchange of ideas or collaboration through feedback, these projects are never truly a lone venture. My notes are an exploration of what I really wanted to say, how I reacted to my feedback, and why I ultimately didn't use the chapter in the 'normal' academic way.

Thesis Proposal Remix: This was included because my supervisor initially suggested including my original thesis proposal and all of the remixes I'd done over the length of the project (there's a few!) I included this iteration because it was one that she had asked me to write, to resituate myself and get motivated again about what had originally interested me in the subject. It's close enough to my original thesis proposal that it still has the original three chapters in the plan: post-colonialism, portal vs intrusion fantasy (as seen in Mendlesohn; discussed on some of my other pages), and deconstruction. It's fascinating to look back at a plan like this and see how everything changed. Even then I was thinking about portals and doors, about how wainscots are represented as exciting, wonderful worlds that you enter through a portal, and any magic that isn't based in a society, with its powers and protections, is representative of intrusion fantasy. At its core, this page is another on-the-nose example of resisting mastery: it is thoughts on a page, no less important because they

aren't written up in an essay format yet, they represent the messy process instead of the polished finish. Knowledge is about practice, about doing something and then doing it again but better, and this thesis is about taking all of those steps out of the closet and laying them bare, showing how many times and different ways knowledge can be shared before we find the "perfect" way to present it.

PRIVILEGE NAIVETY

Quiz: The wainscot quiz came out of a desire to have a sorting-hat-style quiz, and also because my friend group loves uquiz.com. We're constantly sending each other ['Which -core aesthetic are you?'](#) (fairy core), ['What type of ghost are you?'](#) (death echo), and the most recent, ['What type of zoo enclosure should you be kept in?'](#) (open sea exhibit). I wanted to incorporate the research I'd done into secret societies and their similarities to wainscots but instead of more walls of text, I wanted to make it fun! So, the idea was born to create a quiz that would tell you whether you belonged to a wainscot or not, with the understanding that the likelihood of anyone getting the 'yes' option was low. I started out by writing out a series of questions, based on Norman Mackenzie's *Secret Societies* and his discussion of the similarities across real-world societies. As I created the questions, I realised I could put examples from the close readings that I'd done, which would actually make the questions easier to understand. Asking about how secret your society is on a scale of not-secret to super-secret makes a lot more sense when you can use Harry Potter as a yardstick. The main point of the quiz is that in the results, the result that claims 'Yes! You belong to a wainscot' also notes that you might be part of a cult. The point is that wainscots are similar to cults and real-world societies, which isn't necessarily a good thing!

D&D: I decided to take the theorists that I researched extensively and turn them into D&D characters with stat blocks. D&D is close to my heart; it is something I bond over with my little brother; it brought me my close-knit group of friends; and it combines two of my absolute favourite

things: games and storytelling. By turning these theorists, who each have complex theories under their belt, and turning them into wizards with game-accurate mechanics and powers, I wanted to show that the information could be displayed in a way that wasn't simply a wall of text. It might seem like a ridiculous move to some; when I told my friends my idea, they thought it was brilliant and fun. We play to learn when we're kids, so why do we abandon that when we become adults? In academia, it's because we're chasing that seriousness that makes us feel legitimate. The desire to be taken seriously makes us serious, even when fun and play might convey our information in a new and better way. In his final work, Bernard De Koven (a game designer and fun theorist) emphasised how play can unlock our imaginations and "[bring] us close to something like pure possibility" (39). His book is rich in games that he invites us to play, some alone and some with others, but as well as being about embracing fun and imagination, they're also about something else entirely. As Jesper Juul tells us in one section of the introduction to *The Infinite Playground: A Player's Guide to Imagination*, Koven's games are about:

...relating to social anxieties; being or not being part of a group: learning new languages with secret meanings; taking off your shoes; the intensity of rational planning followed by a breakdown of plans; being caught; all the people with their guarded fences becoming one. (11)

Koven's games are able to do this because he takes fun so seriously and understands the potential of play. Further explanations of what I did to create my stat blocks, and how the work of each theorist was carefully considered, are included with the stat blocks themselves. Even though they're designed as NPCs and not player characters, the possibility of inhabiting these theorists as D&D characters breaks down the seemingly infinite distance between you and them. Derrida is a lot less scary when you can imagine being his fictional, wizard counterpart. It demolishes the door that keeps us separate from them, inviting us to play in a space where you can wield the power of deconstruction as a tangible, physical force. I felt closer to these theorists after breaking down the

reverent distance that's created when I was only engaging with their work through pages and pages of text.

Playlists: This is one of those pages that's about radical subjectivity. I am aggressively reminding the reader that this novel and its exegesis have an author, an author who likes to listen to music or watch YouTube videos while they're working. Ideally the reader actually hits play on one of these playlists and listens to the music while they read the novel and its exegesis. The musical playlists introduce a kind of emotionality to the scene, especially given that the first Spotify playlist is chill and relaxed, and the second Spotify playlist is the opposite. They represent the emotional journey of my PhD, which is far from objective. The inclusion of podcasts and D&D actual play shows are a highly personal touch, in line with the radical subjective I was chasing, but also a reminder that there's a world outside of the PhD. Even while I was stressing and working hard, I found joy in my hobbies, all of which contributed to my eventual exegesis. My love of D&D inspired the stat blocks, my love of video games tied in easily with the concept of pushing forward after failure.

Urban Fantasy Recipes: Experimenting with the urban fantasy genre was the primary, original inspiration for my novel and it seems only fitting that it has an entire webpage to itself. I use the page to establish my definition of the urban fantasy genre, especially since it may differ from the more common definition of urban fantasy, which is often just mixed up or conflated with modern fantasy. I use this page to discuss the existing scholarship on the genre, eventually landing on the definition that the Unseen is absolutely key to the genre and is its defining characteristic. I go on to talk about the trope of the Masquerade, which is this idea of the 'unseen', and why it exists to engage our suspension of disbelief. I wanted to take the time to show how much I love and respect the genre of urban fantasy, even while I was challenging its key characteristic in my novel by removing the Masquerade, because I believe that you have to understand something before you can break or transform it. Once I realised that I was talking about the building blocks, or ingredients, of urban fantasy, it only made sense to turn each scholar's definition of urban fantasy into a recipe. I

love cooking, and I've read a lot of recipes in my time. It was fun to decide which element would be an ingredient, and which would fall under directions. Cooking exists as high and low culture: taste.com may not be considered highbrow cooking but it's easy to access, full of recipes for someone without the skills of a trained chef, and anyone is able to submit a recipe for the website. It can be up to you, the reader, to sort through recipes and find the one that works best for you. I feel this way about defining genre: sometimes you have to find what works best for you and the people you're trying to feed! The high culture of cooking tends to be passed on through professional, published cookbooks and put-together cooking shows, or even a paid masterclass (with the likes of Gordon Ramsay, Niki Nakayama, and Wolfgang Puck!) This, in contrast with the low culture of recipes passed down through families: they're no less amazing for not being in a published cookbook. I'd reach for my grandma's cookie recipe before I used one off a cooking show.

- **Young Adult Fiction (subpage):** Another suggestion from my examiner (hello again from beyond submission!), I wanted to acknowledge that urban fantasy isn't the only genre that my novel belongs to. *Urban Magic* was written with a young adult audience in mind, even if it's the tail end of that age group. This page is a short appreciation of the YA genre, an exploration of why my novel fits the genre, and how the genre conventions affected the way I wrote the story.

Wainscots: In a similar vein, since wainscots are so fundamental to my novel and exegesis, I wanted to take an entire webpage to establish what they are and how they operate to help expand on the choices I made for my novel. The wainscot is one half of the metaphor underlying my entire thesis, so I wanted the space to really extrapolate what they are, why they are, and what frustrated me enough to write the novel that I did. I use the page to describe what a wainscot is, giving examples such as *Harry Potter's* wizarding world and the world in Mary Norton's *The Borrowers*. I discuss the ways that wainscots are often introduced to make a social critique in a story, usually with the wainscot in the Term B spot (as the oppressed half of the binary) and argue that the wainscots

I'm talking about are the opposite. They're in positions of power, damnit! This leads to my explanation of how I dealt with the wainscot in *Urban Magic*, by removing its secrecy and making it assimilate with the mainstream culture of our world. I also discuss a few examples of stories (*Mercy Thompson series, Sookie Stackhouse Mysteries, Artemis Fowl*) that have done this as well, removing the secrecy of the Masquerade to reveal the supernatural/magical to the greater world, and emphasise the ways in which my novel is different (mostly because I don't use magical creatures as racial allegories).

High Theory and Why It Didn't Work For Me: The pages above (Deconstruction, Post-Colonial, and Secret Societies) establish the kind of theory that I was working with for the majority of my project, and this page breaks down why each theory didn't work for me specifically. I've broken these down into three blog posts, one for each area of theory. I wanted to address my failure with each area specifically because while it was happening, it really did feel like I failed with each theory one after the other. The blogging format is meant to elicit that feeling of reading a person's blog, less personal than a journal but still casual enough for anyone to read. Anyone can try out a theory and find it doesn't work for them!

SUSPECT MEMORIALISATION

Choose Your Own: The 'Choose Your Own Adventure' is my answer to a novel writing timeline, or a lengthier explanation of my writing process. I envy writers who can easily answer questions about their process; mine is a mess. By the time I came to recall my process, it had been so long since I had written my novel, I knew I couldn't recall it faithfully. Instead of trying to do that or inventing something to fit a nice neat and tidy explanation, I decided to turn my representation of process into a Choose Your Own Adventure narrative. It starts out with the goal of writing a novel for your (my) PhD, and quickly branches off into all sorts of options. Most of these things happened in one way or another. Some of them have been exaggerated, given more importance than they

actually had in the real timeline of events, but with the exception of some of the endings, the options all happened in some capacity. By refusing to adhere to a strict timeline, strict motivations for each of my choices, and no clear 'true' ending, I also refuse to rely on memory. Funnily enough, this segment of my exegesis *is* a hypertext fiction, even if it's very basic and posted on Tumblr instead of a hypertext fiction specific program like Twine. I liked the idea of a nonlinear story to tell the tale of writing my thesis: it felt like the most honest way to tell a five-year story that I can't always keep straight in my head.

Booklist: "Book" list is kind of a misnomer. I consumed a lot of media when I was considering which wainscot texts to focus on in my original exegesis and I kept notes as I went. Instead of pretending that I had always been settled on *Harry Potter*, *The Magicians*, *Vampire Academy*, and *The Mortal Instruments* as case studies to interrogate, this booklist shows the messier history of data collection. The titles link to informational pages about each media in case the reader wants to explore any of them further (or double check that I know what I'm talking about). This page is as much about making my learning visible as it is showing off my list of relevant media. Reading is so important in scholarship, the scale of which often goes unseen. This is about bringing that unseen journey to the surface, like forcing the unseen wainscot from its closet, to show the invisible actions going on behind the scenes. The exegesis is about proving that the work was done behind the creative artefact, and this booklist shows the work. It was also a joy to be able to use hypertext to link out into the webosphere, instead of hiding that information in a reference list; instead of having to scroll down to the bottom of the page, the link is right there where the information is.

Zombies: Think of this page as a fun 'what if?' It explores the inspiration for my novel before it was really a novel, when it was just a twinkle in my eye. I like to think that this page is representative of the flow of the creative process, unlike other pages, showing the changeable nature of research and theory. There were several points of inspiration for my novel and if I had pursued the zombie/genre angle to exclusion of all else, I would have a vastly different PhD today. I

don't think I would have gotten as stuck as I did with the high theory, leading me to frustration and the need to resist convention. There is a spectre of a zombie throughout my exegesis, inhabiting the abandoned works and ideas that haunted me throughout my project. These segments rose from the dead with my new, outlaw exegesis, and now you will also confront them. It also ties in with the themes of my Choose Your Own Adventure, which is that the events of a project's timeline can sometimes be fuzzy, especially when it's taken as many twists and turns as mine has. This page engages in the "forgetting" of suspecting memorialisation, choosing to forget that I chose to focus on closets and exclusivity as my inspiration for my novel, instead imagining a world where I focused on zombies, genre, and the integration of technology into cultures that have been changed by world-wide events. I didn't pursue this angle because it didn't feel scholarly enough to me. An exegesis that just discussed my genre-based inspiration for *Urban Magic* didn't seem like it would hold up against the rubric, but now I think of all the other paths I could have gone down if I'd stuck with this: how genres effect other genres, the growing role of technology in urban fantasies i.e. how do we create suspension of disbelief given all the new forms of surveillance technology in the world?, urban fantasy through the years as a parallel to zombie stories through the years... All of these paths won't be taken because of my fear of being unscholarly and illegitimate in my practice. I wanted to acknowledge that and honour the paths that could have been.

DOOR PLACEMENT

The door placement throughout my novel was not originally purposeful. I tried to place one door per chapter, to spread them out and make the process less overwhelming for the reader. Beyond that, I thought it would be fun to randomly string them through the novel (except for the Breakout and Exit pages, at the beginning and end). One of my examiners suggested that it would be better for their placement to be intentional, as well as more disruptive to the actual novel. I couldn't have agreed more!

I reordered the doors and moved them around. For example, the door that links to the Failure page is located on the page with Sam and her dad's talking about her rejection letter from the army, and the door to the D&D webpage is located near a D&D mention in the novel. I added silly Word Art and text boxes near the doors that give clues (and in some places, outright spoilers) to what the linked webpage entails. They look even more out of place in the middle of paragraphs of story and I think that's fantastic.

I've also done this to address something that my other examiner noted: the doors only go one way. Once the reader ends up on a webpage, they must navigate their way back to the novel and this can prove difficult. Even though I want the doors to be disruptive, I also want them to be accessible. Unfortunately, I couldn't find a way to link from my webpages back to the document. My next best idea was to put the page number of the door at the bottom of the webpage, so that at the very least, the reader can navigate back to the page of the novel that the door is on.

part v. moving forward

The way I see it, you have three options as you go forward and read *Urban Magic*. You can:

- Read the novel in its entirety, then come back and click on the doors to explore my webpages.
- Go through and click on all the doors first, then come back and read the novel.
- Read through the novel and click on the doors to experience the webpages as you move through *Urban Magic*.
- (As a secret fourth option, there is a list of all the webpages at the end of the novel: [click here](#) to go straight there).

I wanted to give you the agency to choose your own path. In a project that's all about breaking out and doing it different, I'm definitely not going to closet *your* experience. Like a hypertext fiction or a Choose Your Own Adventure, each path carries its own benefits. By reading the

entire novel first, you'll have the full plot and themes in your mind as you navigate through my exegesis. By exploring the webpages first, you'll have a full idea of my research, theories, and conclusions before you dive into the novel. And if you choose to experience the webpages as you read through the novel, you'll have the opportunity to pause and reflect on each segment between bursts of plot and character interaction.

I'm going to leave the choice up to you. You'll know best which option your brain and style of reading lean towards. I want you to experience *Urban Magic* and its exegesis in the way that feels most accessible and inclusive to you.

And me? Well, I'm out now. I'll see you on the other side of the door.

Urban Magic

Prologue

Raindrops blurred the suburbs into a soft kaleidoscope of streetlamps and neon light. The torrent spilled over the sorcerer yet none of the drops seemed to touch him. A thin barrier was visible around him, illuminated by the city lights surrounding the rooftop, where the rain hit and bounced away. He didn't notice the rain, or he was ignoring it, as he marked lines on the ground in chalk. He crouched in the middle of a white circle, etching symbols onto the concrete below when a flash of lightning struck the rooftop. The electricity crackled past his ear. He lifted his head and turned wildly to look behind him.

A woman stood there, her eyes alight and charged with the lightning that had signalled her arrival.

"I won't let you do this, Aaipus!" Her voice was magnified, heard even over the thundering sound of the rain.

"You can't stop me!" He made one final mark on the ground and then stood up to face her. The water paused mid-air, shuddered, and then continued falling again as he began to chant, his hands pointed down at the ground below him. The lines of chalk that he had drawn began to glow, the symbols following soon after. The rain seemed to angle towards him at the centre of the circle and still he remained dry.

His chanting was cut off mid-vowel when the woman crashed into him, tackling him to the ground. Aaipus hit the concrete with a snap of his arm. The barrier that surrounded him faltered and his coat began to soak with the rain for the first time. His fist swung towards the woman. It smacked into her jaw with a flash of purple light. He started to chant again. She cried out and retaliated. Her open palm slapped down onto his chest. His body convulsed beneath her, but his chanting only stopped for a second.

Aaipus took hold of her arm. Bright white energy swirled up from his elbow and shot into her hand. The light spiralled viciously up her arm and enveloped her chest. She flew backwards and landed a few feet away, sprawled on the concrete.

Aaipus pulled himself to his feet and stood in the middle of the circle. The light of the chalk markings was getting brighter, to the point of illuminating the entire rooftop.

"It's too late, Riva!" he shouted.

As she slowly got to her feet, the ground below them burst open with a light so bright that they both had to turn and shield their eyes.

When the spell ended, Aaipus was still standing in the middle of the circle, staring down at his hands.

"Aaipus — let's talk about this." Riva reached a hand towards him.

"I don't feel any different," he mumbled in response, clenching his hands into fists. "It—it didn't work."

"What?" Riva looked him over in confusion, then her gaze fell to the chalk circle that surrounded him. "Is that — ?"

She was pointing at one of the symbols, a triangle with words on each of its sides. Her finger drew Aaipus' attention to the side that read *ipsum*.

"You idiot!" Riva screeched. She crouched down to run her fingers over the symbol.

"What?" Aaipus demanded. "What?!"

Riva pointed to the word again. "You used the wrong pronoun, you imbecile! God, why didn't you ever pay attention in Latin class?"

He blinked. "What does that mean?"

Riva shook her head. She placed her palm flat on the concrete and closed her eyes. She paused there for the span of a few breaths and then opened her eyes again, fixing Aaipus with a withering stare.

"It means that your spell worked, *genius*," she explained. "But instead of gaining access to all of magic for yourself, you've opened it for the whole goddamn world!"

Aaipus's eyes slowly widened until they looked like they might pop out of his face. "Oh, fuck."



Chapter 1

The streak of lightning barely missed her head. It whizzed past her right ear and hit a light pole ahead of her instead, causing the light to shatter. Glass burst overhead but she kept running. There were many things that Sam Haid liked doing on a Friday afternoon; running from a street gang was not on that list.

Her heart was pounding and she could feel the sweat collecting on her brow. Neither of these sensations compared to the fury that she directed at her best friend.

"Avi, I'm going to *kill you!*"

Avi just laughed breathily, grabbing her hand and pulling her down the street with him.

"Not if they get us first!" he replied, just as lightning crackled past them again, narrowly missing their joined hands.

Sam took the risk of looking over her shoulder to see behind them. She could just make out a person at the other end of the street: a boy with his hand stretched out in front of him.

"We need to move faster," she urged. She turned back to look at Avi just as he pulled into her into the next street. It was less of a street and more of an alley, with cars parked up one side of the road and the wall opposite them. There was nowhere to run; their pursuers were definitely going to catch up with them before they could make it to the other end of the alley. Sam was left with only one option. She rounded on Avi.

"What did you *do?*" she demanded.

Avi didn't answer. He was too busy pulling a piece of chalk out of his pocket and leaning down to draw something on the ground.

"I better not be dying for anything superficial," she warned him.

He looked up at her and grinned, and then looked back down to finish whatever he was drawing. When he was done, he reached for her hand.

"C'mon Sam," he said. "I'm gonna need your help."

She looked past him at the symbols that he had drawn onto the concrete below and groaned. "You know I'm no good under pressure, Avi. One twitch and we'll be visible—" she froze when she heard noises coming from the end of the alley. *No time like the present to try*, she decided.

She squeezed Avi's hand and focused all of her energy on the images that he had drawn below them. She pictured both of them blending into the concrete and brick around them, safe and hidden from whoever was chasing them. Beside her, Avi was muttering words that she couldn't understand. Sam tried to keep her focus on her own energy.

Three boys came running down the alley. Sam recognised one of them as the boy who'd been throwing lightning at them, but she didn't know the other two. All three went speeding past them without pause. Beside her, Sam knew that Avi was grinning.

"Where'd they go?" Lightning Boy asked, looking up and down the alley.

"No way they teleported," another one answered him. "Would've left a mark."

Now that they were close up, and she wasn't running for her life, Sam could see that he held a crystal with string tied around it. A tracking device? She wondered if they'd gotten close enough to Avi to swipe something of his; even a hair would work.

"The guy wasn't powerful enough," the third boy added. "Don't know about the other one. Let's move."

The others seemed to agree with him because moments later they were headed away from Sam and Avi and down towards the other end of the alley. Sam turned to smile at Avi, who reached up

with his free hand to give her a thumbs up. She looked back towards their assailants, who were at the other end of the alley now. She squeezed Avi's hand.

That was when something exploded at their feet. Sam looked down to see that one of the chalk symbols had burst into flames. The trio had stopped and turned. She could see the moment that they realised what had happened, because they came barrelling down the alley towards her and Avi again.

"Ah, shit!" she yelled, and pulled Avi out the way they'd come. "I told you I'm no good under pressure!"

"We needed to try something!" he cried, eyes wide with panic now. She wanted to sock him in the mouth for only starting to worry at this point of the proceedings.

At the exit from the alley, Sam let go of Avi's hand. She planted her feet firmly on the ground with her hands reaching out to the concrete beneath her. Focusing all of her energy below, she drew power from the surroundings and from the ground itself. She could feel the various sources of magic coalescing at her will, twisting and forming into something else. She only had to push a little further...

"Uh Sam..." Avi said. "They're coming."

"One second..." she gritted through her teeth. She could hear their running steps approaching. One of them was yelling commands at the others. Lightning flew past her. The smell of burnt hair filled her nostrils. She looked up. The trio were still running towards her. Their hands were raised. Ready for battle.

"Sam!" Avi yelled.

"Devoro. Swallow them."

Sam dropped to her knees and smacked her hands on the concrete. The second that the trio's feet hit the ground in front of her, they stopped. Where they had stepped, the ground had opened up and swallowed their feet. They were trapped in a foot of cement and looking at each other in bewilderment. With their focus momentarily occupied, Sam took the opportunity to leap up and grab Avi's hand again.

"Let's get out of here before they figure out how to escape," she urged him. "Or before the spell fails." She started pulling him in the direction of home. Lightning Boy already looked like he was ready to blow up the whole alley just to get to them. Avi snapped out of his daze and nodded, matching her speed so that they could run away from the alley. Neither of them stopped to look back until they were on Sam's front porch.

Magical kids running around

your



city?

Find out why!

"You going to explain what the hell that was?" Sam asked as she rummaged around in her coat pocket.

"THAT was *amazing!*" Avi buzzed and gesticulated wildly. "I've never seen you do that before. What was the inspiration? What was that incantation you used?"

"There's no way we were going to outrun them," she explained, making a small 'aha' noise and pulling a set of keys from one of her pockets. "We needed to slow them down instead. And I couldn't think of that word for 'pull down', you know? So I went with *devoro*. Like, swallow."

"It'd be *kheenchna* in Hindi," Avi said. He followed her through the door once she'd opened it. "I think. Anyway, I'm ready for a nap. You must be buggered." He flopped down onto the couch which sat in the middle of the living room, looking up at Sam expectantly.

"I am a bit," she admitted. She plopped down next to him, turning so that she could lift her legs up and lean back against his shoulder. She was short enough that her feet barely hung over the edge of the couch. "And whose fault is that?"

Avi didn't sound even a little bit ashamed when he replied: "Me. Now, do you want to see what we risked our lives for or not?"

Sam nodded. "This had better be good, Katil," she threatened. However, the way that she had relaxed into the couch and against his frame belayed that threat.

His fingers were dragging into his pocket, his elbow hitting her in the back, but before she could open her mouth to complain, he was dangling something in front of her face.

She blinked at it once. Twice. "You risked our necks for a damn necklace?"

She wouldn't deny that it was a nice necklace. A pretty silver chain and oddly shaped pendant containing a red stone. She was just a little adverse to getting zapped because Avi wanted some jewellery.

"Not just any old damn necklace," he informed her, letting it drop onto her chest. She could feel the warmth radiating from it. "Go on, pick it up."

Sam made a face but reached to take the pendant. She felt it immediately; a kind of thrum of power that belied an item imbued with magic. There were a lot of magical items in the world though,

either because they had always possessed natural magic or because something had imbued it with magic, and then any old person could use it. This pendant was putting out a little more magic than your average magic-endowed object though, Sam noticed.

"What is it?" she asked, turning it over in her fingers. Just holding it in her hand was making her feel more energised.

"No idea," Avi replied. "I was supposed to be trading it for a couple of potions."

"And they didn't want the potions?"

"Oh, no, they took the potions," he said. She could hear the irritation in his voice.

She guessed the end of the story. "But they didn't want to pay you?"

"Nope." He held out his hand and Sam dropped the necklace into it. "They tried to kick me out and said something about the quality of the product. So I grabbed the necklace and ran."

"Forgetting that you'd left your best friend one street away," she continued for him. She pushed herself up into a sitting position and turned to look at him. "What are you doing making deals with street gangs?"

"They're not really a street gang," Avi told her, sounding exasperated. "We went to high school with one of them. They're just a little... severe in their methods."

Sam raised an eyebrow pointedly. "They were ready to zap us and leave us in that alley. Promise me you won't try and deal with them again. No matter what they offer you."

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, Mother."

She reached out to grab his hand, which made him go still. "I mean it, Avi. Even if they don't get you killed, Dad says they're really trying to come down hard on street magic." She could see him thinking, but he still didn't look convinced. "Talk to him if you don't believe me. Don't make my dad arrest you, okay?"

His lips were pursed together in a tight line. "Yeah, alright. No more talking to guys who look like they'd zap us and leave us in an alley."

Sam's eyes narrowed.

Avi laughed. "I heard you, Sam. I get it. No more operations that could, when examined closely, be mistaken as illegal."

"Good. Now let's order pizza. I don't want to cook, and Pop said you're not allowed to touch the oven anymore."

"That was one time!"

NATURAL MAGICAL USER — APPLICATION FOR ARMED FORCES, ENTRY LEVEL 1

Name: Samantha Haid

D.O.B: 03/01/2019

Parents: Michael Haid and Gabriel Haid

Assigned Magic Level: 2

Are you currently responsible for any familiars? No

Police Check: Attached. Clear.

Highest level of education completed? College.

This position may require you to engage with other magic users in a forceful manner. How would you handle this? The law is the law, natural magic user or not.

Is there any reason that you may not be fit for service? A reminder that medical, psychological, and magical examinations will be carried out if you are contacted for an interview. Failure to disclose any such issues will result in immediate rejection of your application. Minor complications with heavy

concentration spells. Best case scenario involves failure of the spell, worst case has involved setting a classroom on fire. I know I can get control of this with more practice though, and I think the army is the best environment to do this.

Miss Haid,

I regret to inform you that your application to join our summer training intake has been declined.

Despite your appropriate qualifications, we are not in a position to accept you based on complications with controlling magic. We thank you for disclosing this issue, but we require a high standard of control from our natural magic applicants.

If you were to receive training and improve in this area, we would be more than happy to consider a second application.

Yours sincerely,

Charles D. Luckey

Lieutenant General, Australian Army

Chief of Army Reserve

Chapter 2

Sam woke in waves. The alarm clock that her parents had bought her was sending out gentle bursts of magic that woke her slowly instead of all at once, unlike the old alarm clocks. She remembered waking violently to digital shrieks and it was not an experience she was keen to repeat.

"Off," she mumbled, when she was conscious enough. The bursts of magic kept coming.

"Off," she repeated, a little louder. Stronger bursts now.

"Off!" She sat up and glared at the alarm clock. The waves stopped. She sighed with relief. The alarm clock sparked and turned off.

Sam groaned and fell back into her pillows with a dramatic thump, shaking her head.

After she'd showered, dressed, and packed her bag for work, she headed downstairs. She walked into the kitchen to find her parents already awake and eating breakfast.

"Bit early for you two to be awake," she said, heading straight to the cupboard to pull out a box of cereal.

Michael Haid, a tall man with brown hair like Sam's and a kind face, tapped the tie he had on over his dress shirt. He was greying at the temples and had laugh lines at the corners of his eyes. "Got called to come into the office about twenty minutes ago."

Sam made a face as she pulled the milk from the fridge. "On a Saturday? Pop— tell him he needs to take the *whole* weekend off, not just a few hours on a Sunday."

Gabriel Haid was a smaller man than his husband, with brown skin and dark black hair, accompanied by the beginnings of a beard. He was still in slacks and the crumpled t-shirt he had obviously slept in. "If I haven't been able to convince him of that in the last twenty-five years, I'm hardly going to be able to do it in the next half an hour."

"You know they don't have a lot of natural magic users that will work with the police," Michael sighed, taking a sip of his coffee. "Trent's on holiday with the family, and they've already got Louise working on a string of robberies."

"We know, love," Gabriel said gently. "It'd just be nice to see you take a few days off. They work you like a dog."

Michael shrugged. "Someone's gotta do it. You can't track magic without magic. Besides, how much work are you planning on avoiding today?"

Sam, who had been listening to this exchange while she shovelled her breakfast into her mouth as quickly as possible, let out a noise of concern. "Pop?" she inquired through a mouth full of cornflakes.

Gabriel looked entirely guilty. "It's just one case. I want to be as prepared as possible. It won't take me long. An hour. Two maybe."

"So, you'll be locked in the study for hours," Michael said.

"You two are the *worst*," Sam said, dumping her bowl in the sink. "You can't even take one whole weekend off together. You're public servant stereotypes and I refuse to spend another minute with you." She grabbed her drink bottle from the bench and left the kitchen. "Oh, D&D was cancelled so I'll be home for dinner."

"Have a good day," her dads said in unison.

Sam stuck her head back around the corner and saluted them.

"Tell your aunt hello for me," Michael added, just as Sam was closing the door behind her.

The walk to work was only ten minutes for Sam.

The Haid's home was in a fairly good Sydney neighbourhood, one that was well known for being filled with mostly natural magic users. Sam had only had one or two neighbours that she could recall being non-NMUs, and they had mostly kept to themselves. The neighbourhood was full of magic shops; not necessarily the shops for magic (though there were one or two of those) but normal shops that were run by magic-using folks and therefore more often than not contained enchanted products.

The only problem with that, Sam mused, was that store owners had to be careful about what products they enchanted. She passed by a fruit stand outside of the local produce store with a large sign that said MAY CONTAIN TRACES OF MAGIC. There were laws and restrictions around enchanting food and store owners had to make it very clear as to what had been grown with magic and what hadn't.

The restrictions had been in place ever since the first major incident. An NMU barista had sprinkled a small amount of luck magic into a customer's coffee. When they'd drunk their beverage, they'd had a severe allergic reaction and died at the scene.

The small percentage of people who were against magic had experienced an increase of support due to that incident, but everything had calmed down once the laws were put in place. At least in Australia. Sam couldn't speak for other countries. She only knew about the incident because she'd taken one magical law class in college.

Seeing a busker up ahead of her on the side of the street, the magic sparking at his fingertips and creating a morning light show, Sam dug into her pocket and produced a five dollar note. She dropped it into the busker's hat as she passed, and he set off a small sparkler above her head as she walked on. It was only another few minutes to work.

Sam worked at her aunt's magic store, one of the most well known in the area. She'd seen her aunt perform some pretty impressive enchantments, and her products were always top quality. The

shop itself was built onto the front of her aunt's house, a large three-bedroom bungalow that her aunt liked to claim she paid a pretty penny and a whole lot of magic for.

Sam pushed open the door and felt the burst of magic that the alarm on the door sent out, letting whoever was inside know that someone had come into the shop.

"Is that you, Sam?" Sam's aunt called from somewhere inside the shop.

"Yeah, it's me!" Sam made her way through the store towards the counter. It looked ordinary enough; shelves and counters covered in objects, not exactly organised but clean enough that things could be found if you knew where to look.

Sam dropped her bag behind the counter and settled onto the stool that was just low enough for her to get onto. She reached out to grab one of the magazines on the counter, opening it up to flick through the articles. *Football Player Found to be Taking Magical Steroids* and *Five Spells to Get Over Your Boyfriend* were the top stories.

"There you are!" Her aunt appeared next to her.

Her aunt was a tall woman (something that Sam hadn't received via genetics, to her irritation) with shoulder length brown hair and arms that were covered in tattoos. She also had a few rune tattoos on her shoulders that weren't currently visible.

"Hey Jaime," Sam greeted her. "Dad says hi."

Jaime raised an eyebrow. "Oh, does he now?"

"There was no secret message attached to the hi," Sam informed her.

"No reminder to stop illegal activity and return to the life of law-abiding boredom?"

"Not even a hint."

"Small miracles," Jaime shook her head with a chuckle. She reached down to lift a box from the floor and place it on the counter. "New shipment of that book. They sent me forty copies instead of twenty. This is one of two very heavy boxes."

Sam eyed the box with barely concealed disdain. "*The Thirty Easy Love Spells?*"

Jaime nodded. "Be a dear and shelve this box?"

"Yeah, course." Sam put down the magazine and slipped off the stool, pulling a few of the books out of the box. "I can't believe this crap sells so well. Everyone knows love spells don't work."

"AMUs want to be able to convince themselves that they can manipulate magic as well as we can," Jaime replied, taking Sam's seat. "A lot of them will buy anything that makes them feel like they can."

"Waste of their time and money," Sam shook her head as she started shelving the books.

"But money for me," Jaime said. "Speaking of; what time is Mr Katil getting here?"

"He said he'd be here by 10."

"Good." Jaime sighed in exasperation. "I swear, it's like I'm paying that boy to sleep the morning away."

"We had kind of a big afternoon yesterday," Sam said. "But he said he'd be here."

"A big afternoon, huh?" Jaime asked, and Sam could hear the suggestion of *tell me* in her aunt's tone.

"Avi got us chased by a gang that he's been making potions for," she explained, not turning her attention from her task while she spoke.

Jaime made an encouraging noise, so Sam told her the whole story.

"And that's when he thought it would be a good idea to try an invisibility spell. On *both* of us."

"I thought you had trouble with high concentration spells like that," Jaime said. Her tone was kind but blunt, in the way that it usually was when they talked about Sam's troubles with magic.

Sam turned to throw her aunt a look. "I do."

"Ah, I see."

"So when that didn't work," she continued, "I made them sink into the ground." She pushed the last book from her pile into place and then moved to get another armful of books.

"You —what? Where did you learn how to do that?"

"I didn't, really." Sam put the pile of books down and stared at them thoughtfully. "I told the ground to swallow them, then I cut the spell off when they were down to their knees in concrete."

"That must have taken a lot of concentration," Jaime said pointedly. "To cut the spell off where you wanted."

"I actually wanted it to cut off when they were ankle deep," Sam admitted, turning to smile sheepishly at her. "But I wasn't quick enough, I guess. So— it was a little bit deeper than intended."

"Still, it was quick thinking. I'm impressed."

Sam's head snapped in the direction of her aunt. "Don't tell my dads."

Jaime snorted. "And give the officer and the lawyer twin heart attacks? I think not." She shook her head. "I've had my fair share of street fights, sometimes in buildings too. As long as you made it out and didn't get caught fighting on the street with your magic. Even your dads couldn't get you out of that one."

Sam winced but nodded in agreement. "Avi said he'd find other people to sell to. Someone more legal."

"I'm glad," Jaime said, moving to help Sam shelve the last of the books. "We've got enough illegal activity going on around here as it is."

A burst of magic echoed through the store at that moment, and a fresh-faced Avi entered the shop. His dark brown hair was tied into a loose bun with a few strands falling out at the front that looked like they might be accidental, but Sam knew were strategically placed.

"Ah, Mr Katil. Glad to see you could join us," Jaime said when she saw him. "Even if you're two hours later than you said you'd be."

"Sorry, Jaime," Avi said, looking shamefaced.

Sam came to stand next to her aunt, looking Avi up and down. He'd shaved and was wearing clean jeans, which told her that he had at least remembered that he had work today. "Keep this up and my word about you is going to mean nothing," she accused him, but she couldn't help the smile that came at the sight of him.

Avi shrugged. "Sorry to be late. It's just that I was trying to find..." he opened the door and motioned to two large bags that were sitting on the front step. "That awesome cat food that you like."

Jaime put her hands on her hips and eyed Avi speculatively. "And how much did you pay for this cat food?"

That made him grin. "Half the retail price, oh benevolent employer of mine."

Jaime's expression broke into a grin, and she stepped forward to clap Avi on the shoulder. "Fine work as usual, Avi." She reached past him to turn the OPEN sign on the door to CLOSED. "Now help me take them out back. It's feeding time anyway. Sam, open the doors for us."

Sam raised her hand in a salute before making her way to the back of the store to open the door that led into her aunt's house. She waited there until Avi and Jaime had carried the two bags of cat food through and into the house before she joined them.

The house itself wasn't anything special; red and the occasional white walls, a corridor that led to the bedrooms, study and bathroom, a living room and kitchen. Jaime had lived in this house as long as Sam could remember, and she felt like she could walk the house blindfolded if she needed to, without bumping into any walls. Except she would trip over an absurd number of animals in the process.

Well, Sam supposed, that was what you got for housing displaced familiars.

Jaime had been using the house for that purpose as long as Sam could remember, and it had always been illegal. Her dad used to try and convince Jaime to clear the animals out of the place, citing how many laws she was violating by having so many magical conductors under one roof, not to mention the fact that her house looked like a cat hoarder's. You could get in trouble for the sheer number of animals, magical conductors or no.

"Did you lock the door, Sam?" Jaimie called to her from further into the house.

"Of course!" Sam called back. She leant down to pat a cat that had appeared at her feet.

Cats are the most common familiars because they're so in tune with magic, Sam had explained to Avi the first time he'd seen all the cats in her aunt's house. Doesn't have to be a cat though; a guy down the street from us has a guinea pig. You never know what you're going to end up with.

When he'd asked why her aunt had a house for displaced familiars at all, Sam had shrugged. *A familiar has to have somewhere to go when their human dies or can't take care of them anymore, don't they?* she'd said. *I used to think Jaime was going out and adopting them. But I think they might find her.*

When she caught up with Jaime and Aiden, they had already stored the food bags in a cupboard and were shovelling cups of the food into various bowls.

"I'm not feeding the snakes today," she told them.

"I'll do it!" Avi offered, far too gleefully for Sam's taste.

She blew a raspberry in his direction before grabbing a large cup of rodent feed and moving to the next room. There were only five rats, who lived in an enclosure with two guinea pigs. They started twitching and squeaking when they saw Sam, and she served out their appropriate level of food into their food dispenser. The two ferrets that shared the room with them already had a bowl of food, so Sam only reached out to give them a few good pats before moving on. She could feel the slight tingle of magic that always came with touching them, but it was easy enough to ignore.

"That magic's not for me, is it?" she said as she rustled the fur behind their ears. "You hang onto it."

The four rabbits, three smaller and one very large, had a bucket of vegetables waiting on a shelf near their enclosure. Sam gave them a handful of vegetables and then left the room, closing the door behind her.

Sam liked it when they got to take the animals out in the backyard to run around but it was hard to know when they were going to be able to do that without being seen. Most of the time the animals roamed their respective rooms, which was why they generally roomed with other animals that didn't like to eat them in the wild.

"The rodents are fed!" She called out, stepping around a labrador and over the tortoise who liked to sleep under the couch.

Feeding time took twenty minutes in total and then the three of them were back in the shop with the sign turned to OPEN.

It happened while Sam was serving a nice elderly gentleman. He'd come in to get some of that "magical cold sore ointment" that he'd heard about, and Sam had explained to him that he was better

off checking down at the local pharmacy. Magic was great, but there were still some technology and medicines that worked just fine. He'd then proceeded to buy two books and an enchanted box anyway.

Sam had just packed his things into a bag and given him his change when the door of the shop opened, sending out a burst of magic. She handed the gentleman his bag and wished him a good rest of the day, smiling when he returned the sentiment.

That was when a girl, no — a woman maybe? — approached the counter. Everything in the room seemed to stop.

Sam was caught up in the sight of her; her long brown hair was tied back into a braid but strands of it frayed out like she hadn't revisited the hairdo in days. Her eyes were brown and bright, almost bright enough to cancel out the bags underneath them. Her jeans and t-shirt combo were speckled with dirt where Sam could see them, but mostly covered by the long coat that the woman wore. Her freckled brown skin seemed to shine, whether by the light of the room or something of her own doing.

More than her striking appearance, and the way that it made Sam's breath catch in her throat, was how unmistakably all the magic in the room seemed to lean towards this woman. Nothing moved, but even Sam felt the urge to step forward, pulled by something silent and magical.

"How —how can I help you?" Sam stuttered.

The woman looked her over, frantic gaze betraying her calm posture. "I need to speak with Ms Haid."

Without looking away from her, Sam called out. "Aunt Jaime? There's someone here to see you!"

"Be there in a minute!" Was her aunt's reply from deep in the shop. The charms that lined the ceiling seemed to ring with her voice; loud enough to be noticed but not enough to be irritating.

The woman didn't quite visibly relax at that, but she did let out a puff of air, as if she'd been holding it in for a long time. A burst of dust lifted into the air with the movement.

"Can I...—Can I help you find anything?" Sam continued to trip over her words. "While you wait."

The woman's gaze snapped back to her immediately, wary. "No."

"O—kay," Sam nodded like she had heard something she was supposed to be agreeing with.

Jaime appeared at the counter after a few long, tense minutes later. She smacked into a pile of boxes on the way, swearing loudly, but eventually made it. She clapped her hands together and turned to their customer. "What can I help you with?"

"I need..." the woman said, and something about her tone sounded off to Sam, which was why it wasn't really a surprise when she continued. "I need a place to stay."

Jaime looked at Sam, who shrugged, and then plastered a smile on her face that was unnervingly similar to a grimace. "I'm not sure what you've heard but we don't take in strays here. There's barely enough room for me. There's a shelter a few blocks down, I can take you there if you wa—"

Sam looked in confusion at her aunt, who had abruptly stopped speaking. She turned then to look at the woman, as if for some sort of explanation, and saw that she had stretched out her left arm, wrist turned up.

At first Sam thought that it was a normal tattoo, because it wasn't moving. Magical tattoos generally had some sort of movement or shimmer to them. The longer she stared though... it looked more like a barcode, or a prison stamp. Sam's head jerked up, her gaze fixed on the woman, who was staring intently at Jaime.

Jaime, who was reaching out to curl her fingers around the woman's wrist, her eyes staring unblinkingly at the marking. "What's your name?" she asked, finally looking up to meet the woman's gaze.

"Rani," was the reply.

"Jaime." She offered her name in return as she touched one finger to Rani's marking. "I'm sorry for this." She shook her head after a moment, clearing her throat. "Of course you can stay here. I'll need to strengthen the wards on the house though. Sam, I'll send Avi out to help with the shop."

"Wait what—" Sam was lost. "What happened to no strays?"

Jamie opened her mouth, as if she was going to explain, and then closed it. She only replied after a moment's pause. "Things changed," was her explanation. She motioned to Sam, speaking to Rani. "This is my niece, Sam. She's perfectly trustworthy. Avi is—" she seemed to rethink whatever she was going to say. "They're both safe."

"Safe?" Sam asked, but Jaime was already heading to the back of the shop and the click of the door confirmed that she'd gone into the house.

Sam had experienced her fair share of running from people that she didn't want catching her. "Who are you running from?"

"None of your business." Rani's answer came so quickly that Sam almost missed it.

"It is when you drag my aunt into it," she retorted, feeling like a child next to this woman who crackled with magic. "She can't afford to get mixed up in anything."

"Your aunt is helping me willingly." Rani turned to look at one of the bookshelves as she spoke, running her fingers over the tips of the books there. The movement lifted some dust that clung to Rani's skin for a moment before floating to the floor.

Avi joined them moments later, grinning and carrying a handful of umbrellas.

"Sam!" He bounded up to her. "Did you know that you can—" He stopped when he noticed Rani, blinking a few times as he processed her presence. "Who —"

"This is Rani," Sam explained to him, gesturing to Rani helplessly. "Aunt Jaime's agreed to give her shelter or protection or something."

Avi either didn't pick the mood or didn't care. He held one hand out and clung to the umbrellas with his other arm. "Avinash Katil. Friends call me Avi."

Rani looked down at his hand disdainfully and then took in the books.

Avi looked to Sam, who shrugged in response. She tore her focus away from Rani and back to the store counter.

"Whatever," she said, then plastered on a smile for the next customer.

"You're quiet tonight," Gabriel said.

Sam paused with her chopsticks halfway to her mouth, noodles slipping off and unfurling back onto her plate. "I'm not."

"You haven't said a word since we started dinner," Michael retorted.

"I'm savouring this delicious meal."

Michael threw her a look from across the table.

Sam shrugged with an exaggerated attitude. "I don't have anything interesting to say."

Gabriel threw her the exact same expression as his husband.

"Ugh. You guys are the worst." Sam dropped her chopsticks onto her plate and crossed her arms. "Everything's fine. There was just this girl that came into work today. Jaime didn't know her but

she jumped to help her, you know? She needed a place to stay and she looked like she'd been on the street for a bit."

"That definitely sounds like Jaime," Michael said. "I don't suppose you want to tell me what's in her house—"

"No comment." Sam waved a hand to dismiss the question. "I don't know, it just bothered me."

Gabriel nodded. "You should trust your gut, baby. It'll get you out of scrapes you don't know you're walking into."

"Besides, you can't be too careful," Michael added. "There's been a lot of OMA movement in the streets in the past few days. They might be conducting raids."

"You need to—"

"Yes, I'll warn my sister. Now isn't the time to be taking in people off the street. Even if the raids don't warrant excessive force, they're still unpleasant."

"I like that she helps people," Sam said. "And animals. There was just something *weird* about this girl. I don't know. I worry."

Michael leant over and placed his hand on her shoulder. "You don't need to. Everything's going to be fine."

"Speaking of which," Gabriel started, trading a glance with his husband. "Did you hear back about your application yet?"

Sam's face went red as she looked down at the table. "Yeah. I – got a letter yesterday. I didn't get in."

He reached over and touched her hand gently. "I'm sorry, baby. I know how much you wanted it."

“It’s fine,” Sam tried to shrug it off. “It was the same old story. They don’t want me cause I can’t control my magic properly.”

“You just need more practice,” Michael said. “They should have seen your training potential.”

“It’s fine,” Sam repeated tiredly.

“No, it’s not,” Michael continued, stabbing his chopsticks into his bowl. “You finally found a career you want to pursue and they’re going to turn you down? I don’t think so. Give me the name on the letter and I’ll make some calls –“

“I said it’s *fine*.”

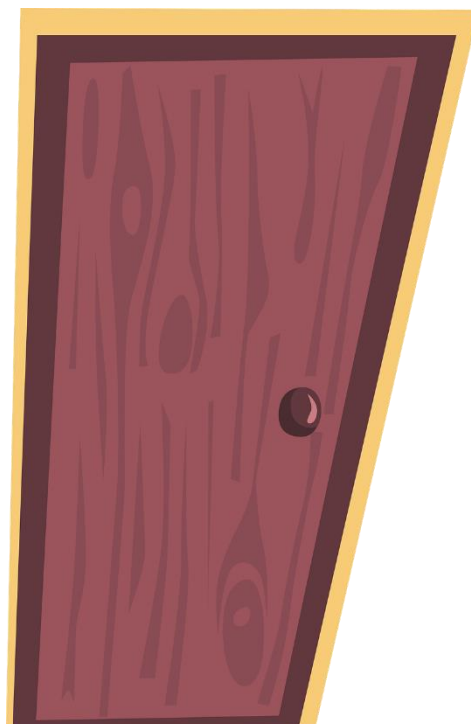
The whole table paused. Sam took a shuddering breath in.

“Alright, we’ll talk about it later,” Gabriel said. “Darling, the tablecloth.”

Michael cleared his throat and reached out to pat down a small flame that had ignited at the end of the table.

“We’ll talk about it later,” he agreed.

This was Sam’s first real failure of the novel (there’s plenty more to come, don’t worry!) Maybe we should talk a little bit about failure...



Chapter 3

When Sam got to work the next day, Jaime was standing at the back of the shop with Rani. Even Avi had come in on time today and was stacking wands into an intricate display on their stand.

Sam dropped her bag on the desk with a *BANG*. Avi quickly went back to stacking with a grin. Jaime tried a smile. Rani didn't bother.

"Aunt Jaime, can I talk to you?"

Jaime's face flashed with confusion but she nodded, gesturing to the back of the store.

"Listen," Sam spoke the second that Jaime closed the door behind them. "I talked to Dad about Rani last night and I think —"

"Oh *Samantha*," Jaime sighed. She let out a breath of frustration. "Why would you tell your father anything? I thought we had an agreement about what goes on in this house."

"That's for animals," Sam replied. "For familiars without homes and stuff. Not for people who could get you into *real* trouble."

"She doesn't have a home," Jaime said, gesturing to the door. "And no one's going to get into trouble if everyone keeps their mouths shut!"

Sam balled her hands into fists at her sides. "I didn't tell him anything specific. I'm just trying to look out for you. Anyway, it doesn't matter."

"What do you mean, it doesn't matter?"

"Dad said that the OMA are out on the streets, carrying out raids on places they know might take in criminals."

Jaime's face actually paled a little.

"He said that?" she asked. "About the raids?"

Sam nodded.

Jaime took a deep breath and rubbed at her face tiredly. "Alright, we'll need to be careful then. We need to put up new wards."

"New wards?" Sam asked, incredulous. "We just redid them last week."

"*Different* wards," Jaime clarified. She ran a hand through her hair, scrunching it up a little, as she looked around the room for something. "Watch the front for me?"

Sam scowled at her but didn't argue. She left the back room and headed back out into the front of the shop. Avi bounded up to her, eyebrows raised in curiosity.

"I'll tell you later," Sam muttered. "She didn't change her mind though."

Avi opened his mouth to speak. Which was, of course, when something blew up outside.

At the sound of the explosion, Sam and Avi ducked behind the counter. When she stuck her head around the corner of the desk, Sam could see that Rani had similarly taken shelter behind a display table. Sam's mind filled with suspicion, followed immediately by rage. This was bound to be that strange girl's fault.

Before she could open her mouth to ask what was happening there was another explosion. This was followed by the sound of the door being torn from its hinges and flying into the shop. It landed with a clang on the floor.

"That doesn't sound good!" Avi said, his voice getting higher in pitch with each word.

"Yeah, door blowing up is bad!" Sam said in a tone that was only slightly more level. She wished that she could have hidden the panic in her voice. Avi would be able to detect it better than anyone else.

"Surrender the renegade magic user Ranjita Anwar and you will not be harmed."

"I uh — may I ask who's speaking?" Sam called out, brave enough to just stick her head around the corner of the counter again.

"The OMA," came the reply. "The magical user known as Ranjita Anwar is unregistered and we are here to collect her."

"The Office of Magical Affairs? That didn't sound right to Sam. Dad had warned her about the possible raids but they weren't supposed to use excessive force, even if they *were* looking for unregistered magic users. They hardly needed an entire assault team for a tiny shop like this.

"I think uh — I might need to get my aunt. Just hold on a minute!"

"No need," her aunt said from where she'd appeared next to them. "I'm here."

"Jaime Haid." The man who had been speaking addressed her. "Still out here trying to save strays, huh?"

"Can't help it. They're just so cute," Jaime replied. "But you're not here to talk about the familiars, are you Hardy?"

"No. I'm not."

Sam sucked in a breath and took another look. The man standing in the entrance of the shop had short grey hair, was dressed in black gear and was looking at Jaime with the kind of familiarity that Sam was not fond of.

"What do you want?"

"I'm here for the girl," Hardy said. "We let you keep the animals, Haid, but the girl is too big of an issue for your new suburban life. This'll bring down all kinds of heat on you."

Sam looked to Avi, who responded with a questioning grimace.

"What's her crime?" Jaime asked.

"She's an unregistered—"

"Yes, I heard you. The OMA doesn't send someone like you after a little unregistered girl. What's going on, Hardy?"

Hardy sighed and rubbed at his eyes. "Don't do this, Haid. She's not worth it."

"I don't even know what I'm doing yet," Jaime retorted. She signalled with a hand behind her back for Sam to get back behind cover.

She did so. She wanted to ask what her aunt was going to do, but she felt she might already know the answer. She reached over and grabbed Avi's hand, squeezing it tight. He made a quiet noise of protest.

"Kids, stay where you are," Jaime addressed them. "I don't want any of you involved in this."

"In what?" Avi whispered to Sam.

"Don't do it, Haid," Hardy demanded. "Surrender the renegade magic user or we'll take her by force."

"Not on your life," was Jaime's reply. The windows shattered at the front of the store. Glass pierced through armour and skin, filling the store with the sounds of tearing and shredding. The soldiers cried out in pain, a few dropping their weapons so they could clutch at their wounds.

Sam looked up to see her aunt grinning. It was short lived. The soldiers only took a moment to recover, then a fireball was flying through the shop. It missed all the occupants and hit a bookshelf. It erupted into flames.

"Holy crap!" Sam yelled. She immediately let go of Avi to aim both of her hands at the fire, whispering the only extinguishing spell that came to mind. When she had brought the fire down enough that it was no longer a danger to the books, she realised that Jaime had opened fire on the soldiers with little bursts of explosions that seemed to be slowing down their attack. Hardy was at the

front of the group, shielding himself from the attacks and grinning at Jaime. "We need to do something!" Sam grabbed Avi's arm and shook him.

"Jaime said not to get involved," he protested. He was already standing up and pulling Sam with him. They immediately had to duck a shot of electricity that flew at their heads, missing them narrowly and hitting the wall behind them.

"I'm going to try and put up a shield," Avi told her. He pulled out a notebook and pen from the pocket of his jacket. "Cover me!"

Sam nodded; hands already turned in the direction of their attackers. *The floor the floor the floor*, she repeated in her mind. Her gaze was fixed on the floorboards at the front of the shop. *Impetus, impetus. Attack!* Two of the floorboards wrenched themselves to whack soldiers in the face.

"I told you not to get involved," Jaime scolded her from across the room. She caught one of the bursts of electricity and threw it back in the direction it had come. There was a satisfying thump when one of the soldiers hit the ground. Her hair crackled with electricity that sparked off into the air harmlessly.

"You looked like you needed the help," Sam told her. "How's the shield coming Avi?"

"Does anyone have a better word for repel?"

"Be gone?" Sam suggested, grounding herself for the next attack. The soldiers were still on the defensive, which for some reason didn't give her any comfort. "Fuck off? Resist."

"No, that's more like a —" but Avi's reply was drowned out by a large explosion that rocked the entire shop. When the dust and smoke cleared, half of the shop front had been blown to smithereens. More soldiers were waiting outside.

"Shit." Sam said as she watched the soldiers appear. "We could really use that spell right now."

"I can't — I need something to channel!"

Sam was ready to panic when out of the corner of her eye she saw Rani emerge from her hiding space. She wanted to yell at the strange girl to get back down, that she was the reason these OMA soldiers were shooting fire and electricity at them, and that they were about to launch a full-frontal assault, but the words wouldn't leave her mouth.

All the magic in the room seemed to swirl around Rani. She had her arms outstretched beside her as she turned to face the shop front.

"I'm here," she told them. "I'm the one you want."

"You don't have to do this," Jaime tried to assure her.

At first, Sam thought that Rani was surrendering, except that she seemed to be gathering all the magic in the room. Sam could feel the *lack* of magic in the air, hadn't even realised what that could feel like until that moment.

"Just come quietly and no one has to get hurt," Hardy said.

"I doubt that," Rani told him.

She slapped her hands down onto the table in front of her. The action released the most powerful shock wave Sam had ever felt, and it wasn't even directed at her.

The soldiers were thrown backwards and into the street, all of them splayed, unconscious. Sam's hands shook as she stared at them. Avi appeared beside her and took one shaking hand in his own, leading them both from behind the counter to join Jaime and Rani in the middle of the shop.

"That was — that was—" Avi tried to speak.

"What *was* that?" Sam asked, straight up. "That's not — whatever just happened was not normal."

"They're OMA... sort of. Now's not the time. You two are so stupid," Jaime said, but she was pulling them both close and ruffling their hair. She kissed Sam on the forehead. The situation was even more confusing when Sam realised that there were tears in her aunt's eyes.

"Jaime—"

Jaime shook her head and stepped back. "You have to go," she said. "Now."

"After that?" Sam pointed at the large hole in the front of the store. "Pretty sure someone's going to have some questions about this."

"Stop it. Sam, you need to leave."

"But they'll know, and they'll come by my place and — oh." Sam's face fell at the realisation. "You mean really leave. Right?"

"Sam, there's going to be more of them," her aunt said, reaching out and putting a hand on her shoulder. "They'll come and arrest me. They'll question your parents. Yours too Avi. These guys won't stop until they've got Rani, and they will do whatever it takes. You can't be here."

"I thought these guys were with the OMA," Avi spoke up. "Who are they?"

"They *are* OMA. Sort of." Jaime said, wiping at her eyes with her hand. "There's no time. You need to go. Rani?"

Rani nodded reluctantly, looking between Jaime and Sam.

"Okay." Jaime let out a breath of relief. "You guys will go with Rani. Trust her and do as she says. Listen to me, this is serious."

"I'm listening!" Sam protested. "You're not making any sense. We can't just up and leave!"

"Sam. We have to," Avi said. When she turned to look at him, he was as sombre as she had ever seen him.

“This is crazy,” Sam said, in a last ditch attempt to get one of them to say that it was all a big joke. When they didn’t, water welled up in her eyes. “Are you going to be okay?”

“I’ll be fine.” Jaime reached over to wipe at Sam’s watering eyes. “I’ve been in worse scrapes.”

“Pops will get you out.”

“He’ll be my first call once I’m in there.”

Something about the look on her aunt’s face told Sam that it wasn’t going to be as easy as that.

“We need to move.” Rani was standing at the back of the shop, the door to the house open and waiting. “Sorry.”

Jaime nodded. “She’s right. Now go, all of you. Before the bastards outside wake up.”

Sam gave her a teary hug goodbye before she and Avi followed Rani out of the shop and into the house.



Sam and Avi are really beginning their adventure here, leaving the safety of home and what they know. My project journey felt a lot like that...

They got out of the house and onto the street. Sam felt like she was dragging glass through her lungs with every inhale. Her heart pounded like a drum in her ears. Panic was really starting to settle in now; this was nothing like the scrapes she and Avi had gotten into; they had always managed to find a way out of them.

"This is some next level shit," Avi said.

"We need to get to the middle of the city," Rani told them, looking around at the street behind the house. "I know people who can keep us safe."

"I think I'm going to puke," Sam lifted a hand to her mouth.

Avi looked at her in concern and rubbed her back. "Keep breathing. At least until we've gotten to Rani's friends. Then we can panic."

"Okay, okay." Sam focused on Avi's hand on her back. She matched her breathing to the slow circles.

Rani made a noise of frustration and motioned for them to follow her. "We need to move if we're going to get away. They'll be sweeping the streets soon."

"Right. Okay." Sam felt a little steadier, and she reached out to grip Avi's shoulder in a silent thanks. "How are we going to get there? We don't have a car, so it's going to have to be the bus or the train—"

"No public transport," Rani said quickly. "We need to walk. Unless either of you two can teleport?" She looked at them hopefully.

Avi and Sam shook their heads ruefully.

Rani's expression screamed frustration, but her tone was level and calm. "Fine. We walk then."

"Running might be better," Avi suggested, and there was something in his gaze that made Sam turn to look in the same direction.

A group of OMA soldiers had appeared from around the next corner. The lack of glass in their armour meant that they were a different group. Others were appearing from the opposite direction, their black armour and guns thumping as they moved. Sam had the insane thought that they looked a

little like toy soldiers as they pointed their guns right at her, Avi, and Rani. It didn't make them any less terrifying as the soldiers moved to towards them.

"This is the suburbs," Sam protested. She followed Rani into a side street, pulling Aiden with her. "Can they attack us like this in the street?"

"They will," Rani replied. The crease in her brow was more pronounced now.

"They must want you really bad," Avi muttered. He already had his notebook and pen in his hands, scribbling symbols onto the paper.

"SURRENDER THE FUGITIVE OR WE WILL SHOOT."

"We need to incapacitate them, so they can't shoot us," Rani explained. Her back was stiff against the brick wall of their cover.

Sam chanced a look around the corner of the building. At least ten guns trained on her position. She pulled her head back. She shook her head at Rani, a small motion.

"We won't reach them from this distance. Not before they've shot us."

"I can't do anything about bullets," Rani hissed. "Especially magic-laced ones. We need to hit them before they shoot at us."

"Surrender or we will shoot." This time, it was Hardy's voice booming around the corner. "Samantha. Avinash. I know you don't want any part in this; you were just helping Jaime. Give yourselves up now and I promise that you'll both be at home by the end of the day. Just surrender the fugitive."

Sam looked to Rani, who was visibly shaking where she stood. Her hands were balled into fists at her sides, eyes wet with tears that she wasn't allowing to escape. It dawned on Sam then, just how scared Rani was of these people and of being caught by them. She also realised that Rani thought they were going to surrender her to Hardy.

“Just a second!” She yelled around the corner. She was in the middle of forming an idea, the words on the tip of her tongue but lacking something crucial, when Avi held up his notebook and showed her the symbol he’d been making. The symbol for disarm. It clicked in Sam’s head and she grabbed Rani’s hand, giving her a look when it seemed the woman might protest.

“We don’t need to hit them,” Sam explained. “We just need to stop their guns from working. Maybe we could aim for the magic and blow it up? No, that’s too specific. I’d never manage it.”

Realisation dawned on Rani’s face and she grabbed for Avi’s hand. “I have a better idea. Both of you; hold my wrists like you’ve decided to give me to them.”

Both Sam and Avi looked taken aback.

“What?”

“Trust me,” she said. “I need to be able to see them. Just act like you’re doing what he told you to do.”

Sam took hold of Rani’s wrist and Avi did the same, though far less tentatively.

“We’re coming out!” Sam yelled around the corner. She looked back at Rani, who nodded, then began to lead them out into the street.

Hardy looked pleased. There were still many guns pointed at them, but Hardy had taken a few steps forward. They were still a good thirty metres from him though. Soldiers were hiding behind cars, garbage bins, one was even partly visible from behind a large mailbox.

Sam felt that shift in the air again as all the magic around them seemed to rush towards Rani.

This time, she could feel the magic passing through Rani’s fingertips and into her own body. It was as if she was channelling the magic herself from an item imbued with power. She couldn’t understand how they were managing to channel so much magic at once without something exploding.

“Wait—” she whispered. “What are we attacking with? I need to know what I’m doing.”

"It's fine," Rani said.

"It's really not," Sam protested. "You don't understand. I can't just wing it—"

"Don't worry about it," Rani told her. "Just let me borrow your magic."

Sam went quiet. She was looking at the force that was lying in wait with increasing panic. They were getting closer with each step and Rani still hadn't done anything.

"If you don't do something soon, they're going to get suspicious and shoot us in the head," she gritted her teeth.

"Once more second," Rani said. Her shaking hands betrayed her calm tone.

"This is the right decision," Hardy said as they approached. "Just come quietly and no one has to get hurt."

Rani wrenched her arms from Sam and Avi's grip, raising her own in the direction of Hardy and his soldiers. "I doubt that."

She dropped to her knees and slapped her hands against the ground. The resulting shock wave did nothing to the OMA soldiers, who remained standing with guns still pointed at the three of them. The air buzzed around them but Sam couldn't sense the casting of an actual spell, or the manipulation of any magic into another.

"Now would be a good time to throw a fireball or whatever it is you guys do," Rani said.

Sam's mouth was still twisted as she leant down to press her own hands into the road as well. Avi was muttering words that she didn't understand. Fire was erupting in his palm, curling in on itself to form a sphere.

"FIRE!"

For one incredulous moment, Sam thought that someone was yelling about Avi's fire spell. Then all she could hear was the clicking of the guns as the soldiers began to fire. There was no impact of any bullets.

Sam looked up from the ground and over at the OMA soldiers. They were throwing down their guns and seemed to be preparing to attack with magic. Except — nothing was happening. They had their hands raised and some were even shouting words that sounded like incantations. Still, nothing was happening.

Sam looked up at Avi.

"Cover me!" She told him.

He nodded enthusiastically. The fire that had been circling in his palm shot out towards the OMA soldiers. It stopped just short of the group and burst outwards, forming a screen to block their view.

Sam was concentrating hard on the road in front of them. She was pulling as much magic from beneath her as quickly as she could, focusing her thoughts on *a wall a wall a wall a wall*. There was something blocking most of the magic in front of her. She could feel it and just couldn't move past it. It didn't feel like she had gathered enough magic to reshape but it would have to do.

She felt the movement as the ground in front of her shifted, trembling all the way towards the soldiers. An asphalt wall about two metres tall shot out from the ground behind Avi's fire. It reached from one side of the street to another, blocking off their side of the street entirely.

Sam felt the magic stretch out too far — not enough — and a section of the wall began to collapse. She reached her hand out but couldn't find enough magic to hold it up. Rani appeared next to her, her hand also outstretched. The collapsed asphalt began to build itself back up and into the rest of the wall until the structure was whole again.

Sam stood up and was thankful when Aiden moved towards her, offering her his arm. She leant against his side, trying to catch her breath.

“Not bad,” Rani was saying. She nodded at the wall, which was fully visible now that the fire had disappeared.

“It’s not very thick,” Sam explained. “They’ll be out soon.”

“Follow me.”

Sam gripped Avi’s arm tight as he helped her to walk, too tired to make her muscles work efficiently. Together they followed Rani, with no idea of where she was leading them.

They weaved their way through the back alleys, around the outskirts of parks and away from large open areas. It was easy enough to blend in with smaller groups if they needed to use a more main street.

As they walked down a particularly empty street, Sam was burning with questions. Her energy was returning to her slowly and allowing her to lean on Avi less.

“What did you do back there?” she asked. Rani, who was walking a few steps ahead of them, didn’t answer. Sam pressed. “What spell did you cast so that they couldn’t shoot at us?”

Rani didn’t look back at them, her eyes fixed on the path ahead of them. “It’s not a spell exactly. I blocked all the magic in the area. Their guns rely on magic, so they couldn’t shoot.”

When she didn’t say anything more, Sam looked at Avi, who seemed just as bewildered as she did. “What do you mean you blocked all the magic? That’s not possible.”

“You asked what I did,” Rani said, huffing. “I told you.”

Sam finally dropped her arm from where she'd been gripping onto Avi for support, hurrying her steps to catch up with Rani. "Only level ones can block a magic attack," she kept on pressing. "But they can't block an attack before it's happened. I don't even know how you would do it! What you're talking about it like — it's like — cancelling out the magic."

Rani turned to look at her and Sam thought she might have seen a moment of hesitation.

"Not exactly," she said. Each word sounded like she had to force it out. "You don't do anything to the magic, you just — block the connection to it."

"Block the connection to the magic." Sam put a hand to her forehead. She turned to look at Avi, motioning to Rani in complete disbelief.

Avi grimaced. He seemed to be torn between staying grim and bursting into laughter at Sam.

"You can't block the connection to magic!" Sam said, hushing when Rani placed a finger over her lips. That didn't mean she was going to stop though. "Let me tell you, I am perfectly up to date with the scientific research into magic and nobody can do it. Nobody's managed that since the magic was originally released."

"I didn't say I could do it permanently," Rani snapped.

Chapter 4

“Please tell me we’re close,” Sam begged. She and Avi had fallen quite a few steps behind Rani, who was still walking as though she had fire licking at her heels.

A journey that might have taken them an hour and a half took them closer to four. They kept to the back alleys and paused whenever they thought a street was too crowded to blend into. This doubled the travel time from Drummoyne and it was dark by the time they reached Pitt St.

“Two more turns,” Rani told them over her shoulder. She sounded as exasperated as she looked.

The second turn came far too slowly for Sam. She was tired, hungry, and sick of looking at Rani’s back.

“We’re here.”

Sam and Avi stopped.

“We’re — what?” They looked around in confusion.

Rani had stopped them in front of a brick wall and an empty back street. There were no people passing by, not even any cars parked on the sides of the streets. On the left side of the road they had stopped on, there was only a burnt out building with construction tape slung across it in varying lengths. Sam was looking at it helplessly and then to Rani for an explanation. Avi looked equally confused but at least he looked thoughtful about it.

Rani was grinning at them. It was the first real grin that Sam could remember seeing since she’d met the woman. She waved her hands in front of them, whispering words that Sam didn’t recognise. She could feel the power behind them though.

Sam watched in fascination as the illusion of the building shimmered in front of them. It flickered until the image of the charred structure disappeared and it was replaced by a two-story warehouse that shone with neon light and illuminated the sidewalk.

Avi clapped his hands together in delight. "An illusion spell."

"Typical suburbans." Rani clicked her tongue. "Not every magical place is as easy to find as your aunt's shop."

"We—"

"We can talk about this another time," Rani interrupted her. "Let's get inside." She motioned to the large doors of the building and moved towards them.

Sam hadn't really known what to expect of this hideout that Rani had been leading them towards, but she'd thought it might look more like a hideout and less like a party spot.

"You've brought us to the right place, yeah?" she asked Rani, after catching up to the woman.

Rani turned her head long enough to look unimpressed at the question. "Of course. I have friends here."

"Looks like a club," Avi said as they stepped into the shadow of the building. The light of the neon sign flashed across their faces.

"It is," Rani acknowledged. She placed her hand on one of the doors and uttered an incantation; nothing Sam had ever heard. The doors vibrated for a moment and then swung open, letting the three of them inside.

The club wasn't anything like that Sam had been expecting and that really shouldn't have surprised her as much as it did as this point.

It was dark and loud like other clubs that she and Avi had been to. However, none of the places they'd visited catered specifically to natural magic users as clearly as this place did. The magic

thrummed through the air to the beat of the music, vibrating through the floor and electrifying all the people who were dancing. Even the lights around the room seemed to be pulsing with magic that filled the room and made Sam lightheaded.

“You get used to it.” Rani leant over to shout over the booming music. “The magic. Just breathe it in and let it go again. And don’t drink anything.”

Then she was making her way through the crowd to the stairs across the room, with Sam and Avi hurrying to keep up with her. People bumped into Sam as she walked. She felt a hand on her arm and then she was swinging around to face the man who had grabbed her. His general appearance wasn’t any different from the rest of the people in the club; he was covered in sweat and short of breath. There was something about his eyes though, Sam noticed. They were unnaturally illuminated from more than just the lights of the club.

“You look like you could use this!” He shouted over the music. He held out his hand and Sam stared down at the little black tablets in his hand.

“What are they?” she yelled.

Before he could answer, there was a hand on her shoulder. Sam turned her head to see Rani standing next to her, gaze fixed on the man she was talking to.

“Keep that to yourself,” Rani told him. “She’s not interested.”

“You sure?” The man grinned. “Maybe you should take some as well. Two for one deal.”

He reached out to touch Rani. Sam barely had time to catch the movement of Rani’s hands as they grabbed the man by the arm. She twisted his arm behind his back and dug her fingers into the skin just below his elbow, where his sleeve ended. His veins were beginning to protrude and turn an ugly green colour underneath his skin. Sam looked at Rani in abject horror, even while part of her was fascinated.

“We don’t. Want. Any.” Rani said, before releasing the man. He tripped over himself in his hurry to get away from her.

Sam was still staring at Rani, who was frowning.

“Come on,” she said. Avi had just joined them. “It’s just up there.”

Rani led them up the stairs and into a room that was almost like a foyer in the way it was set out, and the fact that two men were guarding a door on the other side of the room.

They looked like henchman. One was a large man who looked like he could snap any of them in half. The other was slimmer and looked as though he could turn you inside out with a couple of words and the right rune.

“This is a restricted area,” the big guy said.

“I’m here to see the Mystic,” Rani told them. Her voice was calm and her stance firm.

“The Mystic’s busy,” the guy told her.

What Mystic? Sam wanted to laugh at the name, but she was reminded that she had no idea what Rani’s plan was, or who she was taking them to. This Mystic could have been just as likely to kill them as he was to help them.

Rani stepped up until she was inches away from the man. She held her hand up, fingers splayed out in the air. Sam took one step forward, thinking that she was about to hit the man, but Avi held her still with a hand on her arm.

Rani flexed her fingers, creating a pulsing motion that seemed as if she was drawing something from the air. The man in front of her wore a large red crystal on a thread around his neck, which was glowing steadily. As Rani motioned towards it, the gleam of the crystal began to fade, until it disappeared completely. When she opened her palm, Rani held the glowing red magic in her hand.

She then thrust her hand forward, cupping it over the crystal. She held it there for only a second and when she pulled back, the crystal was glowing even brighter than it had before.

“Trust me. Your boss is going to want to see me.” She stepped back and crossed her arms. “You can tell the Mystic that Rani’s here.”

The big guy, having picked his jaw up off the floor, looked sideways at the smaller guy. That guy paused a moment in thought and then nodded. The big guy shrugged and pointed at Rani.

“You wait here.”

Sam could have sworn that she saw Rani make a face at the guy before he opened the door behind him and disappeared into the room.

“What were those things back there?” she asked as the door shut. “Whatever that guy tried to give me.”

“Hex.” Rani said. Her eyes hadn’t left the door. “It’s a drug.”

“Pumped full of magic.” Sam nodded in understanding. “I’ve never seen that before.”

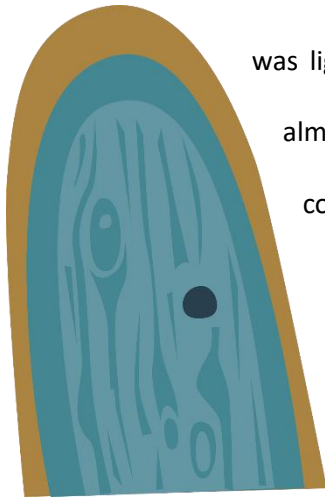
“Hopefully you never will again.”

They only had to wait in their awkward silence for a minute while Sam tried not to stare at the guy in front of the door, or at Rani standing in front of her. At least Avi was a comforting presence beside her. At one point, he stuck his tongue out at her, which made her chuckle.

At the end of this minute, the door opened again, and the big guy stepped out into the foyer, looking sheepish.

“The Mystic will see you now,” he said, after clearing his throat. “Sorry for the wait, Miss Rani.”

When Sam checked, she could see that Avi looked as intrigued as she felt. They followed Rani through the door.



The room was not what Sam had been expecting. Where the main area of the club was lights, thumping magic, crowds and music, this room was dimly lit. It was almost empty and nowhere near as magically charged as the main club. She could still hear the distant thumping of the music, but she could actually hear

Speaking of music... wondering what I was listening
to while I was writing? It's easy to find out...

herself think
now.

It

was almost empty, except for the young woman who was perched on a stool. She was leaning over a bar and pouring herself a drink. There was no bartender in sight, nor any club goers, not even any other bodyguards to occupy the various couches and tables in the room. They were alone with the Mystic and she was looking right at them.

She looked mystic. It was the only thing that Sam could think as she looked across the room at the woman. Dark brown hair with purple ends, that had to have been coloured with magic; every few seconds it would shimmer. Her skin was dark and seemed to glitter, even in the dim light. There were piercings in her ears, nose and lip, but what really drew Sam's gaze were her tattoos. Magical tattoos that swirled and stretched across her skin, many of which were runes, trailing up her arm like a line of poetry.

The Mystic's face betrayed no emotion as she looked over Sam and Avi, who remained perfectly still as they were assessed. Having gleaned whatever she needed from them, the Mystic's attention moved to Rani. Her face changed completely, lips splitting into a smile as she slipped off the stool, drink in hand.

"Rani." She greeted her, walking over to wrap an arm around Rani's shoulders. Rani stiffened at first but to Sam's surprise, relaxed and returned the hug. When the two women broke apart, Rani

cleared her throat and motioned to Sam and Avi standing behind her. “Sam and Avi,” she motioned to each as she introduced them. Sam gave a curt nod. Avi waved.

The Mystic laughed. “Yes, I know all about them. I just didn’t think you’d be bringing guests.”

“They were — unexpected,” Rani agreed.

“And unwanted,” Sam said, taking a step forward. “We stupidly decided to help her sorry ass and nearly got blown to pieces as a response. So now we’re tagalongs.”

“Amiable tagalongs,” Avi added with a bright smile.

Mystic looked at Rani questioningly. “How did they get involved?”

Rani sighed. “She’s Haid’s niece.”

That gave the Mystic pause. Sam didn’t like the understanding that she saw pass across the woman’s face.

“Well, you’re welcome here,” the woman said, opening her eyes to emphasise her statement. “Anyone who’s running from the officials is welcome. And anyone who’s running with Rani can call me Zoey. I’d appreciate it if you’d keep that to yourselves though.”

Avi snorted. “What’s with the archetypal name then, if you’ve got a regular ass one? We expected to walk in on an old man with a white beard and a staff.”

Zoey shrugged, the liquid in her glass sloshing around. It seemed to make little sparks at the edges of the glass as it did so. “Because people walk in here expecting an old man with a white beard and a staff. That’s half the fun; the look on their faces when they waltz in and find a twenty-six-year-old black woman. And doesn’t the name carry something? I’m important. I’m wise. Why not advertise that?”

Sam raised her eyebrows. She turned to see that Avi looked thoroughly impressed.

“Besides,” Zoey continued. “I needed a name that people could give the cops. They can’t arrest the Mystic, can they?”

“Why would the cops want to arrest you?” Sam asked. However, she and Avi were sharing a look. They’d had their fair share of illegal activities but never anything on a grand scale. This seemed like something that might qualify. “I mean — the Mystic.”

Zoey grinned at the question, motioning to their surroundings with her free hand. “Everyone who hides out here does so because they’ve done something that could get them arrested. You’ve stepped into the Sydney Underground, or what would be the Underground if we could set up a system down there without alerting anyone.”

Sam paled. “Is that why they were—” she turned to look at Rani. “Is that why they were chasing you? Is that why we got dragged into this—”

“I’ve never done anything illegal that wasn’t to survive!” Rani spoke over her, fists clenched at her sides. “And that’s not why they want me.”

Sam opened her mouth to shout but stopped when she felt Avi’s hand on her shoulder.

“Then explain it to us,” he said gently, looking from Rani to Zoey.

Rani breathed out and Zoey motioned to two small couches surrounding a drinks table. They took their seats. Sam and Avi opposite the two women.

“Start from the beginning,” Sam urged, following a small awkward silence. “You said this place was like an Underground. Do you mean, like, a crime block, or something?”

“Not even close,” Zoey answered. “Though I don’t doubt we get the criminal type through here as well. Think of it more as a safe haven for those getting pursued by the law. Not the big stuff,” she put a hand up in defence. “We try to keep out the terrorists and murderers, but you can’t be all that picky when you’re opening your doors.”

“You’re hardly opening your doors,” Avi argued. “The illusion magic outside the street was proof of that. And that would only keep out people who are passing by. How do you stay off the radar of—”

“People who are looking for us?” Zoey’s eyes crinkled with amusement. “It’s not easy. Officials are always trying to scope this hideout. We have measures in place though.”

“But you’re not going to tell us?”

Zoey chuckled. “Don’t take it personally. Even folks who have been around here for years don’t necessarily know that secret.”

“That makes sense,” Sam agreed. That wasn’t what was really bothering her anyway. “I want to know why we’re here. Why Aunt Jaime’s shop got attacked. Why we were being shot at with magic bullets. They’re supposed to be military grade. Never used against civilians.”

“Welcome to the real world, babe.” Zoey shrugged, leaning back against the couch. “Innocent people are shot at and harmless shops are blown up. Except — your aunt wasn’t exactly innocent, was she?”

“She wasn’t hurting anyone,” Sam replied carefully. “All she did was house a couple of stray familiars. That’s not enough to get the shop blown up.”

“Of course not,” Rani scoffed. “No one’s saying that. That’s the excuse they’ll use though, to explain the damage. They’ll probably take your aunt into custody for a few days.”

“Custody?!”

“Hoarding an illegal number of familiars, or the like,” Zoey said. “They’ll find something to pin on her. They always do. They’ll have to let her go though; it doesn’t look good to have one of their own locked up.”

Sam had almost forgotten the way that Hardy had looked at her aunt but now the image came slamming back. “This doesn’t make any sense,” she said.

“Your aunt was part of the group that’s hunting me,” Rani said, her tone as unforgiving as her expression. “Keep up.”

“No,” Sam said firmly. “Jamie was in the defence force. She served overseas and helped to capture magical terrorists.” Even as she spoke the words, a picture was beginning to settle in her mind. Rani waited, an irritatingly patient look on her face.

“You’re being chased by the army? Like the *army* army?”

“You know about as much as I do at this point,” Rani replied. “What’s important is that you understand how serious this is. We’re not talking about backstreet goons.”

“Or street gangs,” Sam muttered. She chanced a glance at Avi, whose face had paled with the direction of the conversation. Then back to Rani: “Why did you come to my aunt if she’s from the group of people you’re trying to avoid? Why not come here instead?”

“Because she got out,” Rani explained. “And I needed answers. Zoey hooked me up with her information on the fly and I went straight there. I — tend to bring heat down on wherever I go—” A slight frown here, just a hint of guilt. “—which I didn’t feel bad about when it was just a faceless soldier. I only questioned it when I met her.”

Sam’s hands turned to fists at her sides, but Avi placed a calming hand on the small of her back.

“What are we supposed to do?” he asked, cutting through the silence. “We’re obviously here now for a reason. Unless this was just a last resort.”

“A little bit of both,” Rani admitted. “Zoey’s a collector of information and she can help us through the next step. I was going to come here anyway, after I spoke to Jaime.”

“Why did you need to find my aunt? Specifically.”

Rani’s brow furrowed at the interruption, but she squared her shoulders as she answered. “I was hoping she could answer some questions. Specifically, about the people hunting me.”

“You keep saying hunting,” Avi pointed out. “Not chasing. Why do they want you?”

Sam blinked. She hadn’t noticed that. Then again, Avi had always been more attentive to those sorts of things. He read people better than she did.

“That’s what I wanted to ask Jaime,” Rani said, which stopped that line of questioning in its tracks.

Zoey, who had been lounging as she watched them talk and argue amongst themselves, sat forward again to speak.

“There are quite a few gaps that I was hoping your aunt could fill, Sam. We’re casting blind here, and that’s not a feeling I’m fond of.” She turned to look at Rani, who nodded, before turning back to them. “The only information we have pertains to who is hunting Rani, not why. We assume they’re hunting her because she’s powerful, but I’ve never heard of anyone being pursued as violently as this, even at level 1.”

“Knew it,” Avi muttered, low enough that only Sam could hear him.

“And even then,” Zoey continued. “The Defence Force has involved themselves far too much for one natural magic user. They have her on the same kind of watchlist they put magical terrorists on, yet the order is to take her in alive or not at all.”

“That’s something at least,” Avi said.

“I’m sorry that you got caught up in this but you’re here now. I think it’d be best if you stuck with Rani, especially where you’re going.”

“Where are we going?” Sam asked, confused. She looked to Rani, whose face had closed up again.

“We’re leaving.”

“Please don’t say we’re going up North,” Avi said. His tone was light, joking, but Sam could tell that he was worried underneath that. “The sun does wonders for my skin but it’s hell for my spell concentration.”

“Same,” Sam added.

“No,” Rani answered, her voice tight. “Indonesia. We’re leaving the country.”

Chapter 5

"This is such bullshit."

Sam frowned down at the phone in her hands, legs bunched up from how she was sitting on the curb.

"It's messed up," Avi agreed. He sat down next to her, crossing his legs underneath him. "Are you going to call them?"

"Of course," Sam replied. She wasn't about to give up the gift of an untraceable phone call to her dads, even under the circumstances. "I just have no idea what to say to them. We're not going to Indonesia, that's for sure." Sam felt her pulse racing at the thought of leaving her home, her country. She pressed one palm to the pavement. She focused on the feeling of the magic running like a river beneath her.

Avi placed his hand over hers. "Have we got a choice?" He asked gently. "We've helped out a fugitive - or at least, I think that's what we're calling it. We've helped attack the people chasing her. We've been welcome into a secret, magical-" he looked around the street, searching for the right word. "Club? Society? Anyway, it's not like we can go home."

"We've always got a choice," Sam responded, only now she wasn't so sure. The events surrounding them seemed so much bigger than them. She wasn't sure she could keep them all straight in her mind.

"I always thought India would be my first overseas trip," Avi said. His voice broke a little as he spoke. "Mum's going to be disappointed."

Sam turned to look at him properly then. She realised that she'd been so wrapped up in her own mind, her own anger and sadness, that she hadn't seen past his lie of I'm fine to notice how much

this was affecting him. She pulled her hand out from under his and wrapped an arm around his shoulder. "Okay, let's call my dads, and then we'll call your parents. Okay?"

"Okay."

Sam punched in the number of her dad's phone, turning it to speaker phone while she waited anxiously for the call to connect.

"Hello?" Came the tentative sound of Gabriel's voice.

Sam's eyes immediately welled up with tears. "Pop?"

"Sam?! Oh my god, Sam! Is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me. Is Dad there?"

"Yes! Just let me – Michael! Michael come here! It's Sam!"

"And Avi!" Avi called out.

There was the sound of movement as Michael grabbed the phone.

"Sam, are you okay? Where are you?"

Sam took a shuddering breath in. "I can't tell you. But I'm okay, we're both okay."

"Thank god." Gabriel's voice, wavering.

"I'm calling because..." Sam's face filled with anguish. Avi squeezed her arm. "I wanted to tell you I was okay, and that I'm not going to see you for a little while."

"What do you mean?" Michael's gruff voice demanded to know. "Come home. We can get this all sorted out if you just come home. Avi too, we'll figure everything out."

"I don't think it's safe," Sam told them. "We got chased by OMA agents, Dad. They really, *really* want this girl. And we've met some people who are going to help..."

"We can help," Michael assured her.

"Come home, baby," Gabriel added. "Your Dad and I both have contacts through work who can make this go away. Think about what you're saying."

Sam looked to Avi, who raised his eyebrows.

"They seem pretty sure," he said.

"Okay," Sam said, after a moment of thought. "Okay, we'll come home. Just give us like, an hour to explain to our.... Friends, okay?"

"Okay," Michael said. "We love you."

"We'll see you two soon." Gabriel.

"I love you too," Sam said before hanging up.

They sat in silence until Avi asked: "What the hell are we going to tell these guys?"

"I have no idea," Sam replied. "We might have to –"

"The Mystic wants us back."

They turned their heads to see Rani behind them, an unreadable expression on her face.

"She's found a forger for our papers."

Sam threw her a dirty look for interrupting the moment, and for a million other things.

"Yeah, we're coming," Avi said. He brushed off his jeans as he stood up, pulling Sam up with him. She grumbled about it but she cooperated.

"She says he's the best around," Rani told them as they walked back to the club. "Well - the best that you can find amongst renegade magic users."

“I thought you couldn’t use magic to forge IDs and papers,” Sam said. “They can trace the magic now, so all of it has to be done by non-magic means.”

“He doesn’t use magic to make them,” Rani explained, her words clipped. “He just happens to be a magic user.”

“Oh.” Sam fell silent as Rani led them back to the Mystic’s rooms. Once inside, Zoey introduced them to the forger. He was an average looking, unassuming man with light scruff and a terrible haircut. He didn’t really look like someone who knew their way around fake passports but then again, Sam mused, that was probably the point.

“How long will it take?” Sam asked, looking between Zoey and Jared, the forger.

“Mostly done,” Jared replied. He motioned to a plastic sleeve on the bench near him. “Just have to get some photos of you lot and stick ‘em on.”

“That’s -- a lot quicker than we thought,” Avi voiced Sam’s thoughts. They looked at each other with the same hesitant expression. They were going to have to sneak away at some point, hopefully before things got too far.

“There’s no going back,” Zoey told them. Her expression was gentle, sympathetic even, but her tone was hard and factual. “The military will chase Rani down, wherever she goes. And now that you’ve involved yourself, they’ll chase you too. Your only option is to leave their jurisdiction. At least then they can’t chase you legally.”

Sam paled at that comment, but Jared was already pulling out a camera and asking Aiden to step over to have his picture taken. She felt Rani come to stand beside her, emanating magic and tension in a way that threatened to give Sam a headache.

“I am sorry about this you know,” she said.

Sam turned to look at her in surprise. “What?”

Rani grumbled. "I know it's not ideal but Zoey's right. You're involved now and it's not safe here, for any of us. Things will be better once we leave the country."

Sam looked her up and down and then turned her attention back to where Avi was having his photograph taken. She thought about her Dads on the phone, about agreeing to go home and leave Rani to face this on her own. "I can't talk about this right now."

She stepped over to Jared when he motioned for her, leaning against the wall and staring blankly at the camera. The flash went off and that was when someone burst in through the door.

"OMA are here. They're in the street!"

People moved in all directions. Rani went to the window to look into the street below. Zoey pulled out her phone and motioned to her guards. Jared packed up his things and moved towards the door. Sam and Avi grabbed one another.

"You need to go," Zoey said, between giving orders over the phone. "Get out of here before they find you." Then she was running out the door and into the club. Her guards followed her.

Rani moved to Sam and Avi. "We need to go."

"We need to help," Avi protested. "You know they're here because of us."

Because of Rani, Sam thought. She just didn't understand why. "Avi's right. And I don't see how we're going to get out of here unseen if they're in the street." Not to mention their lack of IDs or papers.

Rani hissed in frustration. "Fine. Let's go."

They followed her through the door and out into the club. The dance floor was alight lit up with battle magic. Patrons were struggling to get out the doors while others were attempting to put

out a fire that was blazing at the other end of the building. The music was still thumping, driving magic into the air and fuelling the magic users.

“Out the doors,” Rani told them. They pushed their way through the crowd. People came near them but never seemed to touch them. They just seemed to thump against a barrier and back into the fray.

“Are you doing this?” Sam yelled over the music. “This is amazing!”

Rani pointed at the air, twirling her finger. “The music helps!”

They made it to the doors easily, although Rani looked a little tired as they flung themselves out into the chaos of the street.

There were OMA soldiers everywhere. It was still dark enough that their black gear would have been almost impossible to see if it weren't for the way the street was lit up in neon light.

Magic crackled in the air around them. Fireballs hit some targets and missed others. Bullets shot through the air. The street was full of magic words and shouted orders. A few magic users had been rendered unable to use their magic and were being hauled into large black trucks by the soldiers.

The building was surrounded by soldiers and magic users alike. Sam could feel the magic rumbling in the ground beneath her but there were so many people.

“Can you do that thing?” Sam turned to Rani and mimed Rani's earlier clap. “Make a path, maybe help some of these guys?”

Rani shook her head, looking wearier by the minute. “I've used too much today.”

“Shit.”

A group of soldiers fell into line in front of them, guns up and fingers on the triggers.

“Fire gun!” Sam shouted at Avi. She pulled Rani to the ground. Avi raised his hands above them. He drew a symbol in the air with his fingers and then shouted *Aga!* Fire burst from his hands as if they were a flamethrower, showering the soldiers with flames.

As they were retreating, Sam pressed her hands into the pavement below them. She pulled at Avi’s residual fire magic, shifting it until it became something else. Then she released it back into the pavement. The soldiers began to yelp as the stones beneath them rapidly heated, soon becoming unbearable to stand on.

Sam could hear Avi breathing heavily above them. She grabbed Rani’s arm and pulled her up.

“That was only a few of them.”

Avi nodded. They moved quickly down the street, away from the soldiers whom they had just attacked. Sam ducked when a ball of electricity threatened to hit her, but Rani was already catching it, turning it around, and throwing it back at an OMA soldier.

“Only small spells,” Rani explained when Sam looked at her in disbelief.

“That’s small for you?” Then she shut her mouth in favour of dodging a bullet.

Another group of soldiers had blocked their path. Sam looked beside her; Avi shook his head, Rani’s brow furrowed.

“Help me,” she said. She ran forward and launched herself at the soldiers. Sam shrieked in surprise and followed her. She had no plan, but Rani was striking at the soldiers with her fists, waves of energy pulsing from her hands. She took one down, then another. Then she cried out in pain as a bullet hit her leg.

Sam tried to call up more magic from the ground. She had a little bit, but it was hard to do on the move. She kicked a soldier in the knee, releasing a similar pulse to Rani. The soldier cried out in

pain. He lifted his gun. Sam panicked and slapped at his arms, hitting him with small pulses. He dropped his gun and went to punch her. Sam closed her eyes and waited for the pain.

It never came. When she opened her eyes, the soldier was on the ground and Zoey was beside her. Two soldiers came towards them, and Zoey released a whip of electricity at them from her palm.

“You and Rani are like, supercharged or something!” Sam exclaimed. Zoey flashed her a smirk.

“I’ll hold them off; get yourselves out of here.”

Sam nodded enthusiastically and moved towards Avi, who shook his head.

“Rani’s been hit,” he pointed in her direction. “I’ll try and help; grab her and let’s get out of here.”

He went to Zoey and the soldiers before Sam could stop him. She let out an exasperated noise and ran to Rani, who was limping slowly towards her. Sam pulled Rani’s arm over her shoulder and took her weight.

“I’m fine,” Rani grumbled.

“Shut up,” Sam shuffled them along as quickly as she could manage. She looked over at where Avi and Zoey were still fighting. She opened her mouth to call out to them when a shock of bullets sounded out through the street. Sam froze. Rani stopped struggling next to her.

Zoey dropped to the ground. Blood was dripping down the front of her dress. Some dripped down her arm across her tattoos. Her eyes were wide open, cold, and distant. Sam knew that she was dead and for a long second, she couldn’t speak.

“Avi!” She gestured for him to move. Only he was clutching a hand to his side. He raised the hand and it came away bloody. Then the soldiers were moving towards him. A soldier grabbed one of his arms, then another did the same. They were pulling him away towards one of their vans.

Sam immediately let go of Rani and ran at the retreating soldiers. One of them aimed a gun at her but she didn't feel the piercing of a bullet, only a wave of magic.

She was vaguely aware that she was screaming Avi's name. She felt as though she was fighting off sleep, the kind that you just can't keep your eyes open against. She was on the ground but she was still trying to crawl towards the OMA van. There was a blast of pain in her head and her vision blurred. Her throat felt raw with how fiercely she was screaming. She screamed until she fell into terrified, heart-gripping unconsciousness.

Sam woke with jarring abruptness. She immediately regretted this as the pain in her head set in. It hurt to focus her eyes but she could tell that she was in a dark room. No one else seemed to be there so she took stock. She still had all of her limbs. She could still feel magic, though it seemed to be concentrated around her instead of in the ground below her, which was where it was usually the strongest.

She jolted into a sitting position when she remembered Avi. He'd been injured! The OMA soldiers had taken him. She had no idea how much time had passed since the fight. They could be anywhere by now. She could be anywhere, was anywhere.

Her head throbbed but she checked herself now that she was sitting. No bullet wounds. No wounds at all, in fact. Nothing to indicate why her head felt like rocks being pounded against her forehead from inside her skull, or why she was here.

Sam slipped her legs over the side of the bed that she found herself on, which was when the door swung open to reveal the semi-familiar face of Jared, the forger.

"You're awake," he said, nodding. "Come on then."

Sam stood on shaking legs, waiting until the vertigo had passed before she followed him out the door. Jared led her into a hallway that looked like the kind of corridor you might find in the subway.

Concrete walls, old broken down vending machines, and the lights that were working were blinding fluorescent lights.

Sam and Avi had ridden the subway more times than she could count but this didn't look familiar to her. It looked too old, too rusted.

"Where am I?" Sam asked. "Where's Rani? Do you know where they took Avi?"

"Underground," Jared replied. "Actually underground, this time. I'm taking you to her. And no, I don't know where they took your other friend."

Sam shut her mouth and followed him in silence.

He led her into a subway platform where a train was sitting, clearly having been stationary for a long time. Sam could see through the windows that there were people inside but she couldn't pick out any details. Jared opened the carriage door and motioned for her to step inside. Sam looked at him doubtfully but he nodded for her to walk through.

*FROM THE 'UNDERGROUND' TO
BEING REALLY, TRULY
UNDERGROUND... HAS SAM
GONE FROM WAINSCOT TO
WAINSCOT?*



There were people inside. People sitting or sleeping on the train seats, others spread out on the floor. One man was being healed by a younger looking man, the green energy illuminating bruises on both of their faces. Parts of the carriage had been gutted and replaced with old couches, stretchers taken from ambulances or hospitals, and they were all full.

Sam recognised none of them, until Rani stepped out from behind one of the strangers.

“You’re awake,” she said, looking Sam up and down like she was cataloguing any possible wounds. Sam went red under the attention but she wouldn’t be distracted from her quest.

“Where’s Avi?” she asked.

Rani looked away. Sam thought she saw a glimpse of guilt or shame but she could have been mistaken.

“The soldiers took him,” Rani confirmed.

Sam opened her mouth to demand that Rani tell her something when a woman walked up beside Rani, putting her hand on Rani’s shoulder. She had whitened hair and a soft, kind face. Her combat ready outfit and the blood on her face told another story.

“This is Maureen,” Rani introduced them. “She’s in charge down here.”

“As far as anyone can be in charge down here,” Maureen corrected. “They took a lot of us in the raid last night. Word is they were looking for you two, and your friend.”

“Word would be right,” Rani told her. “That’s why Sam and I will be leaving immediately. We have plans to leave the country.”

“No!” Sam protested. “I’m not leaving without Avi. No way.”

“If we stay here, we endanger these people,” Rani explained, appearing less calm as the seconds went by. “If we go after the soldiers, we’ll be captured or killed.”

Sam pointed a finger, close to her face. “You got us into this mess. Avi wouldn’t even be in trouble if it wasn’t for your beef with the OMA soldi-”

“You’re not the only one who lost a friend last night!” Rani exploded. With her words, a chill seemed to radiate outwards and throughout the carriage.

Sam had frozen where she stood, accusing finger now dropped as a result of Rani's outburst.

"The Mystic-" she spluttered. "Zoey. She didn't -- she didn't make it?"

"No. She didn't," Rani replied stiffly.

"We didn't even have time to take her body from the street," Maureen explained quietly. "The OMA probably have her. It was chaos up there. We got as many people down here as we could before we sealed everything with charms."

"This is -" Sam shook her head. "Thanks for your help, but I have to go and find Avi."

"I told you; he was taken by the soldiers."

Sam's hands balled into fists at her sides. "Then we need to go and get him."

Rani shook her head. "We can't. It would be suicide."

Sam's eyes narrowed at her. "You know where he is."

"I... have an idea of where they might have taken him," Rani admitted carefully.

"But you won't tell me where?"

Rani shook her head but to her credit, the move was hesitant.

Sam came to a jolting realisation. "You think he's dead," she said. Rani's eyes went wide in surprise and Sam knew she was right. Rani thought that even if Avi had lived long enough to be taken into OMA custody, he was probably dead by now.

"I don't care," she said. "He'd go after me if I'd been taken. Tell me where you think he is."

Rani did seem to properly consider it then. Sam held her breath.

"Fine, but you're really not going to like it."

Rani insisted they speak somewhere privately. Sam, more than willing to cooperate if it meant she was going to get the information she wanted, obliged her. Maureen led them to an empty train carriage and left them there, saying she had people to take care of.

Rani sat down in one of the red, leather-covered chairs that hadn't been stripped down, and stretched her arms above her head. Sam looked away, tapping her foot in irritation and crossing her arms. She opened her mouth to demand Rani say something when --

"I was born here you know."

"Okay?" Sam shrugged.

"I want you to understand," Rani explained. She was tapping on the seat next to her and Sam could feel the sharp releases of magic as if Rani's fingers were tapping against her skin. "I grew up in Melbourne. I went to school there. I had a Medicare card. I got a job at a pub."

"You were a local, I get it." Sam motioned for her to get on with it.

"I was still in college when I turned eighteen," Rani continued.

"When you have to register." Sam nodded. She had an eerie feeling that she knew where this was going. Was this going to be about that tattoo?

"I was also eighteen when the OMA took me."

This was going to be about the tattoo.

"What, like, kidnapped you?" Sam tried to confirm.

"Kidnapped. Took away. Stole. Whatever you want to call it." Rani was gripping the seat. She had a faraway look in her eyes as she spoke. "All I know is that I was taken away from my family, my friends. Taken away and locked up."

Sam sat down in the chair across from her, letting out a loud breath. "Were you... was there..."

“Torture?” Rani shook her head and turned to look at Sam, focusing now. “No. It wasn’t like that. Not exactly. They didn’t seem to want anything from me, apart from making me use magic and doing tests on me.”

“What kind of tests?” Sam’s voice was quiet.

“At first it was just a few blood tests, a few easy magic tricks.” She waved her hand in a mockery of what she might do to perform magic. “Then they asked me to do more complicated things, and they’d bring in machines and hook me up to them. They never hurt me directly but--”

“You were a prisoner,” Sam finished for her. “A lab rat. What did they want?”

Rani shrugged one shoulder. “They never told me. I learned to stop asking. If I didn’t follow instructions I didn’t get fed, or my bed was taken away. And there was always an underlying threat of more physical consequences. I just wanted to stay alive.”

“But you got out, right?”

“Clearly.”

Sam frowned pointedly in her direction. “How?”

Rani looked down at the floor of the carriage. “That isn’t -- look, it doesn’t matter. What does matter is that you’d be crazy to want to break in to one of those places. The OMA want to catch me under the guise of being a -- a terrorist or something! But I’m not, which means they don’t play by the rules.”

“They’re the law,” Sam protested. “I was going to sign up to the army, request to be placed with the OMA when I graduated. They protect us!”

“Were they protecting you last night?” Rani asked. Sam deflated at that. She had a point.

“There has to be some kind of reasoning behind it.” Sam was grappling with the information. She didn’t want to believe that a group of people she’d wanted to join, that her Aunt Jaime had joined,

could do things like kidnap innocent, eighteen-year-old magic users. “My aunt was part of the--” she stopped. The thought of Jaime reminded her of what had changed Jaime’s mind. “Why did she recognise that tattoo on your arm?”

Rani looked surprised. “It’s not a tattoo,” she said. “Not exactly.”

She turned over her arm to reveal what Sam had thought was a tattooed barcode or a prison stamp of some kind. She remembered the look on her aunt’s face when she had seen it, and how she had apologised for it.

“It’s a brand,” Rani explained, running a finger over the black bars that made up the mark. “They put it there the first week after they took me. I’ve tried everything to get it off.”

Sam reached out, unthinking, to press her fingers to the brand. It must have been placed there with strong magic, she figured, and it made her sad to think that Rani had to walk around with the reminder on her skin. It wasn’t until Rani shuddered that Sam remembered herself. She pulled her hand back but could already feel her cheeks heating up.

“I get what you’re saying,” she said quickly, to avert focus. “But it’s only more reason to go and get Avi. I don’t want to leave him to get branded and tested.”

Rani looked dubious, mouth turned up in obvious displeasure.

“Rani.” Sam leant forward, catching her gaze to make sure her plea was being heard. “You don’t have to come with me but please, you have to tell me where they’d take him.”

Rani held her gaze in silence. She held it for so long and so intensely that Sam wanted to look away, only she found that she couldn’t.

“Alright.” Rani broke the silence after what seemed like a lifetime. “The truth is, I don’t know exactly where they would have taken him. But I know where you can find out.”

Chapter 6

Sam turned the map over in her hands. She ran a finger over the folded lines, from when it had been in her pocket, stopping when they intersected with the spot that Rani had marked. The building was located deep in the city, surrounded by other buildings and directly opposite a shopping district. Sam almost wished Rani hadn't told her about the OMA building.

"There's nowhere to hide on approach, and there's probably cameras everywhere," Rani had explained as she drew an imaginary perimeter around the spot on the map. "They would clock your face and have you arrested before you made it to the front door. And that's just getting there. Once you're inside, there's all sorts of measures."

Sam wanted to ask why Rani knew all of this, to demand that she help find a way inside, but Sam figured she'd pushed her luck enough. Rani had left her to think about what she was going to do. She'd been deep in thought, tucked into a corner of one of the carriages, when Maureen had stepped in through the open doors.

"I'm sorry," she greeted Sam. "It was Sam, wasn't it?"

Sam nodded her head. "Yeah."

"Sam, could I ask for your help?" The way she smiled made Sam want to say yes, but she had to think of Avi.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I have to go and find my friend."

"Your friend who was taken in the raid?"

"Rani think he'll be dead before I find him." Sam looked down at the map in her hands. "If I find him."

Maureen placed a gentle hand on Sam's shoulder. "But you'll try anyway. I understand. Many people here have lost their friends and family. I'm sure any one of us would take the chance to save just one of them."

Sam sighed. She folded up the map and stood up, slipping it into her back pocket.

"What did you need my help for?"

Sam stared at the scene with wide eyes. They had a young girl laid out on a table with a bullet wound in her leg. She couldn't have been older than fourteen or fifteen, her tights were ripped mid-thigh to reveal where the magic in the bullet was spreading, leaving her flesh purple and blue with the very telling shine of magic. It looked ethereal but it could kill in a matter of hours, to finish the job that the bullet hadn't.

Two other people were already in the room. One was holding the girl's hand and wiping her brow, the other had their hands on the girl's leg.

"We need another person to help get the bullet out and stem the magic infection," Maureen explained from where she was standing next to Sam. "I saw you during the fight; I need someone at your level."

Sam couldn't drag her eyes away from the girl. "I haven't done anything like this before. I don't have --" she blanched. "My control is bad, especially with stuff that requires concentration and finesse. I'm good at blowing up shit, not pulling bullets from legs."

"All you need to do is follow my instructions," Maureen told her calmly.

Sam took a deep breath. "Okay," she said, even though she was still trying to convince herself this was possible. "Okay. Tell me what to do."

Maureen took her gently by the arm and guided her to the table. "I'm going to draw the bullet out," she explained. "I need you and Misaki to stop the spread of the infection while I do that." She motioned to the person who had their hands on the girl's leg. "The infection starts to spread faster when the bullet is removed, so you'll need to concentrate. It will take all three of us to save her."

Sam wasn't sure of the kind of face she was making but she must have looked completely panicked because Misaki smiled reassuringly. "I've been holding the infection back for an hour; just do what I'm doing."

Sam nodded, reaching out to put both her hands on the girl's leg, next to Misaki's hands. She'd done a first aid class at college but that had mostly involved how to set bones and use disinfecting spells. This was in a completely different ballpark.

She could feel the infection the moment her hands touched the girl's skin. A wave of nausea swept over her and she rocked on her feet, waiting for it to go away.

"It'll pass," Misaki whispered. "As long as you don't get any in your blood, you'll be fine. Try not to focus on where it's heaviest; it'll overwhelm you."

Sam could instantly understand what she meant; it was like swallowing a large ball of magic and having nowhere for it to go, only this magic tasted bad and filled her senses with dread. She could only imagine how the girl beneath her felt.

"Try and focus on sucking it back into the mass, rather than cutting it off when it spreads," Misaki continued. "We don't want to leave any traces of it."

"Okay. I think I understand." Sam closed her eyes and tried to block out the rest of the room as she focused on feeling the magic inside the girl's leg. She couldn't think about the girl herself, about how young she was and what would happen if this didn't work, if she messed up. Her hands wanted so badly to shake but she fought to keep them steady.

"Everyone be ready," she heard Maureen say. "I'm going to extract the bullet."

Oh god, Sam thought. She could feel the magic twisting away from the bullet as it moved, seeking to invade as much flesh as it could. She followed the advice that Misaki had given her, pulling the infection back when it tried to seep into the girl's bloodstream. She didn't know if any other part of the process was going well; she was too focused on her own part and too worried about slipping up to look away for even a second.

She might have been at it for a few minutes, or an hour. Sam couldn't tell. She was snapped out of her focus when she felt a hand on her arm. She looked up to see Maureen smiling at her. There was a bullet on the table, covered in blood, but it was out. Misaki was still concentrating next to her.

"It.. it worked?" Sam asked tentatively.

"Step one worked," Maureen said, turning her attention back to the girl's leg. "Now we need to draw the infection out and close the wound."

"This is a little beyond my pay grade," Sam muttered weakly.

"Just follow Misaki's lead," Maureen instructed.

Misaki's brow was furrowed in concentration but she nodded. "We have to pull the mass of magic out so that Maureen can close the wound."

"Oh. So we're literally drawing the infection out."

"Exactly."

"Right." Sam squared her shoulders and allowed herself to fall back into concentrating on the infection in the girl's body. She could feel where Misaki was pulling at the infection, guiding towards the opening of the wound and out into the air. Sam helped by pushing at the strands of infection that tried to escape the mass, reeling them back in and fighting to keep them there.

It took them the better part of half an hour; the infection was constantly twisting and adapting to their tactics, trying to get deeper into the girl's flesh. At one point, Sam could feel that they had lost a strand of magic and they had to pause while she found it and guided it back to the mass. Eventually though, they succeeded, and Sam opened her eyes to see the swirling mass of black magic that they had pulled from the girl's leg. Maureen had been ready beside them with a large jar. They guided the magic inside and she twisted the lid, placing her palm on top to enchant it with a warding spell.

Misaki grinned and punched the air in triumph. Sam felt like throwing up.

"Misaki." Maureen's tone demanded focus. "Are you going to stay and observe?"

Misaki's attention was immediately back on the situation at hand. "Of course." She turned to Sam. "Maureen's teaching me to be a healer," she explained, before leaning back over the table to watch as Maureen began to heal the girl's wound.

Misaki didn't look anything like what Sam expected a nurse or a healer to look like. She might have been Sam's age, or younger. Her short hair was styled in an undercut, which revealed the tattoo of a rune on her skin. She didn't look like any healer that Sam had met but then again, she was realising that no one down here looked as she expected them to.

"You're welcome to stay as well, Sam." Maureen's voice guided her gently back to attention.

She almost said no, but she wanted to see this girl healed. She wanted to see that she had helped. Besides, it wasn't like she would be able to reach Avi today.

"Alright," she said, and joined them back at the table.

Later that night, she sat down to dinner with them. Or at least, what dinner they could rustle up. They had converted one of the rooms into a meeting area, pulling in what chairs and tables they

could find. Some of the others must have brought supplies, or gone to find them, because there was an assortment of foods set out on one of the tables. None of them were particularly enticing or fancy; some bread, a few fruits, chips, muesli bars, and other small snacks that came in bags. When Sam's stomach rumbled to remind her that she hadn't eaten since they'd been at Zoey's club, she decided not to be picky. She grabbed an apple and a bag of chips and went to sit with Misaki.

She'd just taken a bite out of the apple when Misaki spoke.

"Heather's really grateful, you know," she said. She motioned across the room to the girl who had been lying on the table with a bullet in her leg not hours ago. She was eating and talking with the boy who had been holding her hand in the room. "She'll be running around in no time thanks to us."

"I've never helped with a bullet wound before," Sam admitted, crunching on her apple. "I've only done papercuts and set a broken arm or two."

Misaki whistled, a low and vibrating sound. "You get to heal all sorts of injuries when you run with this crowd. And that's just the inner group fighting," she joked. "Never mind the soldiers showing up to shoot at us every once in a while."

"This happens often?" Sam spluttered in surprise.

"Oh yeah." Misaki nodded, though she continued stuffing her bread roll into her mouth. "Every couple of months, sometimes more. They usually find the smaller groups, ones that don't have proper wards up. The one they attacked last night -- we called it Easy Street -- that was the safest place we've had in a while. The wards on that place were so good, there hadn't been a raid in a year or two."

"Oh." Sam felt something icy wash over her.

If Misaki noticed her shift, she didn't comment. "Maureen says they took your friend. I'm sorry about that." Her face turned serious, a little grim even. "Sometimes they kill us, sometimes they take us. We all know someone who's gone."

"That's awful," Sam mumbled. This was bigger than her and Avi. She'd known it before but this was hammering it home. "Did they take many, this time? Do you know?"

"A few," Misaki nodded. "Killed a few too. I heard they killed the Mystic."

The remainder made Sam's heart squeeze. "Yeah, they did."

"I'll kill 'em when I see them again," Misaki vowed and it made Sam smile a little.

"Those don't sound like the words of a healer," she pointed out, half joking.

Misaki rolled her eyes but she was smiling.

The door to the room opened and Sam looked up instinctively to see who had come inside. To her surprise, it was Rani, and she looked equally surprised to see Sam. She took her time, going over to the food first to pick something out, before she slowly made her way over to where Sam and Misaki were sitting.

"You're still here," Rani said. She didn't bother to hide the surprise in her tone.

"So are you," Sam shot back.

"I was helping out," Rani explained. "A lot of people have injuries that need to be healed."

"I was helping heal someone too," Sam told her. She nudged Misaki.

"Hm? Oh yeah." Misaki nodded. "We healed a bullet wound. It was pretty badass."

"You did that?" Rani asked, looking at Sam.

"I'll try not to be offended at your surprise," Sam muttered. "I just followed the instructions. It was hard."

“We were lucky,” Misaki added. “Usually, the magic’s had more time to spread through their system and it takes us hours. Even when we can’t always save them.”

“I can’t believe they shot a kid,” Sam said, looking back over at Heather. “She’s what -- fifteen?”

“Fourteen, I think,” Misaki supplied. “They’re not really that picky when it comes to victims.” She motioned to the room. “And now we’ve got to find another place to set up shop, until they attack there too.”

Sam couldn't think of anything to say to that. She looked to Rani, whose face echoed the same guilt.

The next morning, Sam was looking over the map that Rani had given her. There was no way she could access the internet to get more details about the building, not without alerting someone to their position underground. She was thinking about getting into contact with her aunt, or her dads, but she knew that was bound to get them into trouble as well.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Misaki said, poking her head through the door. “Rani told me about your plan.”

Sam tried not to feel dark about that. “Great. Did she blab to anyone else?”

Misaki laughed as she stepped into the carriage, pulling the door closed behind her. “You’d have to ask her. She thinks you’re going to get yourself killed.”

“It’s not going to be easy,” Sam admitted. “But Rani says it’s the best way to find out where they took Avi.”

Misaki nodded. “I agree. That’s why I’m coming with you.”

Sam stopped. “I can’t ask you to do that. I’m probably going to get caught, or killed, and --”

“Calm down, short stuff,” Misaki cut her off. “I like you, but I’m not going for you.”

Sam blinked. “Why then?”

“Because we need an upper hand against these bastards.” She curled her hand into a fist and pressed it to her side. “Easy Street was the safest place we’ve ever set up shop, and you saw what happened to it.”

Sam gave a quick nod.

“If there’s something -- anything -- that gives us an upper hand, we need to find it,” Misaki continued. “Will you let me come with you?”

“I’m not going to pretend I don’t need all the help I can get,” Sam admitted a little ruefully. “If you really want to.”

“I do.” Misaki reached over and offered Sam her fist. Sam returned the fist bump.

“You should know,” she said. “I don’t have a plan. I don’t even know what the inside of the building looks like.”

Misaki’s lips broke into a grin. “I do.”

Sam let out a low whistle.

“Do I want to know how you got your hands on the building plans?” she asked.

Misaki grinned, shrugging. Next to her, Maureen was a little serious.

“The Mystic acquired them,” she explained. “She always believed that accessing the building’s more secure files would be a worthwhile endeavour. Unfortunately, we were raided before she could put a plan into action.”

And Zoey was killed. Sam didn’t say. And Avi was captured.

“Well, these are going to be a big help,” she said instead, smoothing down one of the sheets of paper. “If we know where the illusion-disruptor fields are, we can avoid setting them off. I don’t suppose either of you know what clearance 1, 2, or 3 means?”

“Not a clue,” Misaki replied. “Passes? Key cards maybe?”

“That’ll be a problem,” Sam mused. “Depending on where we need to go. Anything like that would probably be protected against magic duplicates. We might need to get real ones from the staff.”

“I’m still not sure I approve of any of this,” Maureen said, arms crossed over her chest. “There’s a reason we’ve never tried this before. There is a very large chance that you will be caught.”

“That’s why it’s a good plan,” Misaki assured her. “No one will expect it ‘cause it’s totally crazy!”

“That does not fill me with confidence.” Maureen gave her a withering look and sighed. “I’m just not fond of the idea of you two going in there alone.”

“Three.”

All heads whipped around to find Rani leaning against the door frame. She pushed off and walked towards them. Sam’s eyes followed her the whole way.

“What was that?” Maureen asked.

“The three of us,” Rani clarified, looking down at the building plans spread out in front of them. “I’m going with them.”

“Like hell you are--” Sam started to say, at the same time that Misaki exclaimed, “Yes! That’s what I’m talking about!”

Misaki looked between Rani and Sam. Rani glared at Sam. Sam glared right back.

“Why?” she asked.

Rani’s brow creased in confusion. “What?”

“Why do you suddenly want to help?” Sam pressed. “You didn’t care a few hours ago.”

“I changed my mind.” Rani replied through gritted teeth. “There could be useful information there, information I could use.”

Sam scoffed in disbelief.

“And,” Rani continued, ignoring her. “You need me.” She fixed Sam with a Look that Sam took to mean *you’ve seen what I can do; you know you need me.*

Sam opened her mouth to argue anyway but Maureen was already speaking.

“It’s an improvement,” she agreed, nodding Rani’s way. “But you need to have a very good plan on how you’re going to get in, get your information, and get back out. Preferably without being detected at all.”

“We can’t avoid the IDFs,” Misaki motioned to the map in front of them. “They’ve got checkpoints at every entrance.”

Sam was still glaring at Rani, who ignored her and walked over to the map, inspecting it.

“I can take care of the IDFs,” she said. “But only one or two, maybe three. Someone else would have to maintain the illusion spell.”

“Bullshit,” Sam said.

“No way,” Misaki said, kinder than Sam. “They pick up magic when you walk through them. Nobody can maintain a spell through that and not get caught. And we couldn’t shut them off without alerting someone.”

"I can disable them temporarily," Rani explained. "Not the machine part; the magic component."

"Bullshit." It was Misaki this time. "There's no way to target that and not the rest of the machine. Others have tried."

Rani looked uncomfortable for a moment, pausing like she wasn't going to continue. "I can do it," she said after a moment. "I can -- block the magic component."

There was a moment of tense silence. Misaki snorted, Maureen frowned, but Sam was remembering a group of OMA soldiers who had very suddenly been rendered unable to use their magical weapons.

"No one can block a magic connection," Misaki argued, when no one else spoke up. "Either the magic's there or it's not. If magic could be blocked, don't you think the OMA would have figured out a way to use that to their advantage?"

"Does it work permanently?" Sam asked.

Rani's expression was guarded. "I've never stuck around long enough to find out."

"What are you--" Misaki started.

"Can you do that to a person?" Sam ploughed on, holding Rani's gaze. "Block them from using magic?"

"I don't know," Rani admitted. "I've never tried."

"Oh, come on guys," Misaki pleaded. "That's crazy."

"I've seen her do it," Sam said, without looking away from Rani. "To some OMA soldiers. She hit them with something and they couldn't use their guns. It was like all the magic had been sucked away. I couldn't access anything." Misaki was regarding them both now with utter seriousness.

“That’s a very valuable skill,” Maureen said, before Misaki could seem to formulate a response. “One that the OMA would pay dearly to control.”

“No doubt,” Misaki agreed. Her eyes were alight with new interest. “And you reckon you can do that to the machines?”

“One or two,” Rani repeated. “Maybe three.”

“So we need to pick the three that will get us the furthest in,” Misaki said. “Front door, obviously.” She pointed to it on the map. “There’s probably one on every level. Maybe we gotta limit ourselves to one level?”

“Top level,” Sam suggested. “That’ll be where they keep the best stuff.”

“Looks like that needs a level three clearance,” Misaki said. “That could be passes, fingerprints -- who knows?”

“Maye we start at the bottom then, see how much information we can get there?”

“Sure, that only needs a level one clearance. That’s gotta be way easier to manage.”

“It’s the OMA,” Rani interrupted them. “You don’t think they’re going to have anti-magic precautions on their passes or their key cards?”

Misaki snorted. “Of course they will. That’s why we’re not going to use a fake key card. We’re going to steal a real one.”

Rani and Sam exchanged a look, in agreement about something for the first time today.

“Don’t make faces!” Misaki shook her head with a laugh. “If I can get us three key cards, can you two make yourselves look like them?”

“Someone else will need to maintain my illusion if I’m going to get us through the IDFs,” Rani said.

“I can hold two illusions, sure.” Sam nodded. She wasn’t sure for how long she could do that, but she didn’t want to admit it. Rani and Misaki both sounded so competent, and confident in their competency. She couldn’t bear to have them think that she couldn’t hold up her end of the deal.

“Okay then. Tomorrow?” Rani looked to her first, then to Misaki.

“I’m ready,” Misaki said emphatically. “Hell yes.”

“You’re sure it’s best to do this during the day?” Maureen asked, sceptically. “Why not break in under the cover of night?”

Sam shook her head. “There’s more security measures at night. They’ll have motion detectors, all the alarms will go up. Everything will be quiet and still. If we go in during the day...”

“We can blend in,” Rani finished for her. “We’ll have less security to deal with and we can move with the crowd. Daytime is better.”

Maureen took a deep breath and then shrugged helplessly. “Well, I clearly won’t be able to convince you not to go. At least let me see if we have any boosters to spare.”

“Shouldn’t we save them for healing?” Misaki asked.

Maureen regarded her for a moment with a smile. “I’ll see what we have to spare,” she repeated, then slipped out the door.

Chapter 7

Sam stared up at the Office of Magical Affairs building, glinting silver in the noon sunlight, and tried to remember how she'd ever felt at ease in this place. She remembered coming here to file her registry papers and receive the shiny Level 2 Natural Magical User card that she'd carried in her wallet until yesterday. Her Dad had come with her and she'd felt no trepidation as she entered through the large, glass front doors.

Now she looked at fifteen stories of shining bureaucracy and felt nothing but anger and fear.

Mostly fear.

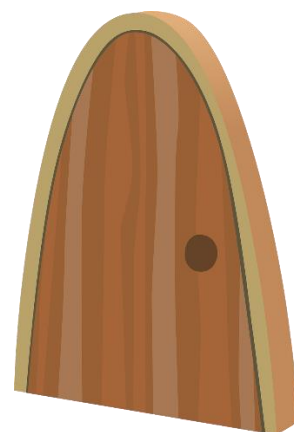
"I'm back y'all," Misaki's voice broke the silence of the alleyway, making Sam jump in surprise. "Sorry, sorry. I'm like a shadow in the night."

Sam raised an eyebrow in amusement as she turned to look at the other girl. "Yeah, you're like a real life rogue."

Misaki's face split into a grin. "Dude. My D&D character is a rogue."

"That sounds about right."

"Did you get them?" Rani asked, stepping out from an alcove in the alley. Her blank gaze focused on Misaki, who smiled sheepishly but was otherwise unphased. She reached into the pocket of her jacket and pulled out three cards.



Misaki's a rogue! I wonder what D&D class Derrida would be...

"These folks were headed to a business lunch," she said, fanning out the cards and offering them to Rani and Sam. "Should be at least an hour."

Sam exhaled slowly and took one of the cards. "An hour should be enough, right?" she asked. "And then you slip the passes back to them like nothing happened."

"That's the idea," Misaki agreed, giving her a wink. "Like a real life rogue."

Rani made a noise of displeasure as she picked her own card. "Nerds."

Sam threw her a look. "RPGs aren't nerdy anymore. They're cool."

"Yeah, and besides," Misaki added, gripping the remaining card in her hands. "We're a real life party right now. Two sorcerers and a rogue out on a stealth mission."

"And that always goes so well," Sam joked, which earned her a grin from Misaki. "We should have hired a cleric."

Misaki shrugged. "You and I did pretty good on that leg. We could heal some shit together."

"Enough. Let's get a move on." Rani said. She nodded to Misaki, who pulled out her phone and swiped until she found the relevant pictures on her phone. Then she turned it in her hand to show Sam the screen.

The photo was of two women, one blonde and the other brunette. One was wearing a pencil skirt, the other black trousers, and both were wearing nice button up shirts. Pencil Skirt was taller than Trousers, and her face was pointier. Sam chose her for Rani.

She stared at the photo, then flicked her eyes over to where Rani was standing. Back to the picture. Back to Rani. She took the picture into her mind and imposed the image over Rani's blank expression. Placed the pencil skirt and buttoned blouse over Rani's jeans and jacket combo, like paper cut outs on a dress up doll.

Sam tugged at the magic in the air, pulling at it and weaving it into the image she'd formed in her head. When she'd gathered enough, and she could feel the magic coalescing around Rani, Sam pressed her hands together in a series of practiced gestures and muttered the only illusion spell she

knew: *fructum illusio*. It was a little simple, and she knew Avi would have come up with something far more creative, but he had always been the magical theory nut. She just tended to set things on fire.

The spell settled into shape in front of Rani and then sank into form around her. Sam blinked and in the next second, Rani looked like the woman in the pencil skirt.

“Nice work!” Misaki said, circling Rani to inspect the illusion. “Seriously, dude. This is tight.”

“Thank you,” Sam mumbled, feeling shy all of a sudden. Then she cleared her throat and squared her shoulders. “Show me the picture again?”

When both of Sam’s illusions were in place, and Misaki was busy making her own, Rani turned to Sam.

“Are you sure you’ve got this?” she asked. It was odd to see the face of Pencil Skirt talking but to hear Rani’s voice talking.

Was she sure? Of course not, but she wasn’t about to tell Rani that. Whether it was generalized stubbornness or just a desire not to look weak in front of *Rani*, it had lit a fire of determination in her belly.

Was she sure? Abso-fucking-lutely not, but she sure as hell was going to *look* like she was sure.

Sam plastered a grin on her face and gave Rani a thumbs up. “Ready when you are.”

“Good.” Rani’s expression didn’t change. “Because if we mess this up, we’ll all be getting locked up somewhere far worse than jail. No one will save your friend. Or you.” And with those devastating words, she turned and walked over to Misaki.

Sam tried to remember how to breathe. Rani was right. Sam knew she was right. She hadn’t even said anything that Sam didn’t already know. It was just that hearing the words out loud had

centred them in reality and made everything more real by comparison. She didn't want to get caught by the OMA. She didn't want Rani and Misaki to get caught and taken away. She didn't want Avi to rot in whatever prison they had him in, if he was still alive.

She shook away the thoughts and jogged after Rani, catching up to her and Misaki.

"Let's do it," she said, slipping the ID into her back pocket. "One more time: we walk in, totally cool and casual. Rani shuts off the IDFs at the last minute so they don't suspect anything. We scan the IDs and move through. Yeah?"

"Yeah." Misaki agreed. "And what if--"

"Enough talking about," Rani declared. "We just need to do it."

She looked at them both and then walked out into the street, towards the OMA building. Sam and Misaki looked at each other with wide eyes before scrambling to catch up to her.

"Walk casually," Rani ordered, like she was the expert on the infiltration of government buildings. Sam held back the urge to stick her tongue out mockingly.

They made it through the large, glass turning door easily. Despite being crowded up with other people, no one spared them a second glance or seemed worried about them. They spilled into the front foyer of the building along with the crowd, and then made their way over to the IDFs. There were two security guards stationed to the side of the machines; they weren't watching the IDFs intently, obviously trustful enough of the technology, but their mere presence was enough to set Sam's nerves alight.

She clenched her fist tight by her side as she took her place behind Misaki in the line. They stepped forward casually. Her illusions held. Misaki's illusion held in front of her. Misaki stepped towards the IDFs and Sam felt the movement of Rani's hand behind her. She didn't feel anything, but she knew that didn't necessarily mean anything.

All three of them took a collective breath as Misaki stepped through the IDF barrier, holding her ID card up to pass it over the scanner.

No alarms went off. Misaki's illusion held up.

She stepped through to the other side of the IDF machines and made her way a few metres to the left and stopped there to wait.

Sam swallowed thickly as she stepped up to take her turn. Beads of sweat were dripping down the back of her neck. She calmly reminded herself that no one could tell through the illusion.

Nothing happened as she stepped past the IDF. Rani's tactic was still working. She held her ID up to the scanner and held her breath. It gave an affirmative beep and a light on the machine turned green.

Sam exhaled and went to join Misaki. They both watched as Rani stepped up to the machine. The IDF didn't go off, and Sam felt Misaki relax next to her. She gritted her teeth and concentrated on holding the illusion spell.

Rani held her own ID card up to the scanner. The machine beeped three times and the light turned red. Rani looked up in alarm as one of the security guards started towards her. Sam started to step forward, but Rani caught her gaze across the empty space and shook her head minutely. She planted herself next to Misaki instead and waited.

Rani was in conversation with the guard, calmly motioning to the card and then back to the machine. They were speaking too quietly to hear what they were saying. The guard nodded and took the card, then turned and walked back to his desk.

Sam started to panic. She wasn't sure how long Rani could keep up her trick, but she knew that the illusion spell was *not* going to survive an interrogation by the security guards, especially if they had to take Rani to another part of the building. She was too busy panicking to notice the problem until she focused her gaze again.

Rani looked over at her, eyes wide and panicked, and Sam quickly realised why. Rani's illusion was shifting, and Sam could feel her own failing alongside it. She couldn't hold on to the magic; she was rapidly losing control of it, the threads falling through her mind and the power being sucked away as if through the tubing of a vacuum.

They were going to get arrested. They were going to be taken and thrown into the kind of black site prison she'd seen in movies. Her dads would never know what happened to her. She'd never save Avi. Avi, who'd only ever wanted to go to school and learn magic theory. Who'd traded his knowledge with street gangs for stupid things like necklaces...

Sam's hand went immediately to the necklace in the front pocket of her jeans. She'd completely forgotten about it. It wasn't enough to do any high-level magic but she felt it pulse as her fingers wrapped around it. Maybe it would be enough.

She crushed the stone as best she could in the confines of her pocket. The magic didn't burst out like it should have, instead seeping out through the cracks that she'd managed to make in the stone. It didn't matter. She pressed her fingers closer and inhaled, sucking up the magic through her hand as best she could. She let it culminate at her chest and then fed it through, first into the illusion spell around Rani, and then the one around herself.

There were a few tense seconds where Sam thought it might not actually be enough. Then both spells shifted and settled, illusions still firmly in place.

The security guard walked back over to Rani, his expression apologetic.

"My apologies, ma'am," he said to Rani, handing her back the ID card. "Must have been a hitch in the system. Have a nice day."

"Thank you," Rani said with a slight dip of her head. Then she walked calmly in Sam and Misaki's direction.

"Hoooooly shit," Misaki said under her breath.

“Not yet,” Rani hissed quietly.

She led them down a corridor, round one corner, then another, and then into the women’s bathroom.

“That was *crazy!*” Misaki exclaimed when the door closed.

“That was too close,” Rani said, rounding on Sam, who was leaning backwards against the sink. She pressed an accusing finger to Sam’s chest. “You said you could handle it.”

“I *did* handle it,” Sam argued, swatting Rani’s hand away. “What’s your problem?”

“You nearly got us caught!” Rani hissed. They were being careful not to raise their voices, by some kind of silent agreement, but Sam could tell that Rani wanted to yell at her. “I saw the illusions failing. I know you did too.”

“So?” Sam shrugged her shoulders angrily. “We made it through, didn’t we? We *didn’t* get caught.”

“That’s not the point and you *know it.*” Rani said. “You were going to lose the spell and then you got some kind of boost at the last second.”

“I --” Sam faltered, eyes going wide in surprise. “How did you know that?”

Rani’s eyes narrowed in response. “I felt it.”

“You *felt* it?” Misaki chimed in from where she was leaning against the tiled wall. “Like, you felt her get the boost?”

Sam’s gaze snapped back to Rani as she registered Misaki’s words. It made sense for Rani to have felt the illusion around her wavering, but improbable that she’d felt Sam manipulating the magic from the necklace given the distance between them at the time. Except... there were a lot of things about Rani that seemed improbable.

"I did," Rani answered Misaki's question without taking her eyes off Sam. Sam felt pinned beneath her gaze. "I'm not going any further unless you explain."

Sam let out a shuddering breath and pulled the necklace from her pocket, offering it up for inspection. "Avi gave it to me. I forgot about it until I was standing there and I started to lose control of the spell."

Rani's expression darkened. "So you *did* lose control."

"Clearly I didn't" Sam retorted, looking Rani up and down. The spell was still in full effect on both of them. She swallowed. "I don't know if I would have kept it up without the boost. I'll never know."

Rani stepped back with a sound of frustration, reaching up to run a hand through her hair. It looked odd, given that the illusion of the woman's hair stayed firmly in place as Rani's hand moved through it. The illusion shifted to accommodate their facial expressions but everything else was stagnant. "You should have *said* something!"

"I lose control when I get nervous," Sam explained quietly. She hung her head and looked at the tiled floor, shame filling her in a rush. "High pressure situations are hard."

"This whole thing is a high pressure situation!" Rani exclaimed, then slapped her hand over her mouth and tilted her head to the ceiling, like she was praying for mercy.

Sam felt someone step in front of her, and looked up to see Misaki with a kind smile on her face.

"You don't need to be able to do everything, Sam," she said, reaching out to lay a hand on Sam's shoulder. "But we have to be honest about what we can and can't do, or this whole thing will blow up in our faces."

Sam took a deep breath and nodded. "Yeah, I know. I'm sorry."

Misaki's smile turned back into her usual grin. "Forgiven! See? That was easy." She patted Sam's shoulder in support. "Okay. Now, quick rundown. What magic are you good at?"

"Blowing things up."

A thoughtful nod. "And what are you not good at?"

"Not blowing things up."

Misaki let out a loud laugh, which made Rani turn and glare at her. She put her hand over mouth to stifle the noise but she didn't look sorry.

"Can you hold the illusion spells for now?" she asked, when she'd stopped chuckling.

"Yeah," Sam confirmed. "No more IDFs. I should be fine."

"Okay." Another comforting shoulder pat. "Just let us know if things get too tough. We ready to keep moving?"

"Let's go," Rani said, instead of answering the question. She looked at Misaki, then at Sam, gaze lingering a little longer. Sam straightened, trying to look more confident than she felt. Rani opened the door and walked out of the bathroom. Sam and Misaki shared a look before following her out.

Misaki led them through the office corridors and towards the elevator. She'd studied the map for hours and practically memorised the floorplan of the building, so both Sam and Rani had been happy to let her lead. Their path took them straight to the elevator which was blissfully empty when they stepped inside.

"Level 6," Misaki said. Sam pressed the button awkwardly with her elbow.

The elevator stopped on the third floor and three men stepped inside. The three women crowded themselves against the back wall, collectively holding their breaths. The men spread out, taking up all of the free space. Sam turned to express her distress and found Misaki making a rude face at their backs. Sam had to stifle a laugh at the sight, which alerted Rani to the situation. Sam could tell the moment she registered Misaki's face because the corners of her mouth started to quiver, and then she was biting her lip and turning away to laugh into her shoulder.

The men stepped out onto the fourth level. When the doors closed again, the three women fell forward into the empty space in a fit of giggles.

"Amazing," Misaki remarked, shaking her head as she laughed.

"God forbid they be less than five feet apart from each other," Rani added.

The elevator chimed and their faces turned serious again. The elevator doors opened and they exited onto the sixth floor.

Misaki led them past cubicles and workstations, past a kitchen that smelt like cheese toasties, and towards the back of the floor. She gestured wordlessly to a room right at the back and off to the left, then moved towards it. Rani and Sam followed her, keeping their heads down and ignoring the chatter of the workplace around them.

They slipped into the room and Rani closed the door behind them. She placed her hand over the door handle and there was a sound as the lock clicked into place.

"Okay, we're good," she said, nodding at Misaki.

There were two desks, each with a computer monitor and the rest of a desktop setup. Misaki dropped into the chair in front of the left computer and placed her hands on the keyboard. The monitor lit up to a login screen.

“Are you sure you know what you’re looking for?” Rani asked, leaning over Misaki’s shoulder to look at the screen.

Sam took a deep, calming breath. “Yes. I listened to my dad talk about this. Sometimes assets will be listed but they’ll call them something misleading. And if the actual asset itself isn’t recorded, then the resources that they use and send out to the asset will be recorded somewhere. They’ll be there. We just need to find them.” She placed a hand on Misaki’s other shoulder as she pulled up a window on the screen. “Look for a location first. It’ll have an ambiguous title like storage warehouse or something, but it’ll have a lot of resources redirected to it. Maybe some personnel if we’re lucky.”

Misaki closed her eyes and Sam watched as small lights sparked underneath her fingers. They flickered over the keyboard and then sank underneath the keys, flitting around through the hardware before travelling up the wire at the back and up into the monitor.

She and Rani were silent as they watched Misaki work. She didn’t move or speak, but windows began to rapidly open and close on the monitor. Search terms would appear in the bars at the top, then several windows would open, and information would spill out across the screen. Then the windows would close again with record speed.

“I’m not getting anything like that,” Misaki said after a minute. “Everything is airtight in here, Sam. Accounted for and signed off on. If it *is* in here, they’re making it all look above board.”

Sam huffed and massaged the bridge of her nose. Rani tapped her foot impatiently. “Okay, *okay*. Look for bulk resources that might have been diverted, lost along the chain somewhere. They won’t have a location attached but it’ll be stuff like water, batteries, um, radios?”

“IDFs,” Rani supplied.

“Yeah, Rani’s right,” Sam said. “They’ll have other security measures too. Magic detectors, maybe. Those are still pretty rare but if the OMA’s running some kind of shady off the books operation; they’ll have them.”

“Okay. Give me a sec,” Misaki said, and the sparks appeared from her fingertips again.

“I gotta learn how to do that,” Sam muttered.

“Shh,” Rani said, but the corners of her mouth were turned up slightly.

Sam’s cheeks went red and she re-focused on the screen.

“It’s hard,” Misaki said after a moment. “There’s spots that the info might be hidden, but I can’t see into them without actually hacking the system.”

Rani made a noise of surprise. “I thought that’s what you were doing?”

Misaki shook her head but didn’t take her eyes off the screen. “The spell I’m using lets me *skim* the servers that this computer’s connected to, kind of like driving past houses on the street. But if I try and go any further in, it’ll set off any fail safes they have set up.”

“Like breaking into one of the houses,” Sam added.

Rani nodded her understanding. “Okay. And you’re not getting anything from a cursory look?”

“Nope,” Misaki replied, popping the ‘p’ sound. “I’m thinking maybe I should -” she stopped talking and her fingers flew across the keyboard, faster than before. “Wait. I’ve found something. Or, really, I didn’t find something.”

Sam grinned and leant forward, glancing at the screen even though she had no idea what she was looking at. “Explain?”

“You were right,” Misaki said, which made Sam grin even wider. “There’s a -- like, a gap, or something, in the trail. There’s all these resources but after the initial order and transport, there’s no trace of them. It’s like they disappear off the face of the Earth.”

“Okay, okay.” Sam tapped her fingers on the desk below her as she thought. “Are the orders all made under a particular office? Maybe if we can narrow it down, we only have to break into one -”

“Actually,” Misaki interrupted her. “They’re all signed off by *one guy*.” She raised a hand to point at the document sheds just brought up onto the screen. It was an order for water, coffee, and tea. The bottom of the order was signed by: *Ralph Ellis*.

“Who’s Ralph Ellis?” Rani asked.

Misaki shrugged. “No idea, but his name’s on all the orders. You think he can tell us where they’re all going?”

“Let’s go and find him and ask,” Sam suggested, cracking her knuckles.

“Don’t get stupid,” Rani admonished her. “This is supposed to be infiltration, not a full-on assault. If we go interrogating staff members, they’re going to know we were here.”

Sam clenched her fist but she knew that Rani was right. There was no way the three of them could take on the full force of the OMA building’s security. Besides, it was better to have secrecy and surprise on their side.

She wished she could call her dad, have him look into the OMA and their finances; he’d be able to find where they’d taken Avi. But she knew that was naive, at best. Both her dads were deep within the system and any move towards this would expose them to more danger than Sam wanted to think about. If only one of them was *already* involved with the OMA...

“Shit!” she swore loudly, then clapped a hand over her mouth. She threw an apologetic look at Rani, who had turned to glare at her. “Sorry, sorry,” she muttered. “I just -- I know who we can talk to.”

Rani raised an eyebrow. “Who?”

“My aunt Jaime.”

Chapter 8

They argued for an hour before Rani finally agreed to follow Sam back to Jaime's house.

"If they catch us," Rani had argued. "We're dead."

"Then let's not get caught," had been Sam's reply.

They couldn't use public transport; Rani was still adamant about that. Which meant an hour and a half long trek back to Drummoyne on foot. They kept the illusions up for the first thirty minutes of the journey, though mercifully, Rani said she could maintain her own.

"It's fine," she had said; not kindly, but something approaching that. "I told you to be honest about what you can handle. It's the only way we're going to make it through this."

Sam had nodded and dropped the illusion with a relieved sigh. Maintaining an illusion spell on herself wasn't too tough, but maintaining a spell on someone *else* was always going to be more difficult. She was glad for the reprieve.

At the thirty-minute mark, they ducked into a side alley and dropped all of the illusions. Sam was immediately reminded of just how colourful Misaki was, and how distracting Rani was. Mercifully, Misaki asked for clarification on who they were going to visit, and Sam was glad to grab at the distraction with both hands.

"My aunt Jaime," she explained. "That's who Rani was coming to find when she ran into me and my friend. She was in the military, but we always thought she was just doing — normal army stuff."

"Bold of you to assume this stuff *isn't* normal army stuff," Rani snorted.

Sam rolled her eyes. "Sure. I guess. Excuse me for wanting to think that the entire Armed Forces isn't going around killing NMUs."

“Newsflash; they’ve always been like that.” Rani said bluntly.

“Why is it so important for you to think the army isn’t that way?” Misaki asked, before Sam could say something rude in response.

Sam sighed, shoulders slumping in defeat. “I wanted to join.”

Both women raised their eyebrows but waited for her to continue.

“Look, my dads wanted me to go into something official. One’s a cop and one’s a lawyer. They believe in public service.” She gave a self-deprecating shrug. “My grades aren’t good enough for law or politics or medicine, and there’s no way I’d get onto the force. I figured I could do a few years for the army, y’know. They could pay for a uni degree, train my magic up a little bit.” Her cheeks heated up at the acknowledgement of her less-than-stellar control.

They were silent for a minute as they continued to walk. Then, Misaki laughed and shook her head.

“I just can’t see you as a soldier,” she said, as an explanation.

“Why not?” Sam didn’t know whether to be insulted or not.

“No, it’s just —” Misaki laughed again. “You’re so stubborn! And you argue with *everyone*. I can’t imagine you taking orders from some stern, middle-aged, white guy. All *sir—yes—sir*.” She gave a mock salute and kicked her legs out in a ridiculous imitation of a march.

There was a sound from her left, and Sam turned with wide-eyed disbelief to see that Rani was laughing too. She rolled her eyes when she caught Sam watching.

“Oh, come on,” she said. “She’s got you there.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter,” Sam continued, eyes back on the road. “My application got rejected. Turns out even the military won’t take you if you’re a magical fuck up.”

The laughter dissolved into silence again.

“Where would you be now?” Misaki asked carefully. “If you’d been accepted.”

Sam shrugged one shoulder. “Probably in boot camp or basic training. Definitely not here.”

“Well, I wish I could say I was sorry that you got rejected,” Misaki said. “But I’m not. You’d probably be off training to hunt down people like us, and then I never would have met you.”

Sam considered her, all wildly coloured hair and guileless expression, and couldn’t help but smile back at her. “Yeah, I guess,” she said. “I s’pose this is still better than being at boot camp.”

“Too right it is.” Misaki reached over and patted her on the back. “You’re taking on the government instead of taking *for* it. It’s a good thing.”

“I’ll let you know when it starts feeling like that,” Sam said, then gestured across the street to a small park. “Let’s cross here. Jaime’s is on the other side.”

Sam led them across the grass and into a group of trees on the other side of the park.

“Hang on,” she said, and crouched down on the ground. “We’re easily trackable right now. Let me try and muddy the scent.”

She pulled out a piece of pink chalk and started to draw some basic symbols into the dirt; *hidden, erase, obscure.*

“You’re sure *this* will cover our tracks?” Rani asked, watching Sam with an expression of clear doubt.

Sam nodded. “Trust me. Avi and I used to use this all the time.” Her heart clenched at the thought of her best friend, but she focused on drawing the runes in front of her. It would have been better to use chalk, but she hadn’t had the time to grab any since they’d first run from Jaime’s place, so dirt was going to have to do.

She finished the last symbol and pressed her hands into the concrete, pushing the magic down into the hard surface and willing it to dissipate into the ground around them. She felt the magic take hold, clearing their tracks for at least a few hundred metres. It might have gone further than that, but by that point it was out of her range of concentration.

“We’re covered for a few hundred metres back,” Sam told them, standing back up and brushing the dirt from her knees. “At least. So, in the unlikely event that anyone’s tracking us, they’ll hit that point and get very confused.”

“Helpful,” Rani said in that blank way of hers that meant Sam couldn’t tell if she was being sarcastic or not.

“Every little bit helps,” Misaki added. “I’ll feel better once we’re inside though.”

“Right.” Sam nodded. “Let’s go.” She gestured across the street, where the back gate to Jaime’s house waited.

She led them across the street quickly and through the back gate. She made sure to run her fingers across one of the warding runes on the brick wall beside the gate, disabling it in the way that Jaime had taught her. Then, she took them up to the back door and knocked.

It only took a few moments of silence before the door creaked open a fraction and Jaime’s face appeared in the gap. Then the sound of a chain lock being undone, and the door opened wider.

“Sam?” Jaime asked, looking from her, to Rani, to Misaki, and then back to her again. Her eyes were wide as she took in the sight of her niece. “You’re okay!” Her eyes narrowed and the relief was gone as quickly as it had come. “What the hell are you doing here?” she hissed.

“We need your help,” Sam said. “*Please*, Jaime.”

Jaime looked skyward, let out a breath, and then opened the door. “Come on, everyone in. Hurry up.” She ushered them through and closed the door the very second Misaki had crossed the

threshold. She held up her hands to make several gestures, and then they all watched as powerful blue circles of magic released from her hands and sunk into the door.

“Holy shit!” Misaki said, stepping up to inspect the door. “That was some heavy layer warding. What base did you use?”

“Latin,” Jaime replied automatically, then shook her head in disbelief. She turned to Sam. “Who the hell is this?”

“That’s Misaki,” Sam supplied helpfully.

“People call me Misaki,” Misaki joked, offering her hand.

Jaime shook her hand but she looked like she was in the twilight zone as she did so. “Come away from the door,” she ordered, and ushered them all down the hallway and into the kitchen. Sam noticed that there were significantly less things in the hallway, and that one of the chairs was missing from the dining table.

“It’s fine, we covered our tracks,” she tried to assure Jaime, surveying the kitchen for changes as well. Nothing there seemed out of place. She took some glasses out of the cupboard and started to get them all some water.

“You don’t know that,” Jaime argued. “You have *no idea* what they’re capable of doing.”

“Some of us have an idea,” Misaki said, gratefully taking the glass that Sam offered.

“Some of us have more than an idea,” Rani added, meeting Sam’s eyes for just a moment before turning back to Jaime. “You know that.”

Jaime sucked in a breath through her teeth. “Yes. I do know that. And I’m sorry that you’re on their radar, but you have to know that coming back here was a *terrible* idea.”

“I tried to tell them,” Rani started.

“We had to,” Sam interrupted her, handing a glass off to her and then taking a gulp from her own. “Before we get into that, how are my dads?”

“Worried,” Jaime told her. “Michael had units out looking for you, but the OMA came in and took over. Shut the whole thing down. Gabriel’s frantic, trying to do something from the legal side.” She shrugged tiredly. “I only got five minutes with them in person. Too worried about the phones being tapped.”

Sam sucked in a breath. It sucked beyond belief that her dads had to be worried about her like this. She’d always tried to keep them away from any troubles she had, lest they worry themselves stupid. Jaime was right though. She couldn’t call them, and there was no way she was going to risk their safety by going to see them. They were on their own.

“We came because we need info and we weren’t going to get it from that OMA buildings.”

Jaime put a hand to her forehead and took a deep breath. “You guys went to the OMA building? Christ, Sam. Are you *trying* to get yourself arrested? What the fuck is going on?”

“They’ve got Avi.”

Jaime dropped her hand to look at Sam. Her expression fell and Sam’s heart followed.

“Oh, Sam,” she said, reaching over to place a hand on Sam’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

Sam wrenched away from her, shaking her head. “Don’t say it like that. We’re going to get him. That’s why we need your help.”

Jaime dropped her hand, disheartened. “When did they take him? How?”

Sam looked to Rani, who hesitated for a second, and then nodded curtly.

“We went to see this friend of Rani’s, the Mystic —”

“Of course you know the Mystic,” Jaime scowled. “Do you know how —”

“Knew,” Rani corrected her. Her expression was hard, but Sam could see the way her eyes went wet with unshed tears. “They killed her.”

Jaime blew out a breath and gestured for Sam to continue.

“We were meeting up with her to get passports and stuff,” Sam continued. “That’s where they hit us. In the Underground.”

“Jesus, you were *there*?” Jaime asked. “They talked about it on the news, said they’d cleared out a small terrorist cell.”

Misinformation and stereotyping are part of colonialism’s toolsets...



...wanna know what else I learned about colonialism?

“Well, they lied,” Sam told her. She was getting to a point where these things didn’t surprise her anymore, even though they still stung or disappointed her. “We never found out if we were the reason the Underground was attacked but I figured that was what happened. They came looking for us and took on the whole street to find us.”

“Unlikely,” Jaime said. “They’ve taken places like the Underground before. First of all, that kind of manpower wouldn’t be worth it, even for someone they seem to want as bad as you,” she nodded at Rani. “And secondly; even if they’d tracked you there, there’s no way to get through that level of warding unless you’ve been told the way through. Either someone let the OMA in there or they’ve got some seriously powerful level ones.”

“That’s a harrowing thought,” Misaki said. “Especially for the remaining folks from the Underground.”

Jaime raised an eyebrow. "You're in contact with them?"

The three of them looked at each other sheepishly.

"I'm part of it," Misaki admitted.

"I might as well be," Rani said.

"I'm with them," Sam added, after a second's pause.

Now, she realised that it was true. Even if there had been a chance of coming back home now, which she was pretty sure there wasn't, there was no way she could abandon Avi or the people who had helped her.

She wasn't one-hundred-percent sure, but she wasn't about to admit that in front of these three women.

Jaime pushed herself away from the kitchen bench and reached into the cupboard to grab herself a glass and a bottle of whiskey. The gesture made the back of her t-shirt ride up, revealing an angry purple bruise on her side, just above her hip and the waistband of her jeans.

"Jaime!" Sam cried, eyes going wide. "What the hell happened?"

Jaime looked back at her, confused, but her expression grew dark as she looked down to where Sam's gaze was fixed. "It's nothing, Sam. Don't worry about it."

Sam scowled in response.

"It was them, wasn't it?" she said. "The agents who were here the other day."

Jaime's silence spoke volumes.

"I thought you knew one of them!" Sam protested. "I thought you'd worked with him!"

"Doesn't matter." Jaime shrugged, and then winced like it hurt. "They want Rani, bad. And they'll do anything to get what they want."

“So they just got to rough you up?”

“I let you escape,” Jaime supplied, by way of explanation. “So I got hauled in for questioning. I’m lucky that’s all it was.”

Sam made a noise of disgust.

“Listen, Sam.” Jaime’s expression grew serious, her tone dropped. “You can’t fuck around with these guys. I’m sorry about Avi but there’s *nothing* you can do. They’ll have him at a secure facility by now, if they even bothered to take him that far.” Sam’s face must have done something drastic because Jaime’s own expression crumpled. “*I’m sorry*. But he’s not even a level two magic user, and I’m assuming he can’t tell them where the rest of the Underground folks are. He’s useless to them.”

“So, they’d just kill him?” Sam asked brokenly.

“They’d already shot him when they took him,” Rani supplied, unhelpfully. At least she sounded a little regretful about the fact. “We don’t even know if he’s alive.”

“He is!” Sam cried, turning on Rani. “I know he is.”

Rani put her hands up in defence. “Hey, I’m here, aren’t I?”

Misaki reached over and put a hand on Sam’s shoulder. “Besides, it’s a chance to take the OMA down a peg. We’re just hitting two birds with one risky, under-planned stone.”

Sam took a steadying breath and turned back to her aunt. “Please, Jaime. Is there *anything* you can give us?”

Jaime took a moment and looked at them all, considering them all individually before her gaze finally landed on Sam.

“Alright,” she said eventually. She passed Sam the glass and bottle that she was holding. “Sit down and pour me a glass of that. I’ll be back in a second. Shit, this is insane.”

Jaime spread the map across the table. Sam looked over the familiar terrain; Sydney, its streets all criss-crossed and overlapping in grids, over to the outer suburbs bordering on the tree line of what became the Blue Mountains National Park. They were waiting patiently as Jaime went to grab a second map from the kitchen drawer.

“Hopefully we’re looking at somewhere in the outer suburbs,” Sam said, gesturing to the area in question. “I don’t like the idea of having to infiltrate something in the middle of the city.”

“An industrial area would be best,” Misaki agreed. “Less traffic, but enough that we can blend in until we get close. If we’re lucky, this could be a mission with five people or less.”

“The less people involved, the better,” Rani said.

Jaime walked back over and spread out a second map next to the first; a map of the Blue Mountains National Park. She took a black marker and drew a circle on the first map, right in the middle of the park. Then she moved to the second map and marked the same spot, only that circle was larger due to the close-up nature of the map.

“Shit,” Misaki said.

“God damnit,” Sam said.

“Fuck,” Rani said.

“Yup,” Jaime confirmed. “I’ve been to one OMA black site, and this is it.”

Sam let her forehead drop to the table in front of her, letting out a groan. This made things infinitely more complicated, and they all knew it.

“There’s no way to get there without a car,” Misaki said. Sam could hear her tracing a finger over one of the maps. “Not unless we want to hike through the trees for *hours*.”

“Six hours at least, from Glenbrook,” Jaime agreed. “Maybe eight or nine for you guys. And that’s if you don’t take the trail. A straight line from Glenbrook to Lions Head is all hills and no fun.”

Sam dug her forehead further into the table. “We’d be exhausted by the time we got there. That’s a long time to stay undetected out in the middle of the bush.”

“And that’s assuming Avi is at *this* black site,” Jaime added. “I’ve only ever been there once, and that was only to deliver a package. I didn’t exactly get the grand tour or anything.”

“What were you delivering?” Sam asked, raising her head to look at her aunt. “It could help us to know what they’re keeping in there.”

Jaime caught her gaze for a second and then looked away, shoulders slumped.

“*Christ.*” Sam breathed, closing her eyes for a second to digest that information.

“What?” Rani and Misaki asked at the same time.

“People,” Sam told them, when she could open her eyes and look at Jaime again without fear of tearing up. “She was delivering people.”

Rani’s expression immediately soured, then distorted further into rage. She pulled up the sleeve of her worn jacket and gestured to the barcode there. “That’s why I was told to find you, wasn’t it?” she asked. “That’s why you knew what this was.”

“And I’m sorry for it,” Jaime replied, glued to the spot. “I’m sorry for anything you might have had to endure.”

“Sorry’s not good enough!” Rani spat, rising to her feet. “Do you know what they’re doing to the people you herded like cattle?”

The air began to feel heavy with magic, like it did when Rani was about to do something big or drastic. Sam looked to Misaki, wanting to know if she felt it as well, and the other girl nodded. Her eyes were wide with a kind of surprise Sam hadn’t seen on her face before.

“I had no idea,” Jaime said, hands raised in surrender. “It was just our job to deliver the cargo. We were told that they were prisoners. Criminals. Terrorists. Everything seemed above board.”

“Above board? They were taking people like me!” Rani exclaimed. “They tried to take *me!*”

Something exploded in the kitchen. They all looked over to see the toaster smoking on the bench.

Rani didn’t look apologetic. She looked murderous. She turned to look at Sam, who froze like a deer in headlights. “Are you going to defend this? All that talk about wanting to be in the army — would you have rounded up people like me as well?”

Sam’s mouth was set in a firm line. She loved her aunt. She’d looked up to her as long as she could remember. Jaime was everything she wanted to be, strong, confident, an amazing magic user, someone who took in orphaned familiars and helped little old ladies with their purchases in the shop. It was too difficult to reconcile the Jaime she knew with the one that Rani was painting.

“Did you know?” she asked. Her voice cracked as she spoke. “Did you know they were taking people like Rani and Avi?”

Jaime looked at the ground and took a deep breath. Then she squared her shoulders and raised her head to look Sam in the eye. “I didn’t. Not until recently. It’s why I never re-upped my contract. I couldn’t go back to work knowing that they were taking —” her eyes flicked to Rani for a moment. “—kids off the street.”

Rani was breathing heavily, fists clenched at her side, but the air didn’t feel as charged around them as it had before.

“Why didn’t you *do* anything?” she asked Jaime. “Why didn’t you stop them?”

“And get myself killed?” Jaime said, her expression turning sad. “There’s nothing I could have done on my own. And if I’d tried to tell anyone, we all would have been dead before the story could

travel." She ran a hand over her face. "We're not dealing with backyard goons. This is the entire OMA we're talking about."

They fell into a heavy silence. Sam was still reeling from Jaime's revelations, and she could hear Rani trying to calm her breathing on the other side of the table.

"So," Misaki said, slapping her hands down onto the table and breaking the silence. "We're going to this one, right?"

"I think it's the best option you have," Jaime said, when neither Sam nor Rani answered. "Though I'd still prefer you didn't go at all."

"Sorry Jaime. No can do." Sam said, staring down at the map. "We're going."

"Yes, I figured," Jaime nodded ruefully. "Fine." She sat down and tapped at the location on the map. "Let's talk about the kind of security systems they'll have in place."

They spoke for an hour. Jaime talked them through every element of security that she could think of, though they were all cognizant of the fact that Jaime had been out of the game for more than three years now.

"Anything could be different," Misaki said wisely.

"*Everything* could be different," Jaime said. "But this is better than you going in totally blind."

"I'm not sure it is," Sam countered. "This has just made me more nervous."

"You should be," Jaime said, reaching over to pat her on the shoulder. "This is big stuff, Sam. God, I really wish you weren't doing this."

"I have to." Sam repeated her new mantra, thinking of the last time she'd seen Avi's face.

"Why won't you come with us?"

Jaime shook her head and stood up, turning away from Sam to place her glass on the kitchen bench. “The only reason I’m not dragging you back home is because the OMA would find you instantly and take you in.” She leant forward against the bench and sighed. “I can pass on a message for you, if you want.”

“Yeah, that’d be good.” Sam nodded. “Tell them I love them, and that I’ll call when it’s not so dangerous. Oh, and can you tell them why you, a trained soldier, didn’t come and help their daughter break her best friend out of some black-site prison that the people you work for took him to?”

Misaki gave a low whistle. Rani shifted uncomfortably. Jaime stopped moving and sighed, her shoulders sagging as the breath left her.

“Because I was held for two days while they tried to get information out of me,” she answered. Her voice was abnormally blank and level. “And I don’t think my brother and his husband would appreciate me supporting this insane plan of yours. They’d want me to talk you out of it, which is clearly impossible.” She sucked in a breath. “So, even if I wasn’t healing these damn bruises, I wouldn’t go with you.”

Sam looked across the room at her for what felt like a very long time. *I used to think you were the bravest person I knew*, she thought, even if that seemed a little unkind. “I’m sorry that they hurt you,” she said, instead of voicing her thoughts. “We’ll kick some OMA asses for you.” She tapped the table with her closed fist and turned to the others. “We should get back before it gets dark.”

Rani nodded in agreement, even as she was looking carefully at Sam.

Sam looked away and back to Jaime. There wasn’t time for that right now. “Tell Dads that I’m okay. We can tell them about the black site infiltration after it goes well.” She stood up, rolling up the second map to shove into her back pocket.

Rani and Misaki joined her at the back door.

Jaime followed, hovering at the end of the hallway as she watched them gather at the door.

“Sam?”

Sam paused with her hand on the doorknob. “Yeah?”

Jaime’s voice went soft. “Just — just be fucking careful, okay?”

Sam tilted her head forward in acknowledgement, then she turned the doorknob.

There was a small *clunk* as something hit the other side of the door. Sam’s eyes went wide and she turned, using all of her strength to push Rani and Misaki back through the hallway as the door exploded in towards them.

The initial burst sent all of them sprawling onto the floor. Pieces of wood flew everywhere, smacking Sam in the back enough to hurt but not enough to break skin. There was no time to be relieved though, not when she could hear the sounds of boots on the ground outside.

“Well, well,” Hardy said as he appeared in the now open doorway. “I didn’t think you’d be stupid enough to come back, but here we all are.”

Chapter 9

The OMA soldiers were on them before any of them could think to move. Rani kicked, Sam yelled, Misaki tried to bite the soldier that grabbed her. None of it was effective. Before any of them could get off a spell, they each had two soldiers pulling them off the floor and clamping their hands behind their backs. Sam tried to swivel around to face Jaime, nearly blind with panic as the soldiers walked them forwards, out the back door and into the backyard.

Sam turned to look at Rani as they were marched into the yard. When she caught the other girl's gaze, she raised her eyebrows in question. She knew full well that Rani could cast magic without having to speak or making any gestures. She regretted not pushing the issue further while they weren't in the hands of the OMA. It would be good to know what Rani could do while she had her hands held behind her back.

Rani just raised her eyebrows in return then gave a slight, almost imperceptible shake of her head.

Sam scowled and struggled against the hands holding her arms back. "How the hell did you find us?" she demanded to know, thinking of her anti-tracking spell. If the spell had failed and that was what had allowed the OMA to find them, she was going to cry.

"Well, you were impossible to track. I'll give you that," Hardy replied, the smug bastard. "You fucked up when you came back here though."

"Fuck." Sam closed her eyes. That was just as bad.

"We had an alarm on the house," Hardy continued. "We were alerted the second you walked in the door."

"My dad's a lawyer," Sam said, instead of commenting on that. "He's going to destroy you."

Hardy laughed. There was a burn mark on his right cheek that looked like it was in the process of healing. "He can try. Your friend," he nodded towards Rani. "Is a magical terrorist. I'm allowed to use whatever force I deem necessary to capture her and any..." he looked down at Misaki, his lip curling in distaste. "...allies aiding her."

"She's not a terrorist," Sam hissed. "And you know it. You've got no real reason to be chasing her."

Hardy rolled his eyes. "My orders say otherwise." He stepped towards Sam, getting far closer than she was even remotely comfortable with. He reached out a hand towards her face. "Not to worry. I'll make sure you end up in the same place as poor Avinash."

Just as his fingers reached to grab her chin, Sam ducked her head and bit down onto his fingers. Hard.

"Argh!" He pulled back with a cry, shaking out his fingers like that would shake away the pain. There were red, angry bite marks across his fingers and Sam's only regret was that she hadn't drawn blood. The OMA soldier behind her tightened their grip, drawing her back and holding her in place.

"You little shit!" Hardy exclaimed. He stepped forward again and raised his hand.

Sam closed her eyes and waited for the blow to land. It never came. She opened her eyes slowly and found a flickering shield in front of her face. Hardy was nursing his hand, looking at the shield in surprise.

Sam turned to look at Rani and Misaki, who both shook their heads. She turned back to the house and saw Jaime standing in the doorway, hand outstretched and brow furrowed with exertion.

"Touch my niece, Hardy," she called out. "And I'll kill you."

Hardy snarled at her. "What is it you think you're going to do, Haid? This'll be your second strike. You can say goodbye to your benefits."

Jaime scoffed. "Yeah, cause they're providing a real fortune."

"We'll have to take you in as well," Hardy continued. "*Really* take you in. Think about this. Don't throw your life away because your niece is aiding and abetting a terrorist. Help us and there's a deal to be made."

Sam met her gaze across the yard. Jaime smiled at her, then she swung her hand to the side.

The shield followed her gesture and smacked Hardy in the face. He went flying backwards and onto the ground. Rani knocked her head forward and a wave of energy hit the OMA soldier holding onto Sam, sending them to the ground as well. Sam spun around to face the soldiers holding Rani and Misaki captive.

A second shield appeared in the air and flew at one of the soldiers holding Misaki. Sam couldn't think of a spell quick enough. Panicking, she jumped forward and latched onto one of the soldiers holding Rani.

They hit the ground and Sam just started slapping. Her brain quickly caught up with her. She pulled her fist back and shouted "*shakti!*", just like Avi had taught her. Power welled in her fist and she brought it down into the soldier's face. The back of their head hit the dirt with a sickening *thunk* but they stayed down.

Sam moved to get to her feet but felt hands clamping down onto her upper arms. They dragged her backwards along the dirt. She tried to twist in their grasp. One of the hands found purchase in her hair instead, pulling until she was crying out in pain.

"Stupid girl," Hardy growled.

"Hardy!" Jaime shouted.

Sam looked up just in time to see another burst of magic hit him, sending him a few feet backwards. She scrambled to her feet and turned to run, smacking right into the chest of another

soldier. She didn't have time to look around and see what Rani and Misaki were doing. She took what residual magic she had left in her hand and swung at the soldier. They stepped backwards to avoid her punch.

"You're gonna pay for this, Haid!" she heard Hardy shout from behind her.

The second of distraction cost her a hit to the shoulder. She cursed loudly and cast the spell again. "*Shakti!*" It was a little less powerful this time but effective enough. Her palm slapped against the soldier's arm, sending a shockwave through them. They fell to the ground and Sam took the chance to look around wildly.

Rani was taking down the second soldier that had been holding Misaki. They were both looking around as well, eyes going wide when they found the back gate. Sam saw what they were worried about; more soldiers, opening the gate and ready to flood the yard.

"We have to go!" Rani shouted.

"I know!" Sam called back. She pointed at the house. "Through the front. Go! Go!"

The other two girls ran towards the back door, which was now more of a back gap. Sam followed, pausing only to find Jaime, who had just knocked Hardy to the ground with a punch.

"Come on!" Sam urged her.

Jaime nodded. "Go! I'll be right behind you."

Sam made a face at her but turned and ran after Rani and Misaki. They were waiting next to the kitchen, at the edge of the corridor that led to the front door.

"Your aunt?" Rani asked, when Sam reached them.

"She's coming. Let's move."

They hurried down the corridor but the sound of squeaking caught Sam's attention. She knew she couldn't stop but she grimaced at the thought of leaving all the familiars here. Maybe her dad could come by and collect them when he heard that Jaime had run away.

God, she owed her dads so many gift baskets.

They'd nearly made it to the end of the corridor when Sam turned back and saw Jaime appear at the other end. She looked tired, brown hair hanging limply in her face, sweat beading on her forehead. She barely paused to take a breath before she was running down the corridor. Hardy appeared behind her at the door.

"Jaime!" Hardy yelled. "Don't make me shoot you!"

Jaime didn't stop running. Sam grinned at her from the doorway, ready to close the door behind the both of them the second that she crossed the threshold.

She never made it.

Hardy raised his gun, aimed, and shot from the other end of the corridor. Jaime jerked forward as the bullet made impact, her spine bending backwards in a way that looked unnatural. She kept moving forward for another few steps and for a second, Sam thought that she was going to keep going. Then a visible, magical pulse emanated from Jaime's lower back. It sent her to her knees, gasping for air.

"Get up!" Sam yelled. She felt Rani next to her, hand on her arm. "Jaime, get up!"

"Stand down, Haid!" Hardy demanded.

Jaime lifted herself half off the ground and took a wobbly step. She lurched forward when a second bullet hit her. She hit the hardwood floor face first, and Sam could see the two patches of red blooming on Jaime's back. Her neck was bent at an unnatural angle, her eyes glassy and unfocused.

Someone was screaming. Distantly, Sam realised it was her. The sound escaped her like a broken cry. Rani's arms were around her middle, pulling her away from Jaime and out the door. Sam was resisting, desperately trying to break free and make her way back into the house. Rani held her steady and pulled her across the front yard with surprising ease.

"Sam!" she shouted in her ear. "We have to go!"

"No!" Sam sobbed, still struggling against her hold and getting nowhere. "No, we have to help her!"

"We can't!" Rani said, out of breath. She had pulled Sam to the front gate, where Misaki was waiting for them. "She's dead, Sam. There's nothing we can do!"

"No!" Sam cried out in anguish, barely registering that Rani was letting go and turning her around. She planted her hand firmly on Sam's shoulders and shook her.

"Sam." Her voice was quiet in contrast to all the previous yelling. That was what made Sam stop and listen to her. "We can't do anything here. Think of Avi."

Sam looked up into her face as she blinked through tears, which were now falling freely down her face. She had the bizarre thought that it was the most genuine she'd ever seen Rani look, before reality came crashing back in.

"Right." She took a deep breath and used the back of her hand to wipe at her tears. "Yeah, okay."

"Okay." Rani heaved a sigh of relief and stepped back. "Misaki?"

"Present and accounted for," Misaki piped up from behind them. "Let's move."

The three of them hurried out of the yard and broke into a run the second that their feet hit the pavement outside. They hadn't discussed a direction but Sam trusted Rani not to run them into enemy territory, at least. They ran across roads, they ran through grass and trees, they crossed a

bridge at some point. Sam didn't dare turn around to check if they were being followed; she ran behind Rani until her chest hurt too much to breathe.

When the air in her lungs felt like fire, she yelled out to Rani, who was now a few feet in front of her. They slowed to a jog and Sam could see Misaki gesturing to a little alleyway off whatever road they were on. Belatedly, she realised that she had no idea where they were. She followed Rani blindly into the alley, waiting until they were halfway through before she stopped and dropped to the ground, her back against the brick wall of a building.

"I'll put up some wards," Misaki said. Her footsteps echoed as she stepped a semi-circle around them, muttering to herself. There was a faint vibration as one layer of warding went up, then a second.

"That'll do for now, right?" she asked. She didn't sound nearly as out of breath as Sam felt, which was unfair.

"It'll do," Rani agreed. She was trying to catch her breath as well, which was at least a little satisfying. "We can't stay here long."

"We should get back to the underground," Misaki suggested. "Check in with Maureen. Regroup. Maybe some of them will want to help?"

"We'll think about that in a minute," Rani said.

Sam couldn't see through the haze that had taken over her vision, could barely focus on the words that the other two were saying, but she felt Rani crouch down in front of her. She felt the hands on her shoulders, grounding her. From there, it was just instinct to match her breathing to Rani's exaggerated breaths, the way her whole body rose slightly on the inhale, the way her hands gripped Sam's shoulders gently on the exhale.

After a few minutes, the haze started to recede. Sam looked up to find Rani staring back at her.

“Can you keep going?” Rani asked. She didn’t ask if she was okay. Sam was grateful for that. The answer would have been a resounding *no*. But could she keep going?

“Yeah, I think so.” Her voice was cry-hoarse when she answered. Her eyes were sore and itchy. Her cheeks were still wet. She realised she’d cried the whole time they’d been running. “Hey. How did you lift me back there?”

Rani regarded her with barely concealed surprise, then her expression smoothed back into that neutral mask. “I’ve got guns, Sam. Obviously.”

Sam laughed tiredly, more a huff of air than anything else.

That made Rani smile. Just a little. “Magic, obviously. I’m sorry I didn’t --” she pressed her lips together. “I didn’t really have time to ask permission. I wouldn’t have... I don’t *like* using magic on people just because.”

Sam shook her off. “I get why you did it,” she said. “There was no time.”

“Still.” Rani tilted her head to the side, seemingly waiting on something from Sam.

She licked her lips, unsure. Then: “Okay. I forgive you.”

Rani’s lips curled into a small smile. She nodded her head and then bounced back up onto her feet. “We gotta go. You’re okay with going back to the underground? Misaki says--”

“Yeah,” Sam assured her as she shakily got to her feet. Rani offered a hand to help steady her, but Sam waved her off. “Misaki’s right. It’s a good idea. And probably the safest place right now, yeah?”

“Oh, for sure,” Misaki agreed. “It’s about as safe as we’re gonna get at this point.”

“Where are we?” Sam asked, looking towards either end of the alleyway as if that would help pinpoint their location. “Is it far?”

“We’re maybe twenty minutes from the right subway entrance,” Misaki said. “We’ll be safer once we get underground. “Can you do that anti-tracking spell again?”

“No. I’m wiped. Anyway, fat lot of good it did last time,” Sam answered bitterly.

“The spell worked perfectly,” Rani protested. “There was no way to know that they had a trigger on the house.”

“I should have known,” Sam sighed. “I should’ve thought it through.”

“Thinking like that isn’t going to get us anywhere,” Rani said. She grabbed Misaki by the wrist and pulled her over so that they were all standing close. Then she began to trace symbols in the air. Thin, grey wisps of magic followed wherever her fingers traced, creating the symbols as if with smoke, before disappearing seconds later.

Sam recognised elements of her anti-tracking spell. “That’s not how it--”

“I know,” Rani said, creating the symbols in a circle around them. “It’s not like I memorised the whole spell. So, I’m filling in the gaps.”

“You’re making it up,” Sam said, a little betrayed.

“It’ll work the same,” Rani assured her. She completed the circle and then pressed her hands together, muttering words in what Sam was beginning to understand was Indonesian. It reminded her of the way that Avi like to use Hindi to cast his spells. She never knew what he was saying, but his magic always felt more powerful when he was using it instead of English or Latin, like they’d been taught in school.

All the symbols that Rani had drawn in the air lit up at the same time, pulsed once, twice, and then spiralled towards the ground, disappearing on impact.

“Oh man.” Misaki bounced on the balls of her feet. “That looked so cool.”

“It’s nothing,” Rani said, but she looked pleased. “It should obscure our tracks from here. Misaki, you want to lead the way?”

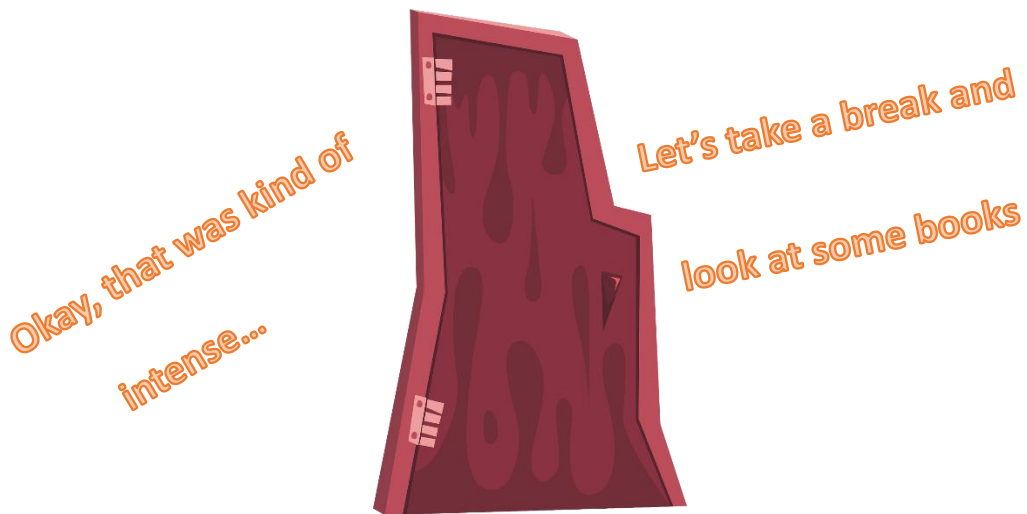
“Gladly!” She gestured to the end of the alleyway they hadn’t come through and made her way in that direction, looking over her shoulder to make sure that they were following.

“Seriously, Sam,” Rani said as they started to follow. “Are you going to be okay?”

Sam tensed her jaw and looked straight ahead. She was *not* going to start crying again. No matter how much she wanted to. Not when there was work to be done. “I can’t think about it right now,” she said. “I have to think about Avi.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Rani nod.

“Okay,” Rani said. “We’ll think about Avi.”



The trip back to the subway was uneventful, given the rest of the day’s events. Sam didn’t care; she was bone-deep tired and all she wanted to do was collapse on one the horribly patterned seats in the broken down trains and sleep for days. She knew that realistically it was probably going to be more of a power nap, but it would just be nice to not be looking over her shoulder every two minutes.

The easy trip was a blessing though, because she was tapped. She knew there was no way she'd be able to fire off even an easy spell, and she hated being a burden on her two comrades.

Five minutes down the abandoned subway line, they found the cave-in of bricks and concrete that signalled they were close to the underground. Misaki took a minute to activate a glyph on the wall beside the cave in, giving it the password when prompted. The cave in flickered and then its illusion fell away, allowing them passage further in.

Sam turned as they kept walking, watching the illusion flicker back to life over her shoulder. She didn't want to draw attention to her weakness, but she also didn't want to leave anything to chance.

"Should we cast the anti-tracking spell one more time?" she queried, careful to use *we* instead of *I*.

Misaki shook her head, kicking a loose stone across the broken down tracks. "Nah, don't worry about. They'll have all the wards up by now. And I think they put up a few things to confuse trackers the closer they get to the perimeter. We should be fine."

"It helps that the OMA don't know they're here," Rani added. "Besides, I'm not sure I could cast much of anything now. I'm wiped. You?"

"Hard same," Misaki agreed. "We all need some food and some sleep, I reckon."

"We need to talk to Maureen first," Sam countered, even though her face hurt and every step felt like it took momentous effort. "And see if anyone will help us take that black site."

"I don't know how much luck we're going to have with that," Misaki admitted. "But it can't hurt to ask. Oh -- look! There it is." She pointed further down the tunnel, where they could make out the shape of the broken down train.

"Thank *god*," Rani said. "I feel like my feet are about to fall off."

“Right?” Sam snorted. “I think my knees are going to give out. Misaki, are you even tired?”

Misaki turned to smile at them, though she kept walking, backwards now. “Oh, I’m exhausted, dog. But I used to be a runner. These legs are used to long distance sprints.” She grinned at them and then broke into a jog towards the train.

Rani sighed, dramatic and long-suffering. “She’s so much cooler than us,” she said.

Sam looked at her and blinked. Then Rani’s lips twitched into a smile and Sam let out a surprised bark of laughter.

“Definitely cooler than us,” she agreed.

Shoulder to shoulder, they walked towards the train.

Chapter 10

Misaki stopped to ask someone where Maureen was, fist bumping them when they gave her the answer. Then she led them off the train and into the corridors of the subway, turning corners until they came to one of the rooms. There were few doors down here, mostly just archways separating the rooms from the corridors, but they'd attached what looked like blankets and old curtains to hang from the archways, providing a small semblance of privacy.

Misaki knocked on the tilted wall outside the room that she'd led them to.

"Come in," Maureen's voice greeted them from inside.

Misaki drew back the thin red curtain hanging in the archway and gestured for Sam and Rani to go in first.

Maureen was sitting cross legged on the ground with two others, leaning over what looked like a large map. Sam couldn't tell what it was of, not from where they were standing. She didn't recognise the two other people, a man and a woman, though they both looked about Maureen's age.

"Girls." Maureen addressed them with a smile. "I'm glad to see you back safe. How did everything go?"

They all looked at each other uneasily, then back at the extra audience members.

Maureen nodded to her companions. "We'll finish this later. Let me know if you find anything else."

They rose to their feet and said their goodbyes, giving a nod of acknowledgement to the girls as they left. When the curtain fluttered down behind them, the three girls headed over to Maureen. Sam could see then that the map was of the subway system; it was old and didn't feature the ley lines that Sam knew crossed over some of the tracks in the city.

“Is that map from before the Reveal?” she asked, looking over it curiously.

“It is,” Maureen confirmed. “They never altered these old tracks to account for the awakened ley lines; they just built the new system on top of it and around it.” She tapped the map. “No one has any need for these now; we’re looking for more pockets of safety where we can set people up. It’s not going to be as glamorous as Easy Street,” she offered Misaki an apologetic smile. “But it will be safe.”

“You should set up some traps,” Sam said. “Wards and illusions are great, but you should have something set up in case they make it through. Y’know, a first line of defence.”

“I would love to.” Maureen looked rueful. “But I don’t want to set up anything that someone down here could accidentally set off. We have young people here.”

Sam thought of Heather, the fourteen-year-old girl who had been shot just days prior. “That makes sense,” she agreed. “Maybe some non-lethal, non-dangerous stuff. Spells that will trap them but not hurt them?” She ran a hand over her face. “I just don’t want what happened at Easy Street to happen again.”

“It will happen again,” Maureen said, hanging her head tiredly. “There’s no avoiding that. All we can do is try to reduce the casualties.”

Sam flinched at the mention of casualties. Maureen either didn’t notice or chose not to draw attention to it.

“Now tell me,” she said, rolling up the map delicately. It was printed on thin paper that already looked like it had been through the ringer. “What did you find?”

They all looked at each other again, and Sam gestured for Misaki to start, given that she was bouncing on the balls of her feet again.

“Okay, so we *totally* got into the building no problem. You should have seen us! Illusion spells up, Rani did this *crazy* thing to the machines and we got through without a hitch.” Sam made a face at that white lie. “I got into the computer system; there’s definitely hinky shit going on in there, Maureen. We found, like, the idea of a secret site or warehouse or something but there was no way to trace it so we had to go right to the source. / wanted to kidnap an OMA agent.”

Maureen’s eyes narrowed.

“But—” Rani interrupted. “We all decided not to do that. Luckily, we had, uh, a contact.” She looked over at Sam apologetically.

“We went to see my aunt Jaime,” Sam picked up the thread of the story, her mood suddenly taking a plummet. How could she have forgotten? Her life was all action and time crunches at the moment but how could she have forgotten for even a second? The image of Jaime lying still on the floor was still so vivid in her mind. All she could remember was Jaime’s face, her glassy eyes. It was her fault that Jaime was dead. She’d never get roused on for shelving the shop’s items wrong, or hear stories about Jaime’s old days again.

“She used to work for the OMA through the army. She knew something about Rani’s situation, when Rani first showed up, but we didn’t really get a chance to expand on that because we got attacked and then we were on the run.”

“Did she have information to give you this time?” Maureen asked, when Sam paused for longer than a few seconds.

“Oh, yes.” Sam nodded, face blank. “It turns out the OMA are in the business of taking prisoners and holding them in black sites. They have been for years.”

Maureen cursed under her breath. “We never knew what happened to those they took alive. I had always assumed the worst, execution. Zoey was convinced they were taking prisoners for another reason. You’re telling me she was right?”

“My aunt was only ever part of one delivery,” Sam explained. “Not that it excuses it. But she only knew of one black site, out in the middle of the Blue Mountains Park. That was a couple of years ago, but she showed us where it was.” She pulled the map out of her back pocket and waved it.

Maureen nodded slowly, taking in this information. She looked at each of them, and then at the map. “You still intend to follow this lead.” It wasn’t a question. “Do you know if your friend is there?”

Sam sighed. “Not for sure. But it’s the only lead we have. I do think they have *someone* there though. I mean, what’s the worst that could happen? We turn up and the place is abandoned.” Christ, she hoped that wasn’t the case. She couldn’t take another hit after today, and this was literally their only lead right now.

Maureen did not look as excited about this news as Sam had hoped she would. Instead she looked contemplative, her brow furrowed at the ground. “Do you expect this place to be heavily fortified?”

“If it’s still active?” Sam asked. “Yeah. For sure. My aunt talked us through the security measures they were using when she was there: wards, IDFs, passes, cameras, perimeters, patrols...”

“It wouldn’t be like your visit to the OMA office,” Maureen cut in. “It wouldn’t be a stealth mission. It would have to be an assault.”

“Well,” Misaki tilted her head from side to side. “That’s what we thought about the office, and we managed to get in and out without getting caught.”

“This would be very different,” Rani said, that serious and faraway look returned to her face. Sam had seen so many other expressions from her in the past few days, she’d almost forgotten what that looked like. Her fingers brushed the tattoo on the inside of her wrist.

Something clicked in Sam’s brain and she almost opened her mouth to give voice to it, but another glance at Rani’s face made her stay silent. It could wait until there was less of an audience.

“Agreed,” Maureen said, looking up from the ground and regarding them in turn. “This would be far more dangerous. I’m not sure I can sanction it, even with the possibility of prisoners. We’d be likely to lose more people than we’d gain.” She turned to Sam with a soft, apologetic expression. “I understand that you want to find your friend, but our numbers are low enough as it is. We can’t risk more lives for one person.”

Sam clenched her fist at her side. “What if they have *your* people there? What if we could get back some of the people they took?”

Maureen shook her head. “Without knowing for sure, it’s not worth the risk. Can your aunt help you? Does she have any contacts within the OMA ranks?”

Sam heard Misaki hold her breath, while Rani let out a quiet hiss.

“If she did,” Sam answered slowly. “She doesn’t anymore. She’s dead.”

Maureen’s gaze snapped to Sam, who looked back at her steadily. The tears didn’t come like she’d thought they would; maybe she’d run out or her eyes were too sore, but she couldn’t even work up the energy to sob.

“If they’d kill one of their own...” Maureen starts.

“She didn’t work for them anymore,” Sam corrected her. “She hadn’t been for years. And then she helped Rani,” the words came out far less bitter than they had even twenty-four hours ago. “And then she tried to escape with us today. She wasn’t, like, loyal to them or anything.”

“Forgive me,” Maureen said carefully. “I didn’t mean to imply that she was. Just that, in my experience, they only kill those they find expendable. And, if you’re right, they’re perhaps not even killing them at all.”

“I don’t know if she was expendable,” Misaki said, looking over at Sam with some wariness. “Not even by their standards. That guy really didn’t want her to follow us. He knew her, right?”

Sam nodded tiredly. “Hardy. They might have been in the same unit, I don’t know. He definitely knew her though. He told her not to throw her life away for us.”

“Friends?” Maureen asked.

“I mean, he killed her,” Sam answered bluntly. “So no, I don’t think they were having BFF get-togethers or anything.”

Maureen’s face took on a pinched look, like she was starting to get frustrated. Sam could relate.

“I’m sorry about your aunt, Sam,” she said, pushing herself up off the ground. She rolled up the remaining maps and held them in one hand. “And I’m truly sorry about your friend. But I’m not going to risk the people that I have left when you have no idea what they’d be walking in to.” She walked towards the exit, pausing to press a hand to Misaki’s shoulder. “Come on, Misaki. We have work to do.” Then she stepped out of the room.



**These guys are
gonna have to make
a new plan, just like I
had to...**

Misaki glanced between the two of them and then shrugged helplessly. “Sorry, guys. This is — all I’ve got. I’d totally come with you, but I don’t want to piss Maureen off.” She cast a worried look at the exit.

"It's fine, Misaki," Rani said, when Sam didn't say anything. "Go do what you need to do. We'll see you."

"Yeah, okay." Misaki nodded, then bit her lip. "See you soon, Sam?"

"Yeah," Sam agreed, not trusting herself to say much else. She didn't have anything to say that wasn't biting or spiteful, and she knew deep down that Misaki didn't deserve even a second of that.

Misaki followed after Maureen, and Rani sighed loudly once her black hair had disappeared around the corner.

"It's not her fault," she said.

"I know that," Sam protested.

"And Maureen's right," Rani continued. "At least in part. It'd be a lot for them to risk on little to no information. They just lost a huge number of people, not to mention losing Zoey. I don't blame them for wanting to play it safe."

"*I know that,*" Sam repeated, firmer this time. Rani just watched her carefully from across the room. She had the fingers of one hand curled around the wrist that had the brand. Before, Sam might have hesitated to ask. Now she was tired and quickly running out of options.

"We need to talk about something," she said. She gestured to the floor where Maureen had been sitting. It was just a cold, grey concrete, but they'd been on their feet for hours and any flat surface would have looked good to her right now.

Rani considered it for a second, then dropped to the floor with an ungraceful *oomph*. It nearly made Sam smile. Instead, she lowered herself to the floor as well, sitting beside Rani and stretching her sore legs out in front of her.

"You've got a question about the barcode," Rani guessed.

Sam looked sideways in surprise. Had she been that obvious about it?

Rani caught sight of her expression and laughed softly. "Relax, you're not projecting or anything. I just noticed you looking at it before; you had that pinched look on your face that means you're thinking really hard about something."

That floored Sam just as much. Had they really spent so much time together in the last week that Rani had picked up on her tells? She didn't know whether to be worried or pleased by the news. She shook her head, trying to clear it of distractions and focus on the task at hand.

"You're right, I did want to ask about it," she said, trying to inject some levity into her voice. She looked down to where Rani's hand was sitting on top of her crossed legs, the barcode facing upwards and clearly visible. "You've been held in one of their facilities, haven't you?" She didn't even really phrase it as a question, not when she was confident of the answer.

Rani sucked in a huge breath; it sounded like a wet gasp. Sam waited.

"Not like —" Rani stopped, took another breath, and then started again. "It wasn't like what we're talking about now. I know I wasn't super keen on helping before, but I wouldn't keep something like that from you. If I knew anything about this prison."

Sam nodded slowly. Whether she believed that or not didn't really matter right now. "I'm not blaming you," she assured Rani. "I might have, when we first met, but I know you a little better than that now. I know more about the whole situation now. Will you tell me?"

Rani rubbed uncomfortably at the barcode. Sam almost wanted to take it back. She wasn't going to though. The silence stretched between, long enough that Sam began to think she was going to have to push the issue.

"They came to my house," Rani broke the silence eventually. "A couple of OMA agents; all suits, no soldiers. They said I'd scored high on the standardized magic testing at school. They wanted to do some further testing with me, said it was part of some program to recruit kids out of school.

They offered us money for it.” She dropped her head into her hands. “It all seemed official, and it’s not like we couldn’t use the money. We’re not destitute or anything, but my parents are immigrants. Everything they have they had to fight tooth and nail for. I think about how far a couple of grand could go—”

“A couple of grand?” Sam interrupted in surprise.

“Yeah,” she confirmed, in a defeated tone. “Four thousand, for a couple of weeks of testing. They even — they suggested I put it towards uni.”

“Jesus,” Sam swore under her breath. “I’m guessing it wasn’t just a couple of weeks?”

“I knew something was wrong a few days in,” Rani said. She lifted her head but didn’t look at Sam, instead staring off towards the far end of the room. “I was only allowed to call home once a day, for like ten minutes, and I wasn’t allowed to say anything about what they were doing. They would hook me up to monitors and stuff and get me to cast spells. Just little things at first, with objects and words and hand gestures and everything. Then they’d take away a component: the objects, the runes, then the hand gestures. By the end of the week, they had me doing some pretty heavy stuff with just the verbal component.”

Sam could see where this was going, even if she was reluctant to hear the rest. “Then they figured out you could cast without speaking.”

Rani exhaled slowly. “Yeah. Things got — bad, after that. It’s like they took the kid gloves off. There was no more coddling, no more phone calls. They just hooked me up to things and made me cast stuff. I was locked in a room with some pretty heavy wards on it.”

“How long were you in there?” She really didn’t want to know the answer, not if it was super bad, but it seemed wrong not to ask at this point.

“A month or two,” Rani replied easily. Then, she made a soft noise of distress. “No. I know exactly how long it was. It was three months. 59 days.”

She sounded so distressed by this information that Sam scrambled for something to say, a way to steer the conversation in another direction but keep them along the same vein.

“I uh — I don’t understand how you do that,” she blurted. “Cast without speaking and stuff. I mean, I can find magic and tug on it, but I can’t *do* anything with it unless I’ve got something to channel it with.”

She felt Rani hesitate beside her, then she offered tentatively: “I don’t... find magic the same way that you do.”

Sam frowned. “What do you mean?”

Rani made a face. “You feel it, right? You can sense it around you and find a magical thread to pull on.”

“Sure.”

“I... see it.”

“You — what?”

“I see it,” Rani repeated, firmer this time. “Not like, through walls or under the ground or anything; I sense that magic like you do. But when you cast spells? I *see* the magic. I can see it all the time, like it’s smoke, or — particles in the air, or something. When someone’s channelling magic to release a spell, I can see it building up around them.”

Sam licked her lips slowly, trying to wrap her mind around what Rani was telling her. “That’s why you can turn it off.”

Rani turned and gave her a look. “That’s not — not exactly. It’s more like cutting it off at the source.”

“That’s crazy.”

“You’ve seen me do it,” she pointed out.

Sam was sure that her eyes must have been the size of saucers by now. “I kind of had other things on my mind,” she reasoned. “Now that we’ve stopped, I — I mean, I feel like I’ve been hit by a train, but also I’m realising how wild it is that you can do what you do.”

Rani crossed her arms over her chest. “Listen, I didn’t ask to be able to do this.”

Sam ran a hand over her face tiredly. “I’m not — listen, I’m not saying *you’re* wack or anything, but you have to admit it’s crazy that you can do things with magic that I’ve never heard of before. It’s obviously why they want you. You don’t think it’d be important to figure out why you can do what you do?”

“Probably,” Rani admitted. “I just don’t know how I’d do that without becoming a lab rat again.”

“That’s fair. God,” she rolled her shoulders and sighed. “Avi would be eating this shit up. He’d have ten theories ready to go already, and ideas about what else you could do based on what we’ve already seen. I mean, how big of a radius can you shut magic off for?”

“No idea.” Rani shrugged. “I’m kind of figuring things out as I go. I do have limits though; I’m not a never-ending battery or anything.”

“Speaking of.” Sam could feel her eyelids getting heavier the longer they spoke. Oddly, she found that she was reluctant to end the conversation. Even if there were things of unimaginable importance weighing over their heads, even if they were talking about prisons and medical testing and Rani’s wacky levels of power, it felt nice to just sit and talk with her for more than five seconds. It felt nice not to be in the middle of a verbal spar or waiting for the conversation to turn bad.

“You’re tired,” Rani guessed, accurately. “We should get some sleep.” She put up a hand to silence Sam when she opened her mouth to argue. “A nap at least, Sam. Then we can figure out what we’re going to do. We’re no good to Avi if we’re dead on our feet.”

It was such a change from the way she'd spoken about Avi and his potential rescue in the past that it threw Sam for a loop. She didn't even protest when Rani stood up and offered her a hand, pulling her up off the ground.

"At least four hours," she said, as she led Sam out of the room and towards the broken-down train. "Don't make me knock you out."

"Yeah, okay." Sam agreed with a wide yawn. "Maybe just a few hours."

Chapter 11

Sam slept in fits and starts. The seat divider of the train seats dug into her back and when she turned to face the wall, it dug into her side. It smelt like old carpet and she couldn't put her face directly on the material because it felt like she was directly inhaling spores or something.

She dreamt that she was running down Easy Street, the neon lights catching her skin and making her look strange. OMA soldiers shot at her from behind and their bullets flew past her face in slow motion. Then she was running down the hallway of Jaime's house. Then she was standing at the edge of the hallway and Jaime was running towards her, just like she had in real life, only she was running in slow motion as well. The bullets hit her in the back and she fell forward, exactly as Sam remembered it, but as Jaime hit the floor, her visage changed and it was Avi hitting the floor. Avi bleeding out through bullet wounds on his back. Avi, whose eyes were empty and glassed over.

Sam woke with a full body jerk that sent her flying off the train seats and sprawling onto the floor. She lay prone on the ground, staring up the rusted grey of the ceiling, and willed her heart rate to return to normal.

On the other side of the carriage, Rani rolled over to face her, eyes wearily blinking open.

"You okay?" she asked. The words were a tired mumble.

Sam rubbed a hand over her face. "Yeah. Just a bad dream. What time is it?"

Rani gestured to their surroundings. "Kind of hard to tell down here. Maybe four or five?"

"AM? Jesus." So, she'd slept for eight or nine hours. She'd obviously needed it, but a part of her still felt bad for sleeping when she knew that Avi could be in a prison somewhere, maybe being tortured, maybe not. Just the thought of him locked up and alone made Sam want to cry; she couldn't even begin to think about the possibility of him being hooked up to machines and wires like Rani had described yesterday.

“So, what’s the plan?” Rani asked.

When Sam turned to look at her again, her eyes were closed and she looked like she was trying not to fall asleep again. It made something in Sam’s chest warm to think that even tired and half-asleep, Rani was still thinking about what the next step in the plan was.

“It’s too early to have a plan,” she huffed, shifting uncomfortably from her spot on the floor.

They’d ended up in the carriage right at the end of the train, which apparently no one else wanted to sleep in because the conductor’s carriage at the end had been ripped from the rest of the train and dragged several metres down the tracks. It left an opening at the edge of the carriage which let in the cold air and also left one feeling pretty exposed. The carriage only had two seats, one of which looked like it had taken fire damage. Sam had opted to sleep on that one, even when Rani had protested. They’d both agreed they didn’t care about the lack of wall, not when they’d been so tired, they would have slept outside on the tracks if they needed to.

“You should get a few more hours of sleep,” Rani suggested. “There’s nothing we can do at this hour. And we should talk to Maureen, see if we can change her mind.”

Sam hauled herself up off the ground, rubbing at the elbow that had been the first point of contact when she’d fallen. “I doubt it,” she said. “But you’re right. I want to try, at least. And it’s not like we can do anything at four in the morning.” She dropped back onto the carriage seat, rearranging the blanket that she was using for cushioning.

“Good man,” Rani said, giving a tired thumbs up that she immediately dropped, her eyes falling closed again.

Sam watched her for a long moment. The only light came from outside the carriage, a flickering yellow that left them mostly in shadow but was occasionally enough to light up the angles of Rani’s face, the brown of her skin, the way her brow furrowed as she fell back into sleep. Sam

thought about the way Rani's face had looked as she explained the way she experienced magic, focused and determined, and the way Rani's expression had softened when she'd looked at her.

Sam snapped her head to the side, gaze wildly trying to find a point of the ceiling to focus on. Her heart was jack-hammering in her chest. Now was not the time, not with Avi missing, not with Jaime gone. There were so many things happening and Sam knew she didn't have time to think about the way the corners of Rani's eyes went soft when she laughed.

It took her far longer to get to sleep this time.

The next time she woke, there was far more light blaring into the carriage than there had been previously. Sam sat up and groggily turned to look out the window next to her, seeing the neon lights of the subway glaring out across the concrete.

"Looks like they've got a generator going," Rani said.

Sam turned to see her already standing, stretching her arms above her and swaying from side to side. She turned away to look out the window again, clearing her throat.

"It's so weird, not knowing what time it is."

"Just check your phone," Rani said in a way that implied she was holding back laughter.

Sam rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I know. But it's different to waking up and seeing the sun and being like, oh! It's breakfast time."

"Well, I'm hungry, so it's breakfast time" Rani said, moving towards the end of the carriage that still had a door. "You coming?"

"Yeah, yeah. Just a second." Sam sat up and threw on her shoes before following Rani through the door and into the next carriage, which had a door that let them out onto the platform.

There weren't any people milling about on the platform like there had been the last time they were down here, but Sam could see people in the carriages further down the train. It wasn't as full though, not like it had been, with people sleeping on every available surface, so she assumed they must have moved people into the rooms beyond the subway platform.

"Do you know where you're going?" Sam asked as she followed Rani over the gap and onto the concrete.

"Not really," Rani admitted. She had taken off her denim jacket and was tying it around her waist as they walked. "I figured we could just walk down the corridor until we find—" she stopped, sniffing the air. "Oh, wow. You smell that?"

Sam frowned and sniffed the air. "Oh my god. Is that —"

"Toast," Rani confirmed. Her face was lit up at the realisation. She looked as delighted as Sam felt.

"Do you think they rigged something up?" she asked. "I never thought I'd miss the smell of toast."

"Come on," Rani insisted, tugging at Sam's arm. "The people will be where the food is. We can kill two birds with one stone."

Sam was so surprised by Rani's fingers on her skin that she forgot to respond and then Rani was pulling her towards the smell of the food.

They found everyone congregated in one of the old subway entrances, a vast hall-like room that still had ticket machines lined up against the wall and vending machines next to the bathrooms. The actual exit was boarded up and Sam had no doubt that several powerful wards had been placed

on it. The kinds of wards that these guys dealt in were a thousand times more serious than the wards that she and Avi had taught themselves in order to lock their bedrooms or their lockers at school.

Maureen's people had set up some plastic folding tables, though people were still mostly sitting on the floor. A few of the still-injured folk had plastic lawn chairs but everyone else had blankets and old clothes spread out across the concrete.

Maureen was behind one of the tables, sitting on which was four toasters. Misaki was sitting in front of one of them, the power cord curled around her arm and the plug itself sitting in her hand. She was chatting with a man sitting next to her, doing the same thing with another one of the toasters, but Sam could see where her muscles were tensing with effort.

On the table next to them was a collection of plastic plates, plastic cutlery, and an assortment of little condiment packets, like the kind that you'd get at a breakfast buffet.

"Morning girls," Maureen greeted them with a wave.

"Morning," Sam replied. They came to a stop in front of the toaster table. "We uh, smelt the toast."

That made her smile. "It's good, isn't it? You're welcome to some, of course. It's not very fancy but—"

"No way, it's amazing," Rani interrupted her. "Honestly, my mouth has been watering this whole time."

Maureen laughed. "Get some food and take a seat anywhere you like."

They did.

Sam asked what condiment Rani wanted and laughed when Rani replied, "all of them".

"I'm kidding," she added a few seconds later, eyeing the dwindling pile of packets. "Just get me some jam."

Sam grabbed a blanket from the pile next to the tables and they went to sit by one of the walls. Once they were seated, they couldn't talk for the first few minutes because they were busy stuffing their faces full.

When the gnawing hunger had dissipated a little, Sam licked the peanut butter off her fingers and said: "Maureen's in a good mood this morning."

Rani made a noise of agreement. "You think she'll be more open to negotiation today?"

"I don't know," Sam admitted. "I'm going to try and convince her that it's at least worth investigating. But listen," her expression turned serious. "I'm going. Even if she doesn't want to come with or send people or whatever. I'll go by myself and I'll make it a stealth mission. See if I can get evidence that someone's in there."

Rani didn't look surprised by this news. "Yeah, okay."

"That'll be easier than going in with a massive group," Sam said. She totally would have preferred a big frontal assault instead, but she was willing to work with what she had at this point. "And then if it goes bad, that's a smaller number of losses."

"Sure," Rani agreed, giving a thoughtful nod. She had jam at the corner of her mouth and Sam had to look away quickly.

"What I'm trying to say," she continued. "Is that I don't expect you to come with me. I was super harsh with you before, but you've done so much already, and I get that this would be kind of a suicide mission. Or, like, a 'get recaptured' mission, and I don't want that for you. So, you totally don't have to—"

"Sam."

Sam slammed her mouth shut. She was so grateful for Rani's interruption to her babbling.

"I'm coming with you," Rani told her. She was frowning. "Regardless."

She opened her mouth to argue, realised that was stupid, and closed it again. Rani seemed so sincere; it was hard to doubt her when she was looking at Sam like that.

Sam cleared her throat. "Okay."

Rani smiled at her like she'd won something, but Sam couldn't help but think that it was the other way around.

They waited until breakfast seemed to be over before heading back over to Maureen, who sighed tiredly when she saw them approach.

"I thought we finished this conversation yesterday, girls," she said. Misaki was still with her, helping to pack up the toasters into some cardboard boxes.

"You had to know we'd be back," Rani said.

"I did," Maureen agreed. "Just like you had to know that my answer wouldn't change."

Sam nodded. They'd expected that. Still, she'd been holding out a little bit of hope that Maureen would at least be open to the idea of changing her mind. What she wasn't sure about, was whether or not Maureen had made the decision on behalf of everyone.

"So, no one even volunteered?" she asked casually.

"Volunteered?" Maureen responded, brow furrowing. "What do you mean?"

"Are you seriously telling me that you didn't even *ask* anyone?"

Maureen's expression narrowed further.

Sam scoffed. "You didn't, did you? You just made the decision for everyone."

"Careful, Sam," Maureen warned her.

“What if someone actually wanted to help us?” she barrelled onwards, regardless of the warning. “Would you let them? What if Misaki wanted to come with us?”

“Everyone here has lost a home,” Maureen said, deceptively calm. “Everyone here has lost someone. Do I think that, given the chance, many of them would want revenge? Yes, of course I do. But this half-cocked plan of yours would get them killed and all we’d have is more loss. More grief.”

Sam paused at her words. Whether or not she was ultimately right, Sam knew it wasn’t her place to argue. She wasn’t one of these folks and she couldn’t speak for them. Someone else would have to do that.

Misaki was eyeing her nervously.

“We’re going to go anyway,” Sam announced. “By ourselves.”

At that declaration, Maureen finally looked at her properly, eyes narrowed and assessing. “Sam,” she said slowly, carefully, like Sam needed to be talked down off a ledge. “You can’t do that. It’s far too dangerous. The two of you going alone is a suicide mission.”

“Oh, they won’t *kill* me,” Rani offered with a wry smile. “If this week has proven anything, it’s that they want me alive.”

“They could kill *me*,” Sam added, playing along. “But if they really are gathering up magic users, I’d put my bets on them taking me captive instead. But hey, then at least we’ll be inside their black site.”

Maureen looked between the two of them, hands on her hips, clearly unimpressed. “You two are joking about this when it is incredibly serious—”

“We know that,” Sam said. “That’s why we’re going. With or without your help. But jeez, Maureen. I’d rather be going *with* your help.”

Maureen wavered for a moment. Beyond just the silence, Sam could tell by the way her eyes flickered from her and Rani, to Misaki, out towards the lingering people in the room, and then back to them.

"No, I'm sorry," she said finally. "I don't want you to go, but I'm not sending anyone out there with you."

Sam deflated. She felt Rani do something similar next to her.

"Well, that sucks," she said with a weak laugh. That was it then. They were on their own. "Can't say it doesn't piss me off but I get it." She chanced a look at Misaki, who had been watching the exchange with a look of uncertainty that Sam hadn't seen before. "Misaki?"

"Yeah?"

Maureen looked at her pointedly and Misaki's shoulders sagged under her gaze.

"Sorry guys," she said, offering a regretful expression, lip turned down and close to quivering. "I *really* want to help, but they need people here."

Sam nodded. "No, we totally get it." She wasn't about to *force* anyone to help, or to make Misaki feel bad for not being able to come with them, not when she so clearly wanted to please Maureen. "What'd they do without their best student healer?"

God, what were *they* going to do without Misaki? She swallowed thickly and reached her fist out in an offering. Misaki smiled weakly at her and gave her a fist bump. Rani leaned forward and offered an open palm instead, which Misaki slapped her hand down onto.

"You guys better not fucking die," she said.

"You too," Sam said. Then, she turned to Rani. "Let's go, I guess."

The walk back up to the surface was silent. Sam was so frustrated by Maureen's inaction that she wanted to scream and froth at the mouth, but Rani was silent. Pensive. Sam didn't want to disrupt her, felt that the silence between them was too heavy to break with her anger.

When they reached the end of one of the subway tunnels, an exit that came out onto old subway tracks behind Surry Hills, Rani paused on the threshold.

"What is it?" Sam asked, looking around in concern.

"Everything's fine, calm down," Rani chided. "I was just thinking about how we could get to that facility without having to run through the bush."

"I'm all ears."

"What if we hitched a ride in?" she suggested. "On one of the trucks going in?"

Sam squinted at her. "If you're about to suggest that we get ourselves captured..."

Rani shook her head. "No. God, never. I'm saying, what if we could hide out in a supply truck or something? Those invoices that Misaki found — they had stuff going in and out, right? All we'd have to do is hitch a ride with one of those."

"Okay, say we *could* pull that off," Sam said, pinching the bridge of her nose. "We'd need to figure out when their next drop is, and where it's coming from so we could be there before they left, not to mention the *hefty* anti-detection magic we'd need to have prepared."

"You're right," Rani said miserably. "I hate that. What if they don't have another drop for days? *Weeks*? I *really* don't want to run through the bush —"

"Wait." Sam reached out and put a hand on her arm to stop her. "Oh my god. We can't wait for a supply drop. So we *order* one."

Rani blinked at her. "Can you do that?"

"Yes." Sam clapped her hands together. "I watched Misaki look around their servers. I know what I'm looking for. All I need is access to a computer that's connected to the internet."

Rani shrugged. "Not sure if you've forgotten our predicament but neither of us have access to a computer. Or phones. So unless you want to break into the OMA building again..."

"Nope," Sam said, popping the 'p'. "We just need a place where the world of information is at your fingertips."

Rani threw her an unimpressed look. "Get to the point, Haid."

Sam laughed and grabbed her hand, pulling them both out into the daylight. "I can't believe you forgot that the library exists, dummy."

If someone had told her that she'd be using her library card to hack the OMA servers Sam would have called them crazy. The librarian ignored them as they made their way to the computers. Sam dropped into one of the chairs and logged in with her library ID. Rani hovered nervously behind her.

"Stop being so obvious," Sam told her, pulling up a few tabs and getting to work.

"Sorry," Rani hissed in reply. "Being so out in the open like this is making me nervous."

Sam rolled her eyes. "No one's gonna be looking for us at the Surry Hills library. Now shush. I'm concentrating."

She focused her attention back on the screen where she'd brought up a login page to the OMA staff server, and a command box to run a VPN to confuse the website into thinking she was sitting in the OMA building a few suburbs away.

"You sure you've got this?" Rani asked, leaning in over her shoulder.

Sam let out a slow breath, trying not to be distracted by the feeling of Rani's breath against her face. "Yes. I'm mostly piggybacking off of Misaki's work. Go and read a book or something."

She felt Rani pull back and walk away, so she got to work.

The trick was releasing just enough magic into the computer in front of her to work the hack without alerting anyone to what she was doing or blowing up the damn computer. Having watched Misaki do this less than 48 hours ago, it was possible for her to find a backdoor into the OMA's servers, but only because she could directly copy the path that Misaki had taken. She knew that one wrong keystroke, or too fast movement, would alert someone to her presence. She was also *a lot* slower than Misaki.

It was close to an hour before Sam gained access to the same server that they'd seen the invoices on. She brought up the last order that she could find; scheduled for two days away.

"Hey, look at this," she said to Rani, who was sitting beside her and pretending to read a book. "Two goddamn days. I don't want to wait that long, but it's not long enough away that we could make an order in the meantime."

Rani stared at the screen for a long moment. "Let's speed up this order then."

"What?"

Rani pointed to the top of the invoice, where there was a staff member's email address. "I don't know how this works. Can you hack their email?"

Sam bit her lip, then put her hands back on the keyboard. "That's — a little more complicated. I could probably *send* an email from that address without raising any flags, but we wouldn't be able to see the response."

Rani nodded in understanding. "So, we wouldn't know whether they agreed or not?"

“No. We’d just have to show up at the warehouse and see if they’ve packed a truck full of supplies.”

“It seems worth the risk,” Rani argued. “If you don’t want to wait another day.”

“I don’t,” Sam said.

Rani ran a hand down her face. “Okay. *Okay*. Do it.”

“Cover me,” Sam murmured as she closed her eyes, sinking into the magic that was coursing into the keyboard.

This was harder. Looking through the contents of the OMA servers was one thing, but creating an entire email and pushing it through the outbox without alerting anyone in particular required her to balance a lot of threads at once.

She could feel her grip on the magic slipping as she typed out the email, asking the warehouse to deliver the supplies a day early due to an unexpected rise in requirements. She barely proofread the message before sending it off through the server. Relief hit her like a hot wave.

“It’s done,” she said, starting to pull back out of the system, careful not to leave a trace.

“Oh, thank god,” she heard Rani say from beside her. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Wait.” Something caught Sam’s attention as she retraced her steps through the OMA servers.

She had a few of the invoices open that Misaki had been looking at, as well as an email thread from the staff member who had signed all the invoices. She couldn’t access their entire email account; it was far too secure for that and she would be caught in a second, but she could pull up certain threads onto the screen. The one she had opened was composed by the staff member, forwarding one of the invoices onto another staff member, which was why it had come up in her search.

There was a phrase that they signed their emails that made Sam's brain fire-up with recognition.

Sub rosa, praecantatio potestas est.

"What's going on?" Rani asked, close to Sam's face again.

"How's your Latin?" Sam asked.

"Barely passing," was Rani's reply. "That's why I don't really cast with it. Why?"

"There's this phrase in this guy's emails," she explained. "It's so familiar to me but I can't remember why."

"So some guy has a pretentious email signature," Rani said dryly. "We've kind of got more important things to worry about. Get out of those servers before you get caught."

"Just hang on!" Sam urged. She pulled up another tab and typed the phrase into the search bar. Several hits came back for the phrase *sub rosa*, a Latin phrase that translated to *under the rose* and referred to the use of the rose as a symbol of secrecy. Not particularly enlightening, so Sam limited her search to the second half of the phrase.

Praecantatio potestas est apparently translated to *magical power* but a few sources underneath that referred to it as a possible motto for the *Medeis Societatis*, one of many.

"Ha! I knew it!" Sam cried.

"Shh!" someone hissed from the other side of the computers.

"Sorry," Sam whispered, then turned to Rani. She pointed to the two searches she had open. "I don't know where the first half of the thing came from, but the second part's a motto of the *Medeis Societatis*."

Rani frowned, leaning closer to the screen. "Wait. The *magical society*? Isn't that..."

“The society that controlled magic before it got released on the world? Yes, it is.” Sam rolled her eyes at the look that Rani gave her. “Don’t judge me. Avi made me take Magical History with him.”

Magical History doesn’t sound like a hard class... it’s probably easier than learning about Deconstruction!



“Nerd,” Rani accused her affectionately. “So what does the whole thing mean? With the bit about the rose?”

“Something secret, that’s for sure,” Sam replied.

“Obviously, but to what end?” Rani leaned back and crossed her arms. “Maybe he’s a fan of the OG magical society?”

There’s probably plenty of people out there who are. They were a secret magical society for, like, centuries, right? That probably attracts a lot of fans.”

“That’s a super weird thing to sign your government emails with though,” Sam reasoned. “Especially when you’re involved with — *this stuff*.” She waved a hand to vaguely reference the secret base and the kidnappings of NMUs.

Rani nodded, so she obviously understood what Sam was getting at. “You’re right. I’m not sure how that helps us though.”

“I guess it doesn’t.” Sam sighed. “Unless... I could always go further in. See what I could find out about this guy.”

“I thought you said you weren’t as good at this as Misaki.”

“I’m not,” Sam admitted ruefully. “But we don’t have Misaki, and I’ve got a weird feeling about this.”

Rani bit her lip. Sam waited while she thought.

“Alright,” she said finally. “I guess we’ve got time to kill until tomorrow. God. Just don’t get caught, okay?”

“Your faith in me is overwhelming,” Sam drawled. She turned back to the screen and returned her fingers to the keyboard. The magic surged through the system again, but she could feel that it wasn’t as strong as when she’d started.

It didn’t matter. She could push through.

Recalling again what Misaki had done in order to traverse the servers without actively touching them, Sam followed what seemed to be the path of least resistance. She jumped through the email thread she already had and used the email to search for more outgoing emails. She could only access those, not any mail incoming into this person’s inbox, but *some* of those emails were replies and still contained the original message they were responding to.

That was the easy part. The hard part was keeping the magic contained to where she was looking, making the hack easier, but also trying to keep any stray strands of magic from leaking through. She could feel a bead of sweat slide the back of her neck, but she kept pushing.

Sam wasn’t sure how much time passed, but she started to see patterns. Certain people that this staff member emailed who received the email signature, while the majority of recipients did not.

“Sam.”

A poke at her arm.

“Sam.”

A hand shaking her shoulder.

“Sam!

Sam reared back, pulling all the magic with her all at once. The screen in front of her gave a *pop* sound and then went black. That was less concerning than the small fire currently enveloping the keyboard.

“Oh shit!” Sam exclaimed, pulling her hands back.

“What on Earth —” someone was saying from behind them.

Rani reached out and patted down the keyboard, releasing little bursts of magic as she did so. She managed to smother the fire, but the keyboard and desk were blackened and damaged.

“Excuse me!” A shrill voice addressed them. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“We’re really sorry!” Rani cried. She grabbed Sam’s hand and pulled her away from the desk. Sam went with her and they nearly bowled over a middle-aged woman with a library name tag on their way to the door.

“Really, really sorry!” Sam echoed Rani’s sentiment and then focused on getting out of the library and far away as quickly as possible.

“I thought you said you could do it,” Rani accused her a little while later, when they were sitting in a nearby park.

“I *did* do it,” Sam said, biting into one of the protein bars that they’d taken from the underground’s stash of food. “I didn’t lose it until right at the end there.”

“You shouldn’t have risked it,” Rani argued as she angrily chewed on her own bar. “You have a real tendency to set things on fire or blow them up, you know that?”

“I’m aware,” Sam muttered. “I’m sorry. I thought it was important. I still do.”

Rani sighed. “Fine. Tell me what you found.”

“That phrase,” Sam started to explain. “He only used it when he was emailing certain people. Two names. Johnathan and Samuel, I think? But it was *only* to them. And their emails had the phrase as well.”

“Weird,” Rani agreed. “But not exactly damning evidence of anything.”

“I know. But there’s something there, I’m sure of it.” Sam gestured wildly, nearly forgetting the bar in her hand. “The horrible science lab you were in? Kidnapping NMUs with *no* consequences? Setting OMA soldiers on twenty-year olds? Secret facilities and weird Latin mottos?” she shook her head. “I’m telling you; they’re pieces of a puzzle.”

“Maybe,” Rani allowed, after a moment of silence. “But it’s not one for us to figure out. Let’s just focus on finding Avi, alright?”

Sam nodded tiredly. “You’re right. You wanna find somewhere closer to the depot to sleep, so that we don’t miss our ride in the morning?”

“Yeah.” Rani blinked. “Oh shit. Tell me you got the address of the depot before everything caught on fire?”

She had to laugh at that. “I did. It’s in Botany.”

Rani let her head fall back as she groaned. “*More walking.*”

Chapter 12

They found a shelter to stay in for the night and bunked down together on a single mattress on the floor.

("I've slept on worse," Rani had said, flopping down onto it.

"Me too," Sam had admitted, laughing at Rani's surprised expression. "Camping with the dads.")

They set out early the next morning so that they could arrive at the depot at least an hour before the supply truck was due to leave. It gave them a chance to scout the area and, when they'd found a good vantage point to watch the depot, they had a chance to study the truck from a distance.

"Remind me of the plan," Rani said, referring to the loose plan they'd made during the night while neither of them could sleep.

"Figure out how to get into the truck," Sam started to list off the steps. "Figure out how to hide when inside the truck. Figure out how to get *out* of the truck without being seen. Profit."

Rani let out a surprised laugh. "Right. Super easy. I can't see whether or not the truck is full. We're too far away."

"You're the one who wanted to hide in a tree," Sam protested, but she stepped up onto a higher branch. "Invisibility will get us in there."

"If we can maintain the spell."

Sam frowned down at her, even if she couldn't see it. "I think our best bet is going to be getting into one of those boxes and pretending to be cargo."

"What if someone opens it?" Rani asked. "An empty box is going to look pretty suspicious."

Sam thought about it for a moment. "Can you cast an illusion? Make it look like there's stuff in it?"

"I could do that," Rani replied, without hesitation. "Easy."

“Okay.” Sam let out a slow breath. “Let’s get closer. I want to make sure it’s the right truck before we go throwing ourselves into it.”

“Agreed.” Rani dropped from the tree and landed on the tanbark below with a crunch. Sam shimmed her way down the tree silently, landing on the ground below with nary a sound.

“Impressive,” Rani stage whispered.

“Climbed a lot of trees to escape from things,” Sam told her in a similar tone. “Mostly people, who were after me and Avi.”

“I *have* to hear more about these adventures at some point,” Rani said as they made their way through the small outcropping of trees and across the road. Rani cast a sort of invisibility on them; not quite full invisibility but a shimmering sort of illusion that made them more difficult to see but used less magic and energy to cast. With that protection covering them, they made their way around the back of the depot, still careful not to take any unnecessary risks of being seen and found a small path between the depot itself and the office building next to it. They crouched at the edge of the gap and watched the entrance to the depot’s loading area, where a small truck was sitting.

It was a simple box truck, like the kind that Sam remembered using the last time she and her dads had moved house. The back doors were open, two large boxes sitting behind it that obviously hadn’t been loaded with the rest of the cargo.

“We need to move now,” Sam said, grabbing Rani’s hand. “We need to get in and hide before they come back to load those boxes.”

“Ah, shit,” Rani said. She squeezed Sam’s hand and Sam felt a new wave of magic rush over. “Okay. Proper, for-real invisibility now. Don’t let go of my hand.”

“I won’t,” Sam assured her, so damn glad that Rani couldn’t see the blush spreading across her cheeks. “Let’s go.”

They hurried across the empty space between them and the truck. Sam could feel her heartbeat in her throat and the way her hands were starting to sweat but she held on tight to Rani’s hand until they were pressing up against the side of the truck, catching their breath. Sam looked

around the corner to see that a man and a woman were talking not too far away from the back of the truck.

She squeezed Rani's hand twice and then pulled her around the corner. She realised that she was going to have to let go of her hand to get up into the cargo area. She dropped Rani's hand and smacked the floor of the cargo area as gently as she could, then hauled herself up and inside.

She heard Rani's hand make contact with the floor a few seconds later, and then a few huffs of breath, and then Rani's body smacked into her.

"Fuck!" she hissed quietly. She felt around for Rani's hand again, smacking her in the face, then the arm, and then finally intertwining their fingers again.

"Ow," Rani muttered.

Sam rolled her eyes, despite the fact that she was invisible, and pulled them both to their feet. She looked around the truck; boxes were stacked pretty tight towards the back, and it looked like the space they were currently squishing into had been left for the last two boxes. There was one box on the right of the area that only reached half the height of the cargo area and looked like it might fit them both.

"Box on the right," Sam whispered, and pulled Rani towards it. She tested the lid, making sure she wasn't going to fall straight through it, before pulling herself on top. She crowded against the wall of the truck before pulling on Rani's hand, sighing in relief when the other girl was on top of the box beside her.

They sat in silence for two minutes before the man returned to the truck. He loaded the last two boxes into the cargo area, right where they'd been standing minutes earlier. He then shut the two doors, plunging them into darkness.

Sam heard the clicking of fingers beside her and then a small light appeared at the tip of Rani's pointer finger, just enough to see her face and the immediate area around them. Sam looked down to see her own body as well.

"We did it," Rani whispered, offering her a small smile.

"I'm gonna have a bruise on my shin," Sam joked, gesturing to where Rani's head had crashed into her leg. "But yeah, mission accomplished."

"Do you still think we need to get into a box?" Rani asked her, voice still quiet.

"Maybe not," Sam replied. "I guess I was just worried about us fitting in, space-wise. I figured the truck would be completely full, you know?"

"For sure," Rani agreed. "There's still the worry of how we're going to get out."

"No, it's fine," Sam assured her. "We'll go invisible again and then while they're unloading the other boxes, we'll slip out. We'll be fine."

They felt the rumble of the engine as someone started the truck, and Sam pushed herself further against the wall to maintain a balance.

"We've got this," she said, as they felt the forward roll of the truck. "This is going to work."

The plans seems to be going
okay so far...



Click to see a time when I
thought my plan was going well!

The drive was two hours long. They didn't talk much, for fear that their voices would carry through the wall and alert the drivers of their presence. Every time the truck slowed to a stop, Sam jerked nervously and prepared to herself to have to jump out at speed. By the second hour she was shaking so much it was noticeable and Rani reached over to take both her hands in her own.

They felt when the road became dirt and gravel, and from there it was another forty-five minutes. It was a winding path for the last leg of the journey and by the time the truck rolled to a stop, they were both a little green.

The truck idled for a moment before the engine cut off entirely. The doors to the cabin opened and there was the sound of talking outside.

“Oh shit,” Sam said under her breath. She looked to Rani with wide, panicked eyes and Rani nodded. She squeezed Sam’s hand once and then they both disappeared under the invisibility spell.

Seconds later, the doors at the back of the truck opened to reveal the depot employees and two OMA soldiers, dressed to be on the job with their guns resting at their sides.

Sam closed her eyes and wished hard for an uneventful escape. Both the depot employees and the soldiers removed the boxes towards the front. When they came back for another two boxes, Sam squeezed Rani’s hand and pulled her forward.

They stepped when the others did, masking any sound their feet might make with the sound of shifting boxes and grunts of effort. As the others were placing the boxes roughly on the ground, Sam took a running leap towards the corner of the cargo area, aiming for a patch of dirt to the right of the others. Rani’s hand stayed in hers the entire time, like they’d discussed, and she heard an “oof” from Rani as they both made contact with the ground.

One of the soldiers turned to look in their direction and although instinct told her to stand and run away as fast as possible, Sam held her position. She could feel Rani pressed against her side, still there as well. They sat and waited.

Eventually the soldier turned back and returned to unloading boxes. Sam stood up, pulling Rani with her, and hurried behind the nearest building; a small concrete one that didn’t look big enough to be important. Sam yanked the door open with relief and they tripped inside, shutting the door behind them.

With a sliver of light peeking in from two high windows, one on either side of the room, they could see that it was some kind of storage room full of crates, wires, one broken ward generator, and other miscellaneous items.

Seconds after Sam pulled the door closed behind them, their invisibility dropped.

Sam’s eyes went wide and she turned to Rani. “What the hell?”

“Sorry, sorry!” Rani held up her hands. “That scared the shit out of me. I seriously thought he’d made us.”

Sam deflated. “Me too,” she admitted, running a hand down her face. “*Christ*. What are we doing?”

Rani closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “No, come on. We’ve come this far. Let’s pull it together.”

“Right.” Sam did the same, taking a long breath and releasing it before opening her eyes again. “Give me a lift to one of those windows?” She gestured to the one on the left.

Rani stood under the window and held her hands together, offering Sam a lift up. She succeeded, and Sam grabbed onto the ledge of the window. As she dangled there, Rani got underneath her and positioned Sam’s feet on her shoulders.

“Brilliant,” Sam said, then got busy looking out the window.

“What do you see?”

“Hang on, hang on.” She craned her neck to get a good look. “Okay, there’s another building next to this, a little bigger but it’s still only one level. One door with a keypad, I think. That’s what it looks like, anyway.”

“Probably not what we’re looking for,” Rani understood.

“Yeah, I think that’s the building next to that one,” Sam continued. “It’s gotta be where they’re holding people; it looks huge, and it’s got at least four levels.” She shifted position and changed angle. “Looks like there’s a patrol. Two soldiers on this side. And one at the door at the front.”

“Well, we didn’t think we’d be going through the front.”

Sam smiled, despite the situation. “There’s some windows on the first level. We could wait for the patrol to pass and jump through one.”

“The invisibility works out there,” Rani acknowledged. “But I’m worried that they’ll have security measures inside that’ll negate it.”

“Agreed.” Sam nodded, then indicated for Rani to let go of her ankles. She dropped to the ground once Rani had taken a step back, brushing herself off. “So we’ll try and pick a window to an empty room. And if we’re unlucky, we’ll need to be ready to hide straight away.”

“Or fight.”

Sam gave her a look. “Don’t jinx it.”

“Right, sorry.”

She held her hand out to Sam, who took it and managed not to blush this time as the invisibility spell fell over them.

They made their way out of the small building, very careful about how far they opened the door this time, and slowly crept towards the very large, main building.

Sam couldn’t get over how much this place looked like a prison. The buildings themselves were all horrid, cream-painted concrete with darkened windows and no individual style to them at all. The whole facility was surrounded by wire fencing at least twice her height, and she was certain the whole length of it was charged with warding magic. Or worse.

They stood around the corner of the second, slightly larger building, and waited until they saw the patrol pass them. Then they moved across the dirt and gravel towards the largest building, hyper aware of the noise that their shoes made as they walked. They moved slower than Sam would have liked but their footsteps made less of a crunch that way, which was important.

They made it to the wall just as the patrol turned and disappeared around the corner.

“We’ve got, like, five minutes,” Sam whispered as she went up onto her tiptoes to look into the first room.

The view was blocked by something, so she pulled Rani to the second one without comment. This one wasn’t blocked but now that they were closer, Sam could see that it was an awning window that tilted out towards them. It made for an awkward, tight fit, but possible.

“What are you thinking?” Rani whispered.

“It’ll have to do,” Sam replied, tilting the window open as far as it would go. “You go first.”

“Sam...”

“No, come on.” Sam shook her head, even though Rani couldn’t see her. “Don’t argue. We don’t have time.”

“Argh. Fine.”

A few seconds later she heard the creaking of the window and watched as it shifted slightly. She nervously kept watch as she waited, cringing every time Rani’s movements made a sound. Eventually the creaking stopped and she heard the sound of footsteps dropping onto the floor on the other side.

“Sam! Come on!” she heard the hiss through the window.

She gritted her teeth and contorted her body so that she could start climbing through the window. She was about halfway through, going slow so as to not make too much noise, when she heard the chatter of the two patrol soldiers coming up behind her.

She held her breath and tried not to panic, though that was a mixed success. Making a split-second decision, she rolled her whole body through the window.

Pain rocketed through her side as she landed on the ground, her right shoulder hitting the solid concrete floor and making her cry out. She immediately slapped a hand over her mouth and looked towards the window. The soldiers had stopped just outside; she could make out their shadows through the darkened glass.

“You hear something?” one of them asked.

“Always hearing things in this place,” the other answered. They moved on.

“Sam!” came Rani’s voice from the empty room. “Are you okay?”

“Peachy,” Sam answered, rubbing at her aching shoulder. She pulled herself to her feet and clenched her teeth at the shock of pain that went up her right side. “Just a hard landing, is all.”

“Okay.” She sounded relieved. She was also visible, which Sam pointed out.

“Looks like you were right,” she acknowledged.

Rani nodded. "It dropped the second I got through the window. Managed to keep it on you until you were through though."

"Thanks."

"I don't think it set off any alarms," she continued, gesturing to the closed door at the other end of the room. "They'd probably have burst through the door by now."

"Probably," Sam agreed easily, looking around the room. There wasn't anything particularly interesting or useful; a desk, a chair, a cabinet that was open and seemed to be full of stationary. "Is it just me, or is this place kind of empty?"

"What do you mean?"

"There aren't enough soldiers," Sam tried to explain. "If you were keeping a bunch of magic users locked up, wouldn't you have more guards? It's not like they're suffering for resources or something."

Rani stopped to contemplate that. "Maybe keeping it off the books is harder than we thought? Or they don't think they *need* all the manpower?" She gestured to the building they were in. "They wouldn't be expecting an army to come running in here."

"Yeah." Sam said. "Yeah, okay. You good to move?"

Rani nodded. "Yeah. You?" She looked pointedly at Sam's right side, where she was still clutching at her shoulder.

"I'll be fine," Sam assured her. "Let's go."

They moved towards the door. While Sam pulled it open, Rani peeked through the thin gap, changing angles a few times, before holding a thumb up. Sam slowly opened the door the rest of the way and they slipped out of the room.

If they hadn't seen the outside of the building first, Sam might have thought they'd stepped into a school hallway or an older office building. The walls on the inside were the same off-cream colour of brick, the lights were buzzing but only barely, and the floor was a shiny concrete that threatened to squeak with every movement of their feet.

Rani moved to the next door down the hallway. This one had a small window at her face level. After turning to check with Sam, who nodded, she peered inside.

She pulled back a second later and made a *cease and desist* motion with her hand, ducking below the window. Sam gestured with two fingers past Rani and down the hallway in the direction they were moving, then to the right to indicate the staircase at the end of the hallway.

They moved silently, ducking past most of the doors that had windows but stopping to check a couple, until they could safely turn into the stairwell.

“People?” Sam asked, once they’d waited a moment and listened for footsteps.

“Yeah,” Rani confirmed. “Two of them, in lab coats.”

Sam raised both eyebrows. “You think —?”

“Maybe they got sick of having to trick their science experiments,” Rani suggested, rubbing at her arms as if she was cold. “And they just started working on their prisoners.”

“Christ.” Sam muttered.

“This whole floor looks like a lab and office space,” Rani continued, looking up at the stairs. “We should check the next one up.”

They started to make their way up the staircase, which took them up and to the left. As they were stepping onto the second half, which took them left, footsteps sounded above them, and then toward them.

Sam felt herself pressed against the wall, Rani’s hand on her chest pushing her. She waved her free hand in front of them and a shimmering wall appeared around them. Sam brought her hands up to prepare some kind of offensive spell, she hadn’t decided yet, but Rani shook her head forcefully.

Against all instinct, Sam waited. Two soldiers appeared at the top of the stairs and walked towards them. She couldn’t figure out why they hadn’t seen her and Rani; the spell looked like a normal ward to her but neither soldier was attacking them.

Rani was shaking with effort beside her; she could feel the movement through the hand that was still pressed hard against her sternum.

The soldiers made it to where they were standing. Their gazes passed over Sam and Rani as if they weren't there. They kept walking, heading down the second half of the stairs and down towards the first floor.

Sam waited long enough to hear the soldier's footsteps hit the first floor, and then echo down the hallway, before she was grabbing Rani by the arm and yanking her up to the second floor.

"What the hell was that?" she whispered as they climbed the remaining stairs. "We weren't invisible."

"Illusion," was Rani's answer. She looked a little shaken, whether from the effort of the near-encounter, Sam wasn't entirely sure. "I didn't even know if it would work."

"It did," Sam assured her. "You saved our asses. God, I'm going to have a heart attack if we have to be here much longer."

Rani reached for her as they came to the end of the stairs and a full view of the second floor. "I don't think you'll have to wait much longer," she said.

This floor was immediately, visually different. The bricks were faded and cracked in places from what looked like hits of magic. There were no more doors with little windows in them; cells lined the walls as far down the corridor as they could see, on both sides.

Rani blew out a breath. "I think we found what we're looking for."

Chapter 13

Sam moved down the line of cells, frantically trying to look past the wards on each one. The wards created a kind of sheen that made the contents of the cells look like mosaics from the outside and the most that she could tell was whether or not there was a person in there. Most of the cells were empty; some of them were not.

“Oh fuck, oh shit,” Sam muttered as she moved along the cells. “I’m sorry! We’re going to get you out of there. I have no idea how, but we will. I just have to—” There was no reaction from behind the wards, which made Sam deflate. “You can’t hear me, of course!” She kicked a wall and swore loudly.

“Woah, hey!” Rani came around the corner of the hallway as she caught up, gaze seeking and immediately finding Sam.

“It’s like a total wall,” Sam explained, gesturing at the wards on the cells. “I can tell there’s people in some of these but sound isn’t going in or out. I can’t—I can’t,” she screwed her eyes shut against the urge to cry and sucked in a harsh breath. “I can’t tell if Avi’s in any of these.”

When she opened her eyes again, Rani was looking right at her, brow furrowed in determination.

“Okay,” she said, moving towards one of the cells. “We’ll just have to open them all then.” She pressed her hands against the barrier of the wards and closed her eyes. She pushed her fingers against the sheen of the wards, which shuddered in response. Her expression was twisted with effort, and Sam could feel where the magic was starting to shift around her hands.

Rani pulled back with a gasp. The wards pulsed where her hands had been and then settled into place again, unaffected. Rani swore loudly this time.

“These are some heavy-as-shit wards,” Sam said, not that Rani needed her reassurance. “We can’t just push our way through them.”

“I can’t sever the connection either,” Rani admitted, shaking out her hands. “They’re not isolated to the cells.”

Sam frowned. “What do you mean? I thought you could just...” she mimed the chop of an axe with her hands.

Rani gave her a look. “It’s not quite that inelegant but, yes, basically. I have to cut it off at the *source* though. These aren’t individual wards.” She gestured to the sheen in front of the cells.

“They’re all connected, and the source is somewhere else. I can feel it feeding them all.”

“Like a battery.” Sam nodded. “And you can’t just cut them off from the battery?”

“I could...” Rani tilted her head from side to side, considering. “If I really pushed it. But that’s hard shit, and I’d have to do it to every single cell.”

“Which is the opposite of efficient. Got it.” Sam pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead. “Okay. Can you follow the connection to the battery? Find it that way?”

Rani squinted and looked past Sam for a second, then made a waving sort of gesture with her hand. “Yeah, it runs through the ground, but it’s got these little pockets at the cells where the magic comes out of the floor. The pattern is pretty obvious; I don’t think they were worried about hiding it.”

“Why would they be?” Sam scoffed. “You’re pretty unique.”

Rani flashed her a grin and then nodded further down the hallway, away from the direction they’d come. “It goes that way.”

Sam took a step back and motioned for Rani to lead the way. “After you,” she offered.

“How kind of you,” Rani joked in response, but she took no time in heading down the hallway. Sam kept up behind her, glaring at each cell they passed like Avi was behind the ward of each one.

Rani led them down the end of the hallway and then to the left. Down another hallway, then another. Just as Sam was getting ready to ask how far away they were, Rani pointed towards the end of the hallway they were currently jogging down.

“There!” she said, running towards it. Sam lost a little bit of momentum due to surprise, but she broke into a run as well.

Rani threw the door open the second that she reached it, giving Sam a clear view of the OMA soldier standing right behind the door. They raised their gun and swung it in Rani’s direction. Sam flung a hand out in his direction and yelled out “FORCE!” Energy coalesced around her hand and then shot directly out of her palm. It flew past Rani and hit the soldier square in the chest, sending them stumbling backwards.

Rani’s eyes went wide with realisation and she ducked behind the open door. Sam realised that she herself had nowhere to take cover. She planted her foot firmly on the ground and crossed her arms over her chest, palms on her shoulders. She pushed her arms forwards, channelling *shield shield shield*. A shimmering oval wall appeared in front of her, not unlike the wards in front of the cells. This was significantly thinner though, and barely large enough for Sam to stand behind. It would have to do.

Through it, she watched as the soldier stood up. They looked around wildly and, seeing only Sam in front of them, aimed their gun and fired a round of bullets in her direction. Too many bullets.

Sam had to fight the urge to shut her eyes. She didn’t want to watch and see when the shield failed.

Each bullet hit the shimmering wall and bounced off, ricocheting for one bounce against the walls, before dropping to the ground.

Sam looked over to the door to see Rani with her hand extended towards her, brow furrowed in concentration. The second that the bullets stopped firing, she dropped her hand. The shield in front of Sam dropped as well. Rani swung out from her hiding place behind the door and leapt towards the soldier.

Sam watched in horror, and pride, as both Rani and the soldier went toppling to the ground. A ball of glowing energy appeared around Rani's hand as she pulled it back. Then she brought it down to connect with the soldier's face. One hit, and Sam could tell the soldier was out cold.

"Sorry," Rani huffed out when Sam caught up to her. She had climbed off the soldier and was in the process of giving their gun the same treatment that their face had received. "I should've waited for you. Or had a spell ready."

Sam shook her head, wide-eyed and high on the adrenaline of a fight. "No, it's good. You're good. You kept the shield up?"

"Eh." She waved her hand from side to side in the universal gesture for 'sort of'. "I just gave it a boost. You did most of the work. You're okay right?" She looked Sam over, like she might find bullet holes that had previously been hidden.

"All good." Sam gave her a thumbs up. "This is the place?"

Rani stood up fully and looked around the room. They'd found themselves in what looked like a control or security room. Screens lined one wall, all of them focused on the cells or corridors of the building. Another wall had one screen connected to a desktop setup. The third wall was actually a wall of glass, beyond which sat a large generator that was thrumming so hard with magic, even Sam could see it.

“Hoooooly shit,” she breathed out, stepping forward until her nose was pressed against the glass. “That is the biggest magical battery I’ve ever seen. How the hell are they keeping this thing stable?”

“I don’t know,” Rani said, stepping up beside Sam to face the glass. “I knew that stuff like this existed but it... It feels wrong to have it stretched out through the building like it is. It’s not natural.”

“Natural?”

“Yeah, like, the magic doesn’t want to be contained like this.” Rani waved a hand at the generator. “It wants to escape. I think the fact it’s circulating through the wards is the only thing keeping it from just blowing up.”

“Wild.” Sam shook her head in disbelief. “I guess if you were super confident that nothing could interrupt the wards, it wouldn’t matter that this was so unstable. They just expected it to keep working like this.” She turned to Rani with a large grin. “Guess they weren’t expecting you, huh? Let’s cut off the access and get going.”

Rani didn’t move though, and she didn’t spring into action. “No, we can’t. The circuit that the magic’s created is the only thing keeping it *stable*.”

Realisation didn’t dawn on Sam, so much as it smacked her in the face. “Oh, shit.” She slapped a hand against the glass. “Okay. No blowing up the building; got it.”

Rani relaxed a fraction, but they were both still looking through the glass; Sam’s mind was whirring with thoughts and ideas and panic. Again, she wished that Avi was there. He would have had a thousand ideas about what to do.

“What if we just turned it off?” she asked after a moment, turning to look at the computer set-up on the other wall. “What do you think would happen?”

“I can’t say for sure,” Rani replied, rubbing at her temples. “It might let the magic dissipate, out into the world maybe. Or it could have the exact same effect as cutting the battery off from the wards.”

“Right. Magic explosion bad.” Sam walked over to the soldier lying on the ground. She crouched down and pulled their security card from around their neck. Then she hurried over to the desk, dropping into the large computer chair that was sitting there. She pressed the card to the ID reader next to the keyboard and the computer screen flashed to life. It paused on the login screen for a few seconds, then logged itself in and brought up a control screen.

“How the hell was *that* the easy part?” Rani asked, coming to stand behind her with a hand on her shoulder.

“This place is supposed to be top secret,” Sam reasoned, navigating her way around the program on the screen. It wasn’t particularly intuitive, which was honestly par for the course, but she assumed the tab labelled SECURITY GENERATOR couldn’t be too far off. “They’ve got soldiers everywhere, wards that you can’t get through or bring down. I doubt they thought they’d need a complicated IT system. Who knows,” she grinned in triumph when the controls for the generator appeared on the screen. “—maybe they wanted to avoid having everything rely on magic.”

“Shit,” Rani breathed, leaning over to look at the screen. “Is that it? Can you shut it off?”

Sam brought up the command and opted to execute it. A warning panel came up and she threw her head back with a groan. “Fuck me, of course! They’ve got a protocol set up to turn it off but it has to do it in stages. It takes *hours* to properly shut this thing off. Anything faster than that and the magic overwhelms the containment.”

“Boom?” Rani asked.

“Boom.”

“Shit.” She stepped to the side and planted her hands on the desk, leaning forward to breathe, slow and deliberate. “They would have called for reinforcements the second they realised we were a threat. There’s no way we can hold off the entire OMA for hours. How long do you think it would take for the generator to go critical and blow everything to smithereens?”

Sam shrugged helplessly. “Science isn’t really my strong suit. But, and this is just a guess, probably not long enough to get everyone out of here and far enough away.”

Rani growled in frustration. “Come *on!*” she smacked the desk. A wave of magic burst from her palm and dissipated into the desk. “There’s no way we made it all this way just to get stuck here. There has to be *something*.”

Sam turned to look at the monitor in front of her, which flickered with the release of Rani’s magic. It stabilised again, but Sam was still blinking at it.

“Okay. Wait.” She raised a hand to point at Rani. “What if we channelled it somewhere?”

Rani stopped. Looked sideways at her. “What?”

Sam nodded as the idea took more a solid form in her mind. “No, yeah. That’ll work. We turn the generator off and then we channel the magic into somewhere. Somewhere. Instead of letting it drain out over a few hours, we use all of it at once.” She grimaced and turned to Rani, looking apologetic. “You’ll — probably have to do the bulk of the channelling, but I can help.”

Rani looked, understandably, dubious about the plan. “That’s — a *lot* of magic, Sam. What the hell are we gonna channel it into? I can’t think of a spell off the top of my head that would use that much magic.”

Sam threw her hands up in the air. “I don’t know! Maybe we don’t use it to cast anything. Maybe we just — maybe we put it back?”

“Put it back where?”

“In the ground? I don’t know!” Sam cried. She froze at the look on Rani’s face and immediately deflated. “Sorry, fuck. I’m not angry at you. I just want to get these goddamn wards down. I want to find Avi.”

“Wait. No, I know.” Rani’s expression shifted as she interrupted Sam. “Repeat what you just said.” Sam frowned. “I want to find Avi?”

Rani shook her head frantically. She walked over to the third wall, covered in screens that showed the feed of the facility’s security cameras.

“I want to get the wards down?” Sam tried again.

“The wards.” Rani pointed at one of the screens which was currently showing an individual cell, the ward in front of it shimmering every few seconds. “We’ll channel the magic into wards.”

“Uhh...” Sam continued to watch her in confusion as Rani gestured to various screens, muttering to herself. “I’m pretty sure we established that we want to *get rid of* the wards, not make them stronger.”

“Not these wards,” Rani said, turning to face her. “Wards for us. To protect *us*.” Her face lit up and she gestured to the screens excitedly. “No, one *huge* ward. That backup is going to be here soon, right?”

“Right.” Sam nodded helplessly, trying to follow her train of thought. “I figure we’ve got a massive firefight on our hands, but we only need to hold them off long enough to get everyone out.”

“We don’t have to fight,” Rani started to explain. “We take the magic from the generator and we channel it into a massive warding spell. We create a barrier around the whole building. We only need to get the perimeter.” She pointed to one screen that showed the second, inner fence line surrounding the facility. Then, to another screen that showed the opposite side of the building and the same fence line. “Make it a dome.”

Sam's eyes went wide as she caught on. "Throw up a bubble," she breathed out. "The assholes can't get in. We get everyone out and leave the ward to disappear in its own time."

"With this amount of magic, who *knows* how long the bubble would stay up," Rani added. "We get to open the cells, the magic has somewhere to go, we don't have to fight more soldiers..."

"You're a genius!" Sam exclaimed. "Okay. Do you have a spell in mind?"

"I do." Rani crossed the room to stand in front of the glass wall again. "Don't worry about that. I'll cast it; just help me channel everything. I'll have to pull the magic out of the thing because it won't leak out fast enough. It'll be like punching a hole in a water container. Can you focus on containing any of the threads of magic I miss or lose?"

"Woof." Sam let out a breath. "I mean, I can do my best, but you've seen my limitations. I'm not great when it comes to concentration stuff like this and I—"

"I trust you."

If the words hadn't knocked the breath out of Sam, the look that Rani was giving her from across the room would have. It was all focus and intent, like she wanted Sam to know that she really meant the words and, more than that, she meant them so intensely that she couldn't *not* say them.

Sam swallowed thickly. "Okay. Give me a second to start the shutdown procedure."

She pressed her fingers back onto the keyboard and brought up the system command to turn off the generator. When the safety warning came up again, she took one breath.

In. Out.

She tapped the command key.

Red and yellow lights began to blink above the generator. An alarm sounded for five seconds and then the generator itself made a kind of depressurising noise, like air being let out of a tire.

“There, it’s happening,” Rani shouted over the alarm. She pointed up against the glass, towards the generator. “I can see where it’s starting to release. God, it’s really slow. This is going to be hard.”

Sam slipped off the computer chair and hurried over next to her. “What can I do? What will help?”

“Do these open?” Rani gestured to the glass walls.

“Probably,” Sam replied. “Take a few steps back.” Rani complied, even if she looked confused about it. Sam walked over to the desk, grabbed the computer chair, and rolled it back over. Then she picked it up and flung it as hard as she could at the glass wall.

It shattered inwards, thankfully, sending most of the glass flying away from them. She swept her arm towards the, now exposed, generator and smiled at Rani. “After you.”

Rani returned the expression before stepping over the remains of the wall and towards the generator. Sam followed suit. She could feel the heat of it, or maybe the magic just *felt* like it was giving off an intense warmth. It was unlike anything she’d ever felt, even when she’d felt Rani call all the magic in a room towards her and channelled it into one massive spell. It was almost too much, being so close to it.

“Okay, we’re going to start drawing the magic out,” Rani explained, her voice still raised so that she could be heard over the alarm. “When you pull the thread out, I want you to pass it to me, okay?”

“Okay,” Sam agreed dubiously. “I really don’t know how effective I’m going to be at pulling magic out of this thing.”

Rani laughed. “Just think of it as a really tough round of tug-of-war,” she suggested. “And remember; the magic *wants* to come out. You just have to give it an avenue to do that.”

“Jesus. Alright.” Sam rubbed her hands together and squared her shoulders, waiting for Rani’s signal.

Rani planted her feet firmly on the ground and stretched her hands out in front of her, aimed towards the generator. She slowly began to wave her hands back and forth, curling her fingers like she was pulling at loose cloth or string. The heat of the magic started to fill the room, and Sam could feel where large threads of it were being pulled from the generator and into the space around them.

She shook out her hands, trying to shake away her nerves at the same time, and then she took the same position as Rani. She watched her for another few moments, trying to get a feel for the movements of her hands, before she started to draw on the magic as well.

At first it was only a trickle, like a small creek, but it very quickly became a more powerful rush of power. It felt like the pressure that built up in a bottle of soda when you shook it too hard and you knew that the second you twisted the cap off it was going to go spraying everywhere.

Sam clenched her right fist tight as she fought against that pressure, trying to keep the release of her thread to a manageable level. The second that she felt she had control of it, she waved her left hand and sent the thread towards Rani. Rani wasn’t in any position to *catch* the extra magic being thrown at her, so Sam channelled into the threads that were already flowing around and through Rani. From there, Rani seemed to be forcing them into the ground at their feet, where Sam could feel it forming into a large pool of magic.

It was a lot. Once they really started to pull the magic from the generator, Sam barely had the energy to focus on what she was doing, let alone to check in with Rani.

It reminded her a lot of being back in that room in the subway, the young girl on the table in front of her. Somebody else had been controlling the main source of the magic and she had been there to keep loose threads from escaping, to keep the flow of traffic in the direction that they had wanted. It was a lot like that, only on a much grander scale. She could feel the sweat forming on her

brow, her feet were beginning to ache from where she had them pressed so firmly into the floor, and each time her attention wavered even slightly, she could feel the way the magic wanted to burst outwards. She couldn't let that happen. Rani was counting on her to do her part of the job. She had to keep it together.

She could hear Rani chanting, again in a language that she didn't understand. She couldn't free up any of her focus to notice any more than that though. Small sparks of magic were starting to crack away from the main source; they were small enough to be harmless, but she knew that it meant she was starting to lose control. She screwed her eyes shut and tensed the arms of her muscles, reaching out to grip harder at the magic and pull it back towards Rani. It felt like they were standing in the middle of a wind tunnel; the pressure of the magic around them pushed and pulled so much that Sam could feel the skin on her arms starting to burn.

She heard a *thump* beside her and opened her eyes to see, out of the corner of her eye, that Rani had dropped to her knees on the ground. Her face was twisted with pain and her whole body seemed to be shaking.

"I can't hold it!" she cried. "It's too much!"

"No, come on!" Sam shouted back. "We've got this!" Even though she knew that, realistically, they did not have this.

Rani reached out a hand, blindly seeking in Sam's direction. Sam gulped and reached out to take it. Her skin sparked when their fingers interlaced, and she could feel the magic start to leak out of her control.

"Holy shit!"

The weight of the magic immediately halved. The magic threads snapped back into control and the leak from the generator stopped. It felt as though someone had slapped a giant piece of duct tape over the hole.

Sam's head turned to the side to see Misaki. She was standing in the doorway with her stance that mirrored theirs, her arms outstretched, and her brow furrowed with intense concentration.

Sam might have cried with relief if there hadn't been a job to do.

"Give the magic to Rani!" she shouted and saw Misaki nod in return. She reached over and placed a hand on Rani's shoulder. The pain on Rani's face lessened but didn't disappear. She dropped her hand from Sam's and instead pressed both of her hands to the ground. Sam mirrored Misaki, placing her now free hand on Rani's shoulder, which made it even easier to channel the magic through to her.

It wasn't easy, but with Misaki's help, the entire process became possible again.

With one final cry of effort, Rani pushed the last threads of magic into the ground, screaming out with words that Sam didn't understand but *felt* the intention of. *Shield. Protection. Sanctuary.*

The aftermath of the spell felt empty in a way Sam had never really experienced before. Granted, she'd never been in the presence of that amount of magic, not in the way it had been contained, and she'd never seen it used the way that Rani had channelled it into the warding spell. It had been harder than hell to control the flow of even the little bit of magic that she'd been in charge of, but it had felt powerful to be surrounded by so much magic at once. And to have a hand in controlling it. She didn't kid herself into thinking that she could have truly controlled any of it without Rani's, and then Misaki's help, but it didn't make the air feel any less empty.

When she was absolutely sure that the last traces of magic were gone from the generator, Sam rushed over to the wall of screens. When she looked at the views of the outside of the building, she could see where a large shimmering wall had appeared, between the building and the fenced perimeter of the facility. Upon closer inspection, she could see that the wards on the cells had

disappeared. A few people were even appearing from inside some of the cells. Sam looked frantically from screen to screen but couldn't see Avi.

"It worked," she said, to let the others know. "It worked!"

She looked back towards them; to Rani, who was trying to catch her breath and whose shoulders were slumped forward with exhaustion, and to Misaki, who looked as full of energy as she always did.



"We did it," Sam said with a grin, and saw it echoed on Misaki's face.

"It was..." Rani said between heaving breaths. "... a close... call."

"Super close," Sam agreed. "I very nearly lost it at the end there."

I nearly lost it during my project... head through the door to find out why!

Rani turned her face up to Misaki, who still had her hand on Rani's shoulder. "It's a good thing you showed up when you did," she said.

Misaki shrugged, still grinning.

"How did you find us?" Sam asked in pleased disbelief.

Misaki tugged at the string around her neck, revealing a blue crystal from beneath her shirt. "I've had a tracking spell on you guys ready to go since I met you." She grinned at Sam's look of horror. "Come on. I knew I was gonna have to come chasing after you one day."

Rani reached over and slapped a hand on Misaki's shoulder. She was swaying with exhaustion, but her eyes were bright. "We'll let it slide this one time," she joked.

They all grinned at each other, the weight of what they had accomplished washing over them.

"So," Misaki said, breaking the silence. "Anyone want to tell me what we just did?"

Sam waved a hand. "Magic generator. Had to turn it off to turn the wards off. Uh, Rani channelled it all into a ward around the building." She looped her finger in the air to indicate the bubble now surrounding them.

Misaki nodded. "Awesome. Sounds good. Can you stand?" she asked Rani.

"Yeah, help me up."

While Misaki grabbed one of her hands, Sam rushed over to help from the other side. Together, they pulled Rani from the ground and held onto her as she wobbled for a moment. Then she patted them both on the shoulder and moved to step out of the room. Sam followed her, nearly dizzy with relief and anxious to get out there and search through the prisoners.

"Uh, guys?" Misaki asked as they headed towards the door. "What are we gonna do about *this* guy?" She gestured down to the soldier who was still lying unconscious behind the door.

Sam looked to Rani, who just raised an eyebrow in response.

"We'll lock the door behind us," Sam said. "Leave them here."

Chapter 14

As they walked back through the hallways, the wards on all of the cells had indeed disappeared. The group that they had brought with them had followed them further into the facility and were now dispersing to find and help the people who were staggering out of the cells, or investigating each cell in case there was someone inside who couldn't walk for any number of reasons. The corridors were a flurry of activity; the cells weren't at full capacity, like Sam had noticed on her way through, but it seemed like there was a person in every third or fourth cell. That meant two or three people per cellblock, since they hadn't been imprisoned in groups.

Once she was sure that Rani wouldn't topple over without the extra help, Sam started to move through the group in a daze. The prisoners were varied, some young and some older, though no children and no elderly, of differing colours and genders, to the point where there seemed no obvious pattern amongst them. None of that mattered to Sam in the moment; none of them looked like Avi.

She was nearing the end of the crowd when she saw him. Someone stepped out of her line of vision, revealing the brown skin, dark brown hair that was still held in a messy bun, the same jeans and shirt he'd been wearing the last time she saw him; the light blue shirt was stained with blood that she knew was his own. He looked pale and tired but alive. Alive and standing just a few feet from her.

"Avi." She gasped, her voice wet and thick with emotion.

He turned slowly to look at her, face lighting up slowly as his eyes found her. She could have looked at that sight forever. She ran towards him instead. His arms opened to catch her as she barrelled into him, flinging her own arms around his neck and burying her face in his shoulder. She sobbed, big fat tears that soaked into his shirt and pooled there.

“Hey,” he said softly, running a soothing hand up and down her back. “Hey, it’s okay. I got you.”

“Shut up,” she mumbled. “I’m supposed to be comforting *you*.”

“Well, you’ve always been kind of a mess,” Avi replied kindly. Her arms tightened just a little around his neck and he squeezed her gently in response.

Sam pulled back to wipe furiously at her cheeks with one hand, keeping the other firmly on Avi’s shoulder. When her vision wasn’t clouded by tears anymore, she stopped to look over Avi and take stock.

He looked terrible, but Sam kept her gaze steady. He was pale, which against his usual brown skin was not good. There were bags under his eyes, which looked sore and bloodshot, and his hair was greasy and unkempt, though not in the artful way he usually wore it. He was just in his shirt (she didn’t ask where his jacket was), which made the finger-shaped bruises on his arms completely visible. The blood on his shirt was alarming but he wasn’t *dead*, which meant somebody had to have treated his injury, at least enough that he didn’t bleed out.

She reached out and pressed gentle fingertips to the blood stain.

“Are you... okay?” she asked, knowing that he would understand she didn’t mean *okay* okay, but something closer to *are you okay enough for now?*

Avi reached down and took her hand, grasping it tightly to his chest. “It was horrible, Sam,” he said, with the kind of levity that was unusual for him except in the circumstances that really called for it. “Really, *really* terrible. Can’t believe you came to get me,” he joked with a weak grin.

“Asshole,” Sam protested. “Of course I came to get you. What did you think I was doing? Sitting on my ass?”

Avi shook his head and laughed. It was a shaky sound but Sam was so grateful for even that. He pressed a kiss to her forehead and then looked at something over her shoulder.

“Is that -- holy shit, is that Rani?”

Sam turned to look as well, eyes immediately finding Rani on the other side of the room, tracking her movements. She looked exhausted as she leant on Misaki’s shoulder and spoke to Maureen. Her brow was furrowed in concentration though, and the three women looked like they were in the middle of an intense discussion.

She dragged her eyes away and turned to find Avi watching her curiously.

“What?” she asked indignantly.

“Nothing,” he replied, in a way that meant the absolute opposite. “So, Rani’s here. At the super-secret OMA base.”

“Yes...” Sam drew out the word, waiting for him to get to the point.

“The organisation she was gung-ho about running away from.”

“She came to help save you,” Sam explained. “Don’t be weird about it.”

Avi was grinning at her though, a familiar sparkle in his eyes. “She knew me for two days. And she doesn’t seem much like the heroic type. You must have put the charm on *real* thick.”

She widened her eyes and pressed her lips together in indignation. “Shut *up!*” She pretended to smack at his shoulder but made sure to barely make contact. “I didn’t do a damn thing, except make her feel guilty, I think. She thinks I’m annoying. This was just -- our goals aligned, that’s all.”

“If you say so,” Avi allowed, but he was still grinning, and Sam wasn’t about to ruin that.

“Now’s hardly the time,” she said instead, knowing it would make him laugh.

“Sam!”

Her head whipped around at the sound of Rani's voice, ignoring Avi's snickering. She took his hand and led him over.

"Avi, you remember Rani. This is Misaki, and Maureen." She gestured to them in turn. "Guys, this is Avi."

Misaki reached out to shake his hand immediately, which he dropped Sam's hand to return.

"Cool to finally put a face to the name," she said. "I feel like I know you already."

"Ah geez," he said, rubbing his arm and grimacing. "I hope she's been telling you all the good stuff."

"She fought tirelessly to find you," Maureen said, before any one of them could make a joke in response. "You are the reason we're here. That speaks volumes in your favour."

Avi at least had the decency to look humbled at that.

"Now," Maureen continued mercifully. "We just need to get everyone out of here. We saw the bubble go up outside when the wards on the cells went down. Something tells me that was you two," she looked between Sam and Rani.

"More Rani," Sam admitted. "But yeah. It's a long story. One I'd love to recount in great detail when we're gone. The ward's supposed to keep them at bay until we're out of here. Ideas?"

"Saw a couple of vehicles on the way in here," Misaki said. "Round the side?"

"How many?" Rani asked.

Misaki let out a low whistle. "Three jeeps? No, two. And a ute. Plus a few dirt bikes."

"Makes sense. We're in the middle of the bush," Sam nodded. "Is that enough to get everyone out of here?"

“We brought ten, although we’re now eight,” Maureen told them matter-of-factly. “Us, plus the nine we’ve found. We’ll have to pack people into the back of the ute, but we’ll do what we have to.”

“We’ll have to ditch them as soon as we get into the city anyway,” Misaki reasoned. “It’s just to get us out of here.”

“Plus a few of us on the bikes,” Rani added. “We’ll be fine.”

“Okay. Keys?” Sam asked.

Misaki gave her a look and then wiggled her fingers pointedly.

“Right,” Sam laughed.

Maureen nodded. “Then we’d best get moving. I’ll round everyone up. Let’s have some extra defensive spells prepared as well, just in case.”

She turned around and called out to get the attention of everyone else in the room. It took a moment, but eventually everyone fell silent.

“Thank you everyone,” Maureen said. “We have a plan and means of escape. We’re heading towards the right side of the building and commandeering the OMA’s vehicles. Please stick together as we make our way and keep our new friends towards the middle of the group, if we could.” As people started to shuffle forward in the direction that she was gesturing, Misaki jumped to the front of the group to lead them down the hallway and towards the stairs.

“Those of you who can drive,” Maureen continued. “Please step forward to do so. I imagine most of you know how to hotwire a car, but Misaki or myself can show you if you’re unaware.”

Sam turned to Rani and made a face to express how much that impressed her and Rani just rolled her eyes.

“Sam? Rani?” Maureen queried.

“We’ll take up the rear,” Sam told her. Maureen nodded and joined the exiting group.

“Anyone can hotwire a car, you goody two-shoes,” Rani teased. “Come here and help me up.”

Sam held out a hand and helped Rani up from where she had been resting on the floor. She leaned heavily on Sam’s side, and Sam pointedly ignored Avi’s curious gaze.

“You wanna take the other side?” she asked him, gesturing to her free arm.

“I can walk,” he said. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

The group was mostly silent as they made their way down the stairs and through the hallways that led to the outside. Despite the unconscious (and, Sam suspected, dead) OMA soldiers slumped against the walls or on the ground, there was a tension in the air as they walked. Despite the bubble outside and a lack of any sound or commotion since they’d decided to move, it felt like everyone was just waiting for the OMA soldiers to burst in and fill the corridor, guns raised and shoot first kind of attitude.

Sam trusted the ward that Rani had put up. What she was worried about was what they were going to find once they got outside, and how quickly reinforcements would be surrounding them. They might not be able to get through the ward but the soldiers could wait patiently outside while they sweated it out inside.

At the exit, Maureen sent two of the group to scout ahead. When they returned, one of them explained that the vehicles were indeed still there, and that they hadn’t seen any activity on the other side of the bubble.

Sam and Rani made a face at one another.

“No reinforcements, still?” Rani voiced their shared concern.

“That doesn’t feel right,” Sam agreed.

“We don’t have much of a choice,” Maureen spoke over them. “We have to go now, or risk a larger number of soldiers showing up with each passing minute.”

“She’s right,” Sam said. “We just have to do it. We’ll go as quietly as we can. Pile everyone into the cars and don’t start them until -- Maureen, will you give a signal when everyone’s ready?”

Maureen nodded her agreement, then turned to disperse the instructions amongst the rest of the group.

“Hey.” Rani caught Sam’s wrist with her fingers. She’d been able to walk by herself by the time they’d made it down to the bottom floor, though she still looked tired and unwell.

“What’s up?”

“Ride with me?” she asked, gesturing her head to the door. “On the bike? I could use the backup.”

“Oh.” Sam looked at Avi. “I want, um. I don’t really want to leave Avi.”

Rani dropped her hand from Sam’s skin like she’d been burned. “No, yeah. Of course. I shouldn’t have --”

“Don’t be stupid,” Avi interrupted them both. “Sam, the girl is going to be alone on a dirt bike. Go with her and play support. I’m just going to be lying in the back of a ute. Really,” he placed a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “We have to keep everyone safe.”

Sam closed her eyes and breathed in slow. “You’re right,” she said. And he was, even if she was suspicious of his motives, she knew he wouldn’t suggest something like this just to tease her. “Just -- just don’t disappear again, alright?”

“I’ll do what I can,” he agreed. “Looks like we’re ready.”

Maureen was standing at the exit that they’d chosen; a side door instead of the main entrance, and she had her hand on the door handle. She looked to them, catching Sam’s gaze first

and then moving to the others. She didn't know what the others did, but Sam nodded her head to indicate that she was ready, and Maureen returned the gesture. Then, she opened the door, and the group started to file out.

The gravel crunched beneath their feet and Sam wondered if they should have cast a silencing spell of some kind, though maybe that would have been a waste of magic. Avi hissed quietly as they hurried across the ground, and Sam also wished they'd had time to find shoes for everyone. She made a sarcastic mental note to include that in her next rescue plan.

The vehicles were just around the corner. They weren't under cover, which made her nervous, but they unlocked with just a touch of magic and everyone began to pile into the cars. Sam helped Avi and a few of the others into the back of the ute, squeezing his hand tightly before she made her way over to Rani, who was getting herself situated on one of the dirt bikes.

She grinned when she saw Sam and gestured to the seat behind her. Sam slid into place, debating with herself for way too long before finally gripping the bars behind her for purchase instead of doing something silly like holding onto Rani.

They both looked forward and waited for Maureen to give the signal. A few moments later, her hand appeared out of the passenger side of the ute, and gave a wave forward. All four vehicles came to life at the same time.

The wind was whipping through their hair and against the bare skin of their arms. Sam thought vaguely about the need for helmets and riding jackets, but it wasn't really the time. It was, more than anything, nice to be out of that godforsaken place.

Rani brought the bike out in front of the small convoy and led them around towards the front of the building. That was when Sam saw them.

Three armoured vehicles at least, which had clearly brought the small mass of soldiers that were forming ranks outside the ward, between the bubble and the exit to the road that led back

towards the city. They weren't all soldiers though. There were two people standing right at the edge of the ward, and one of them had a hand out, extended towards the ward.

Rani had gone stiff in front of her, so Sam knew that she had seen them as well. She brought the bike to a skidding halt in front of the ward, the side of it facing the bubble. She held up a hand to indicate to the other vehicles and they came to a stop as well, a little further back.

The two figures at the bubble had noticed their approach. The one with their hand outstretched clapped their hands together and Sam saw a spark on the other side of the shimmering wall. When he spoke, his voice boomed over them as though the ward wasn't there.

"Congratulations on getting this far. We're all very impressed." His voice was accented, British maybe, and dripping with condescension. Sam immediately hated him. "But there is nowhere for you to go. Despite your very admirable ward placement, we stand between you and your exit. This is where your ill-fated escape attempt ends."

"A little full of himself, isn't he?" Maureen asked, having stepped out of the ute and crossed the gravel to them.

"I just wish he was wrong," Sam said. "Even if that's all the soldiers they have out there," she gestured to the ranks of OMA soldiers, maybe fifteen or twenty. "We can't take them with how run down we are. We could drive through them but once we're past the ward, all bets are off. They'll probably blast us all to kingdom come."

"Not necessarily," Rani said. She looked back at the vehicles. "They're all off-road, right?"

Maureen nodded. "Yes. I see what you're suggesting." She looked back to inspect the jeeps and the ute as well. "It'll be rough on anyone who's injured, but we could manage. It won't take long for them to catch up to us though, and it will still end in a firefight."

"*God.*" Sam exclaimed. "This day."

"I'd like to make a proposition," the man was still speaking.

The three of them turned to look at him tiredly.

"Can't imagine being interested in *any* proposition he has to make," Sam tried to joke.

"Step up to the ward so that we can speak," he said.

Oh, good. It was nice to know that he couldn't hear what they were saying from this far out.

"Come on," Maureen said, walking towards him. "We can at least buy some time."

Rani and Sam followed her over to the edge of the ward. They could see him and his companion more clearly now; he was tall and blonde, wearing a grey two-piece suit that should have been dirty with the dirt around them but was instead pristine. His companion was a shorter woman with brown hair and a stern expression. She was wearing a white lab coat that was nowhere near as pristine as the man's suit. The soldiers that they'd brought with them stood a few metres back, presumably out of hearing range, with their guns aimed directly at the ward.

"Oh my god." Rani's grabbed at Sam's hand, linking their fingers. "Sam, that's her."

"Her who?" Sam asked in alarm.

"The woman in the lab coat," she explained. "She was there at the hospital -- at the place they kept me. She's the head doctor, or scientist, or whatever."

Sam's gaze snapped to the woman. If Rani hadn't been holding her hand so tight, Sam might have stepped right through the ward to lay hands on the woman. Instead she just gritted her teeth and glared. If the woman noticed, she wasn't phased.

"We won't let them take you," Sam said, realising very suddenly where this was hurtling towards. In every encounter that she'd had with these people so far, they'd wanted one thing. She didn't know what he was going to offer them in return but she made the decision there and then: they wouldn't get Rani. Not today. Not on her watch.

“Ranjita! My name is Jesse.” The man greeted them with open arms and a wide, fake smile. “You’ve caused so much trouble this week. It’s time to be a good girl and come with us.”

“Fuck off,” Sam spat. “She’s not going anywhere with you.”

Jesse turned to look at her and she nearly recoiled from the look in his eyes.

“And this must be Samantha,” he said, sending a chill down Sam’s spine. “Yes, I’m afraid we’re going to have to take you in as well. You’re far too involved now to be left roaming free with the -- *underground folks*.” His lips curled as he said the words.

Sam sucked in a panicked breath. Rani’s grip on her hand tightened.

“I’ll come with you,” she told him. “But everyone else has to go free.”

“What? No!” Sam cried.

“Impossible,” Jesse said at the same time. “At the very least, I must take you and Miss Haid.”

He kept talking while Sam turned to shake her head at Rani, eyes wide. Rani looked steadfastly ahead and ignored her.

“Just me,” Rani reiterated. “Or I’ll take down every one of your soldiers. I’ll bring this whole facility down. If you know who I am, you know I can do it.”

“I don’t think you could lift that bike at the moment,” Jesse countered. “Let me make this easier for you. I promise that no harm will come to either of you. You’ve been with us before, Ranjita. Were you harmed?”

“Debatable,” Rani muttered.

“No,” Sam said. “Not debatable.”

“We have no interest in harming you,” Jesse continued. “We need you, and we’d like to help you in return. We could have a wonderful, mutually beneficial relationship.”

“Are you kidnapping her or trying to date her?” Sam snapped.

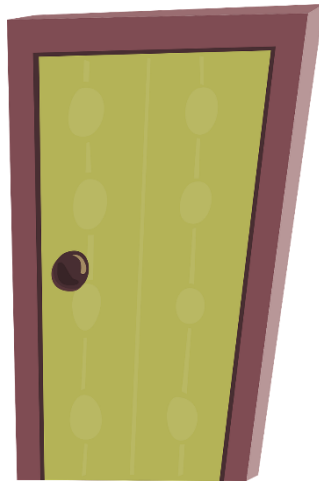
“Allow me to show you a gift,” Jesse said, ignoring her. “Proof of our intent, and of what we could achieve together.”

He gestured to his companion, who waved a hand in the direction of the soldiers. They parted ranks down the middle to let someone through. A few someones. And then close ranks again, guns still raised.

Sam heard Maureen gasp beside her. Rani let out a weak noise of disbelief. Sam couldn’t even form a sound. She was too busy staring through the shimmer of the ward at the person who had stepped through the crowd of soldiers and was now standing next to the woman in the lab coat.

The Mystic was staring back at her.

Okay, that’s a
crazy plot drop.
Hopefully she’s
not a zombie?



You know who
nearly wrote a
PhD about
zombies? Me!

Chapter 15

Rani took a step forward.

“Zoey!”

Sam immediately grabbed her arm to yank her backwards.

“Let me go!” Rani protested.

“It’s not her,” Sam said. “There’s no way it’s her.”

“What are you talking about, she’s standing right there!”

“She’s right, Rani,” Maureen said. Sam turned her head to see tears in her eyes. “Magic cannot bring someone back from the dead.”

“We didn’t see her die,” Rani cried. “We only saw her go down. They could have taken her to a hospital, they could have --”

“We need to get the others out of here,” Sam said to Maureen, still holding tight onto Rani to keep her from vaulting forwards. “Take them the other way, through the bush. Then double back and head into town. Ditch the vehicles the second you can.”

Maureen’s gaze narrowed. “What about the two of you?”

“We’ll keep them busy,” Sam assured her. “We’re more likely to escape a full-on chase if it’s just us.”

“I don’t like the sound of that, Sam,” Maureen said.

“We don’t have much of a choice,” Sam countered. She looked over to where the other vehicles were waiting. Avi was looking back at her. “Tell Avi we’ll be right behind you.”

When Maureen hesitated again, Sam pleaded with her. *"Please, Maureen. You know they can't fight. Besides, this won't be the craziest thing we've done this week."*

Maureen watched her for the span of a breath and then nodded. *"Don't let them take her. Don't let them take either of you."*

"I won't," Sam assured her.

Maureen turned and headed back to the others. Sam watched as she shouted some directions and then got into one of the jeeps. She caught Avi's gaze through the window of the car, eyes going wide. He shook his head. Sam shrugged helplessly at him and turned her attention back to Rani, who was still staring through the ward at the image of Zoey.

"I see your friends are attempting to leave," Jesse's voice boomed through the ward again. *"Does that mean you've decided to come with us?"*

"You'll really let them go?"

"For now," Jesse allowed. *"I can't promise we won't need to hunt them in the future."*

"Well that's a shitty deal," Sam murmured.

"I have questions," Rani spoke up. Sam turned to look at her in surprise. She still looked devastated, and desperate, but there was a spark of something in her eyes as she raised her voice. *"I want answers before I agree to come with you."*

"Rani!" Sam protested in horror.

Jesse held his arms out wide in a gesture of acceptance. *"I would be more than happy to--"*

"Not you," Rani interrupted him. *"Her."* She jerked her head in Zoey's direction.

Jesse turned his head just enough to speak in low tones to the woman next to him. She murmured something back and although she was frowning, Jesse turned back to them with the same smile.

“Of course. Zoey, step up to the ward please.”

She did, and Sam’s heart clenched painfully. If it was an illusion, it was a good one. Zoey didn’t look dead, for one thing, which was how she’d looked the last time Sam had seen her. Lying on the pavement of Easy Street and bleeding out, eyes glassy and expression empty.

Now, she was in even better condition than when they’d first met. She was practically glowing with how healthy she looked. Her dark hair was in tight curls, the bright purple long gone, and she was wearing a stylish blue coat with gold trimming. It didn’t sit right with the image that Sam had of Zoey in her mind; of the colourful patterned dress and high platform boots, the purple ends of her hair. Nothing about this felt right.

Rani stepped up to the edge of the ward, pulling Sam with her.

“Don’t step through,” Sam hissed.

“I know what I’m doing,” Rani replied. She squared her shoulders and steeled her expression in the face of Zoey staring back at her. “Prove you’re her.”

Zoey’s face slowly morphed into a smile. “You’re wary; I understand. You have every right to be. But I’m me.” She gestured to herself. “I’m more me than I’ve been in a long time. I’d be dead if it wasn’t for these guys. And check out this shiny new coat.”

Rani turned to look at Sam, who shrugged.

“So you talk like her,” Rani said. “That doesn’t mean anything.”

Zoey's expression fell for a moment, but it was back just as quickly. "Okay. The first time we met, my hair was green and I asked you if you wanted that tattoo removed. You told me to mind my own business."

Rani pressed two fingers to the barcode on her arm.

"And Sam," Zoey continued, turning her smile on Sam. "The night that Rani brought you and your friend to meet me, he asked me why I used such an archetypal name. You both expected to see a wise, old man in wizard robes."

"We did," Sam acknowledged. There was no way for anyone casting an illusion to know all of that. Even the sound coming from Zoey's mouth seemed fine and natural.

"One more thing before we talk," Rani said. "Stick your hand out."

Zoey tilted her head and gave Rani a questioning look. When Rani didn't budge, she held her hand out towards the ward.

"Sam, hold my arm," Rani said. "Tight."

Sam tightened her hold on Rani, adding a second hand to Rani's arm. "Only five seconds. Seriously."

Rani gave a curt nod and stuck her hand out through the ward. Sam watched as their hands connected, how Rani jerked in surprise and immediately pulled her hand back into the safety of the bubble.

"She's real," she said, as if that was necessary.

"Holy shit," Sam said.

"Okay." Rani took a deep breath and gestured to Zoey. "Talk. We saw you go down. How did they save you?"

Zoey shrugged one shoulder. “The wonders of modern magic. You should see what these guys can *do* Rani. I thought *I* was powerful but these guys... they have access to spells and ways of magic I could only have dreamed of.”

“*These guys?* We’re talking about the OMA, Zoey,” Rani said in disgust. “They attacked Easy Street. They killed you and captured Sam’s friend. They’ve been *hunting* me.”

“No, no.” Zoey shook her head, chuckling softly. “Jesse’s not with the OMA. Far from it. He and his friends *use* the OMA. They’re not controlled by any government agency.”

“What?” Rani asked, brow furrowed in confusion.

“*Medeis Societatis.*” Sam breathed out, continuing when Rani looked at her oddly. “That guy’s email signature, remember? It was one of the mottos for the Magical Society.” She turned to Zoey. “But that whole thing dissolved when magic became readily available. It doesn’t exist anymore.”

“Nerd,” Rani muttered, low enough that only Sam could hear it because they were so close.

“Shut up,” she fired back with absolutely no heat.

“How clever you are,” Zoey remarked. Her smile grew more and more worrying the longer it was plastered on her face. “And correct. *Medeis Societatis* doesn’t exist anymore. At least, not in its original form.”

“Quit it with the riddles,” Rani demanded. “Are you saying this guy,” her eyes flickered to Jesse and his scientist friend. “That all of these guys, are involved in some kind of magic club?”

“That’s a very crude way to put it, but yes,” Zoey answered. “They are *Medeis Societatis* reformed, a return to the values that they held before the Reveal. You saw the motto, right?”

“*Sub rosa, praecantatio potestas est,*” Sam recalled the phrase from the email signature. “Something about secret roses and magical power.”

“The direct translation matters less than the message,” Zoey explained. “They are a rededication to the *Societatis*’ true purpose, to see that magic returns to the hands of the worthy, and those few only.”

Wanna learn more about secret societies? (They’re fascinating)

Sam screwed up her face in bullshit. How are they going to go can access magic?”

“That’s where you come in,

“Is that why they want to about as impressed with the whole

“No one wants to put you in important, Rani. They want you to *join* them.”



displeasure. “Sounds like a load of elitist about doing that if the whole world

Rani,” Zoey said.

put me in a cell?” Rani asked, seeming thing as Sam did.

a cell,” Zoey assured her. “You’re so

Sam and Rani looked at one another, equally flabbergasted.

“Why did they try and kill us then?” Sam asked, at the same time that Rani asked: “Why am I so important?”

For the first time since they’d started talking, Zoey seemed to hesitate. She looked to Jesse, who waved a hand dismissively.

“Tell her what she needs to know,” his voice boomed in the space around them.

By the time Zoey had turned back to look at them again, the creepy smile was back on her face. “Rani,” she started, folding her hand sweetly in front of her. “You have to have realised by now that you’re special. Your power over magic is unlike those around you.”

Rani bristled under the praise. "So what? I'm just in the top percentage of level one NMUs. They told me that after the testing at school, and when they had me in that lab. There are plenty of level ones in the world."

Zoey shook her head. "You're not a level one, Rani."

"I am!" Rani protested. "I cast magic without somatic components. I don't have to wave my hands around! Or use symbols and shit."

"You're *more* than a level one," Zoey continued calmly.

Sam snorted. "Yeah, okay. Pull the other one."

When no one spoke, Sam spluttered. "There -- there isn't anything above level one!"

"You've seen her magic for yourself," Zoey said. Rani grew more stiff with every word she spoke. "She doesn't even have to speak words to cast magic. She can perform extremely powerful spells that would make even me exhausted and drained. She can cast magic that *we* can't."

Sam pressed a supportive hand to the small of Rani's back but she couldn't deny the truth in Zoey's words. From the look on her face, it seemed like Rani was having the same kind of realisation.

"What do they want me for?" Rani asked, after a few moments of silence.

"Only Jesse can answer that," Zoey replied. "But I know that it's something wonderful. Come and join us. Please, Rani?"

Sam felt Rani shudder beside her.

"Call him over here."

Zoey nodded and gestured for Jesse to approach them. This close to the ward, they had an even better view of his smarmy face. Sam might have reached through to punch it if she hadn't been so worried about keeping Rani upright.

“You called?” he asked, looking between the three of them.

“What do you want me for?” Rani repeated her question, getting straight to the point.

“There has to be a reason.”

Jesse regarded her coolly for a second. “You’re correct, of course. We need your talents, your power. You’re something very rare, Rani.”

“She’s not an endangered species,” Sam hissed. “Cut to the chase. Why do you need her?”

He barely glanced at her, continuing to focus on Rani instead. “My people’s goal is to return the world to the natural state of things. Magic was never meant to be used like this; available to every single greedy person on this planet. The Reveal was an accident and instead of fixing the problem, most members of *Medeis Societatis* decided to accept this new reality. They shared their ways with the world instead of keeping them safe and secret, as they had been for centuries.”

“Hoo boy,” Sam let out a long breath.

“But not all of them integrated into the new world order,” Jesse continued without pause. “There were those who decided not to fall in line with all the new garbage that came along with it. Governments thinking that their laws could ever possibly apply to the ways of magic, creating departments to keep magic users in check; some of us find that disgusting.”

“What’s the alternative?” Sam asked in disbelief. “You gonna overthrow every government in the world? Let magic users run around unchecked?”

Jesse laughed humourlessly. “You sound like one of them, Miss Haid. You’ve seen how *this* government has treated natural magical users. Unfairly targeting them, forcing them into underground groups without proper access to meet their needs and numbers.”

“From what I’m hearing,” Sam countered, crossing her arms over her chest. “Everything I’ve seen for the past couple of days has been you guys. Hunting Rani? Taking Avi, and all these other magic users? You’re saying that all of that was you.”

“Not all,” Jesse said. “We operate throughout the OMA but we don’t control it as a whole. Everything that happens under their purview is official and sanctioned. We don’t want to be part of their system.”

“Okaaay,” Sam drew out the word. “But *a lot* of the shit that’s happened to us has been you guys.”

“I admit that some of our measures have been... extreme,” Jesse said, tilting his head from side to side. “But it’s only because we *need* you, Rani,” he turned his attention back to her. “We would never have let any harm come to you.”

“Tell me why,” Rani snapped. “You keep talking in circles but you haven’t answered the damn question.”

Jesse steeled his expression. “Very well. Those of us who took up the mantle of *Medeis Societatis* after the split want to return the world to the way it should be. Overthrowing governments and all of that is far too complicated, too time-consuming, and quite frankly, only have the problem. Magic should be returned to the *true* magic users of the world, and only them.” His eyes snapped to Rani, his face lit up with the first kind of real emotional Sam thought she’d seen from him so far.

“You asked why we need you, Rani. We want to cut off the world’s access to magic, and we require an incredible amount of magical power to do it.”

Rani jerked back in surprise. Sam startled beside her.

“Wh-what?” Rani asked, looking from Zoey to Jesse. “You - you can’t! That’s crazy!”

"It's far from crazy," Jesse told her. "The veil that kept magic from most of the world was lifted. It can be replaced. The magic required to do so is *very* complicated though, and will require several magic users with power like yours."

Sam was reeling from the information. The whole time they'd been following this thread, she'd never expected something like this. Cutting magic off from everyone except a select few? It seemed crazy, but Jesse was right. The only reason everyone could use it in the first place was because someone from *Medeis Societatis* had messed up a spell in the first place. Could they really return the rest of the world to its previous magic-less status? She'd never had to consider the loss of her magic before but now that she did... it terrified her.

Rani shook her head. "I don't want to have anything to do with that. That's -- it's making a *huge* decision for the whole world! I can't do that."

"It won't just be you," Jesse assured her. "When the dust settles, you'll be with *us*. Small pockets of people across the globe who will still be able to use magic. We'll disappear into the shadows and go back to how we were before this mess. You've seen how the world treats natural magic users." He took a step forward. Rani and Sam took a step back instinctively. "Your friend has seen the righteousness in our goals."

"Zoey?" Rani asked her.

Zoey smiled at her, that same plastic smile that she'd been wearing the whole time. "Of course. Think about it, Rani; magic users able to live in peace. We could make a new Easy Street, one that's a *true* haven for people like us."

Rani hesitated. Sam saw it in the way that her shoulders rose and then fell.

"How do you --" she licked her lips nervously. "How would you pick who gets to keep their magic?"

"Rani!" Sam hissed.

Jesse's smile split into a grin. "Oh no, my dear. *We* don't choose anything. The foundations exist in our genetics. Those who will get to keep their magic are those who have the strongest connection to it now."

Rani turned to look at Sam with a confused frown. Sam thought about it for a second and then slapped a hand to her forehead.

"Level ones," she said. "And whatever you're classified as, Rani. That's it, right?" she asked Jesse.

He nodded. "Yes. We believe that the parameters used to classify level ones also predict those who will retain their access to magic. The statistics match the numbers of *Medeis Societatis* globally, before the Reveal. So, there's no need to worry, Rani. You will, of course, be amongst them."

"But Sam won't," Rani said. She clenched her fists by her sides. "Avi. Plenty of people won't. Why do *you* get to decide that they don't deserve magic?"

"I told you, *I* choose nothing," Jesse replied. "The magic itself chooses. Surely you can see that."

"And how do you know it wasn't meant to be like this the whole time?" Rani kept on, relentless. "The spell that did this in the first place was an accident, right? How do you know the *magic* didn't fuck it up on purpose?"

A small pinch appeared between Jesse's eyebrows. "You can't know what the magic did or didn't intend."

"Then how can *you*?"

Sam could feel a familiar crackle in the air, a sense of build-up around Rani. She still looked exhausted, face gaunt and eyes dark, still leaning a little to the left as she struggled to keep herself upright, and Sam could hardly believe that she still had the energy left to do her magic thing.

“Because of who I am,” Jesse replied tersely. “Because I have *always* belonged to *Medeis Societatis*.”

“Sounds like a bunch of snobbish bullshit to me,” Rani said. “What do you think, Sam?”

“Uh huh,” Sam agreed immediately, glaring at Jesse. “Bullshit.”

Jesse’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t want to hurt you, Rani, but you *will* help us. I’d prefer it if you came of your own accord but I *will* make you see that our way is the right path forward. Besides, don’t you want your friends to be safe?” He gestured his head towards Sam, who bristled in response.

Rani took a deep breath. “You really won’t let Sam stay behind?”

“Shut up,” Sam said quickly. “As if I would.”

“I’m afraid not,” Jesse confirmed. “Especially now. She knows far too much to be allowed to run wild. But she won’t be harmed if you both come with us.”

Rani turned to look at her, a question in her eyes.

Sam shook her head. “I’d rather die than watch them use you to take magic away,” she said quietly.

“I’m not gonna let either of those things happen,” Rani replied, just as soft. “It might get ugly though.”

“When doesn’t it?” Sam asked with a hint of a smile.

Rani returned the smile briefly before turning back to Jesse.

“It’s going to be a no from me,” she said.

Jesse looked down at the ground and sighed. “I have to say, I’m really disappointed to hear that, Rani.”

"I bet you are," Rani grumbled.

"You understand that we can't let you leave?" Jesse asked.

"Just try and stop us," Sam challenged him.

"This ward won't last forever," Jesse replied, the very picture of cool and collected. It just made Sam want to punch him more than she already did. "And while we've been talking, my soldiers have surrounded the ward's perimeter. You leave with us or not at all. In any case," he held his palm up to the ward, stopping just a few centimetres away from touching it. "You assume we can't break through this."

"I'd like to see you try," Sam challenged him, pointing unnecessarily at the shimmering wall in front of them.

He huffed a laugh. "Last chance to change your mind, my dear." This was directed at Rani.

Rani reached out blindly for Sam, who took her hand and held it firmly. She tried her best to exude as much supportive energy as she could.

"Get bent," was Rani's reply.

Jesse sighed again, nodded, and then waved a hand in Zoey's direction. "You know what to do, dear." He turned and walked back to the woman in the lab coat,

"Yes sir," Zoey said cheerfully. She stepped forward and brought her hands up, palms moving towards the edge of the ward.

"Zoey, no!" Rani shouted. She lurched forward with a hand outstretched and Sam had to hold her back again.

They waited in horror as Zoey pressed her open palms to the shimmer of the ward. They waited for a cry of pain or for her to be sent flying backwards but neither came.

They watched as magic sparked on the other side of the ward, between the shimmering edge and Zoey's hands. Her brow furrowed in concentration and she stepped back on one foot, then pushed forward again with more force. The sparking increased, like gold flames lapping at the sleeves of Zoey's fancy coat, until they looked like they might overwhelm her. Then she pulled one hand back, forming a fist in the air, and brought it back down onto the ward with a cry of effort.

Sam flinched as she made contact. She was glad she didn't close her eyes though, not with what came next.

Zoey's hand hit the ward and it splintered. The sound cracked through the air around them. Rani stepped backwards in surprise, pushing Sam backwards as well.

"There's no way --" Sam started to say.

Zoey raised her hand and struck the ward again. This time, her fist came crashing through the ward. When she pulled her arm back this time, there was a fist-sized hole in the shimmering wall.

"Holy shit!" Sam exclaimed.

"We need to move," Rani said, shoving at Sam's shoulder, who was unable to drag her gaze from Zoey.

"She shouldn't be able to do that!" she protested, letting Rani turn her back towards the dirtbike.

"You can tell her that when she breaks through!" Rani told her, hurrying them both across the dirt.

They heard a third, larger crack behind them, and then an ear-shattering sound that seemed substantially larger than the others.

"Get down!" Rani shouted. She shoved them both downwards. Sam hit the ground on her already sore half, crying out in pain. Rani fell on her with a grunt. They both raised their heads just in

time for Sam to see the ball of force magic fly over their heads and keep going until it smashed into the building in front of them.

“Move, move, move!” Rani insisted, grabbing at Sam’s arms even as she was trying to get herself off the ground.

Her hands disappeared from Sam’s arms as she was flung to the side. Sam tried to roll onto her side to get up but she felt a shoe on her upper back, pushing her back into the ground. She turned her head just enough to see the blue of Zoey’s coat and the brown of her curls.

“Ow,” she said, pushing against the force of Zoey’s foot but failing to move it an inch. “Please, Zoey. Don’t do this. You’re *The Mystic*. You wanted to help. You didn’t--”

“I’m sorry, Samantha,” Zoey interrupted her. “You’ve become a liability. I will make this as painless as possible.”

“Oh Jesus.” Sam started scrambling in the dirt, panicked and trying to get away, but her side was too weak from her earlier fall and she couldn’t get enough power behind her movements to get anywhere. “Oh crap, crap, *crap*.”

“Get off her!” Rani’s voice cried from her left.

Then there was a *smack* of contact and the shoe disappeared from Sam’s back. She rolled onto her uninjured side and pushed herself up onto her knees. A frantic search found Rani and Zoey on the ground to her right. Rani was sprawled on top of Zoey, struggling to hold her arms down. Zoey was shooting off bursts of magic from her hands that missed Rani and flew in all directions.

Sam rushed over and took hold of Zoey’s left arm, pushing it to the ground with all the force she could muster. Rani focused on holding down her other side.

“What do we do?” Sam asked, eyes wide with panic.

She looked back over her shoulder at the hole in the ward. Jesse's soldiers had begun to gather on the other side. The hole was small enough that they had to break it open a little more to get through with all their gear, but it wouldn't take long.

"Rani, what do we do?"

Rani followed her line of sight to the soldiers, then back to Zoey, struggling on the ground beneath them.

"Zoey, snap out of it!" she demanded desperately. "Whatever they've told you, whatever they promised... it's not worth it. Come with us!"

"Don't be crazy!" Sam hissed at her. "She's one of them now."

"I won't go with you," Zoey hissed at them, doubling her efforts against their hold.

"Praecantatio potestas est!"

Rani looked down at her for a second, her expression one of complete devastation, before it hardened into something Sam was more familiar with.

"Then I'm really sorry about this." She reared her head back and then brought it down, smashing their foreheads together.

Sam winced in sympathy at the sound, but Rani pulled back looking no worse for wear than she had a moment ago. Her gaze flicked down to Zoey, who was now unconscious.

"Magic," was Rani's explanation, when Sam raised an eyebrow at her. "Now let's move."

"What about her?" Sam asked as they stood, gesturing to Zoey.

Rani only hesitated a moment. "We can't afford the dead weight," she said. "Go."

They rushed to the dirtbike, jumping on the second they reached it. Rani started it and kicked it into gear.

“Hold on really fucking tight!” she shouted over the engine.

Sam threw her arms around Rani’s middle and did as she was told. It was insane but the first thought that came to mind was that her dad would be furious at her for riding a motorbike without a helmet or a jacket.

As they shot off across the dirt, Sam quickly realised why she needed to hold on so tight. She could feel the magic thrumming through the bike beneath her, working alongside the hum of the engine. The bike they were on was made for grip, not necessarily for speed, but whatever Rani was doing to it was definitely making up for that fact.

She brought the bike around to the other side of the building and sped up as they raced towards the edge of the ward.

“Soldiers ahead!” Rani yelled.

“I’ll shield!” Sam shouted back.

Keeping one hand around Rani’s middle, she began to draw the symbol for *shield* on the back of Rani’s jacket. Then she grabbed at the symbol, like she was taking it from thin air, and waved her hand over them. As she did, she began muttering *armum, armum, armum*, even though it felt a little dirty to use a latin spell right now.

A glimmering shield appeared over themselves and the bike, barely large enough to cover them and nowhere near as powerful as Rani’s, but it was there.

Rani revved the engine and pushed them onwards. Sam steeled herself and concentrated on keeping the shield up.

The second that they broke through the ward, everything became chaos.

The soldiers jumped out of the way of the bike, rather than be run over by it. However, those who weren’t busy jumping out of the way fired straight at them. Sam felt the bullets hit the shield

and ricochet in different directions. Each impact made it harder to hold the spell. She focused all her effort on keeping the front of it the most fortified. Rani needed the protection more; she was driving, and the bullets were flying right at her.

One of the soldiers made a grab for Sam's arm. She raised the other arm to push a small burst of magic out of her palm. It was enough to send them staggering backwards, just enough that they missed her arm.

She felt the shield slip on the side that she'd moved her hand away from. She quickly snapped it back over and brought the shield back around the whole bike. Rani wasn't injured and the bike was still running, so everything was fine.

They had barely cleared the group of soldiers when Rani turned at a hard right angle, the tyres screeching as they worked hard to grip the ground beneath them. Sam wondered what the hell she was doing until she saw the tyre tracks headed in their original direction.

They shot off in a different direction, driving straight off the grounds of the facility and into the bushland surrounding it. Sam could hear the starting of engines far, far behind them, but Rani had them moving so fast that she was starting to feel a little woozy.

A little weak, even. Her shield spell dropped as she fell forward, her forehead pressing hard into Rani's back.

"You okay back there?" Rani shouted.

"Don't feel so good..." Sam muttered, her eyes closing slowly. She pitched sideways without warning, yelping as the motion snapped her back to consciousness. She tightened her arms around Rani's middle and just barely kept herself on the bike.

It screeched to a halt anyway, and Rani turned in her seat as much as she could to look at Sam.

"You good?" she asked.

Sam shook her head. Her mind felt cloudy, like she could quite grasp the thoughts that were passing through it.

"I really don't -- I feel bad," she said, at the same time that she noticed a blazing pain in her side. "Ow."

She and Rani both looked down, seeing the bloom of crimson at the same time.

"Oh shit," Rani said.

"Oh boy," Sam said.

Objectively she knew that a gun wound was bad but she could quite work up a panic about it. She felt frozen, like things were moving in molasses, but mostly she just felt like throwing up.

"Must have got through my shield... when I was distracted," she tried to explain.

Rani was staring at her, her eyes wide and filled with horror.

"Sam, oh my god," she said, frantically pulling off her jacket and rolling it into a bundle. She pressed it to Sam's side and then took Sam's hand to hold the jacket there. "You gotta keep pressure on this okay? Here, lean against my back to keep it there." She turned to face forward again, pulling Sam's arms around her waist.

Sam let out a cry of pain as her front connected with Rani's back, feeling the pressure of the jacket against her wound.

"I know, I know. I'm sorry," Rani said. "I have to get us out of here. Just hang on, okay?"

She kicked the bike back into gear and then they were moving again, racing through the bushland, although Sam couldn't tell which direction they were going or where they'd come from. She really hoped that Rani knew where she was going.

Chapter 16

Sam swam in and out of consciousness as they rode. The speed made her sick and the rough terrain caused her to bump up against Rani's jacket, which hurt like nothing she'd ever felt before. She was conscious enough to keep her arms tight around Rani's middle, and the road was bumpy enough that each time she slipped into unconsciousness, the pain jerked her awake again. She did start to lose time at some point though because she closed her eyes surrounded by bushland and opened them again to see street lights and buildings.

The bike wasn't humming with magic anymore, which explained why they were going much slower than before. Sam rested her cheek against Rani's back and watched as the buildings flew past them.

She startled awake when she felt the hot stab of pain in her side. Rani had one hand on her shoulder, keeping her upright, and the other hand was pulling her gently off the bike and onto solid ground. They were in a carpark, nestled behind a row of shops and far from the main street.

"Come on, Sam," Rani said gently. "We have to move."

Sam nodded and made an effort to swing her leg over the bike so that she could hop down. She made the swing but the second that her feet touched the ground, her legs turned to jelly and she fell into Rani. They both stumbled a few feet but Rani quickly stabilised them. She swung Sam's arm over her shoulders and took her weight. She used her other hand to press her bundled up jacket back to Sam's wound, causing tears to form in Sam's eyes.

"It hurts," she complained.

"I know," Rani sympathised. "But we have to keep moving."

"Okay." Sam heaved in a large breath and forced her legs to move.

With Rani taking half of her weight, they made it a whole block before Sam had to lean against a wall and catch her breath. She was on the verge of panting, sweat dripping down her back and her forehead.

"I don't know how much further I can go," she told Rani, who was wiping the sweat from her own brow. She looked so tired and Sam immediately felt terrible for leaning on her the entire way.

"It's another two streets away," Rani said, reaching out to grip Sam's shoulder. "Seriously; one more minute then we have to go."

Sam groaned when Rani jostled her to take her weight again. Rani just patted her in sympathy.

She lost time again between that stop and the entrance to the old subway. She had no idea how long it had taken them to get there but once they were a few metres in, Sam stumbled away from Rani's arms and dropped onto the ground, leaning against the concrete wall. She was heaving in pained breaths, unable to keep the extent of her struggling under wraps.

Rani collapsed on the ground next to her, hands reaching over to lift Sam's shirt and check the wound.

"Shit," she swore, pressing her bundled up jacket back on the wound. Sam hissed. "Just hang in there, okay? I've got -- I don't have medical training. I'm exhausted and depleted and even if I wasn't, I wouldn't know what to do."

"It's okay," Sam mumbled, shifting against the wall to try and find a more comfortable slouch. "Got me this far."

"I have no idea how to find the others," Rani kept on, her voice getting more distressed with each second. "If I take you to a hospital, they'll find you."

"It's really okay," Sam tried again. "Will you do me a favour though?"

“Anything.”

“Make sure Avi’s okay.” Tears welled in Sam’s eyes at the thought of not seeing him again. She’d missed him so much and they’d only had five minutes back together. It didn’t seem fair. “He’s gonna need the help.”

“Shut up!” Rani snapped. “You’re not gonna die. After all of that, and you’re just going to die on me? I don’t think so.” She jumped back up, pacing in front of Sam. “I’ll find the others. Just -- don’t go anywhere.”

“I’ll try.” Sam snorted, her eyes drooping closed. She felt so tired. “I’m just gonna take a nap.”



Before you find out if Sam’s okay...

Take a quiz to see if you live in a wainscot!

When she woke, Sam was surprised to find herself lying on something soft. She was stretched out on a portable cot, an old couch cushion under her head. She was surrounded by four walls, a familiar grey ceiling overhead, and the gentle snoring of someone beside her. It felt reminiscent of the first time she’d woken up in the subway, saved by underground magic rebels with no home and nothing but each other. It was bizarre that knowing she was lying in an abandoned subway line brought her comfort instead of panic.

She turned her head and saw Avi, looking uncomfortable but asleep on a fold-up chair. Her heart immediately swelled at the sight of him. He looked bruised and tired, but alive and safe and here. Sam reached out a hand towards him and winced when it pulled at her side, causing pain to shoot in several directions around her body.

The noise that escaped her reached Avi, who startled awake. His gaze zeroed in on Sam and his face split into a wide smile. Almost as quickly, it turned into a frown.

“You idiot!” he chastised her, gesturing wildly at her prone form. “What the hell did you think you were doing, going against all those guys by yourself?”

“I wasn’t by myself,” Sam said, rolling her eyes.

“Maybe, but you still got yourself shot!” Avi accused her. “You should have seen yourself when they dragged you in here.” He dragged a hand over his face, exhaling shakily.

“Oh. Hey.” Still groggy, Sam reached out to pat at his knee uselessly. “I’m sorry, okay? I won’t do it again.”

Avi laughed, then cleared his throat. “You better not. It’s too late to find someone else to listen to me ramble about magical theory.”

Sam laughed, relief spilling from her in waves. There’d been several times in the past twenty four hours that she’d thought she was going to die, or never see Avi again, and to have him joking beside her was almost too much joy to bare.

The reality of the situation quickly crept back in though, and she found herself wondering.

“How’d I get here? We were -- Rani had us at one of the entrances but I conked out.”

Avi shrugged. “All I know is that the excitable girl with the rune on her head left with a couple of others and like, half an hour later, they came back with you Rani.”

Sam snapped upwards, nearly braining herself in the process. “Where’s Rani? Is she okay?”

“Down boy,” Avi teased her. “You’ll rip your shiny magical stitches if you’re not careful.”

She winced, feeling where her skin was tender. “Seriously, Avi. Where is she?”

“Sleeping,” he replied, a look of unbearable smugness on his face. “She sat in here with you until her eyes were popping out of her head.”

Sam relaxed back onto the cot, throwing him an irritated look. “Don’t start. She was just making sure her stunt didn’t kill me.”

“If you say so,” he said generously. “Though while we’re on the subject; what the hell happened back there? We were supposed to all be escaping, and then Zoey showed up and everyone got all crazy, and then we were leaving you behind!”

“Rani hasn’t told you what happened?” she asked, brow furrowed in confusion.

Avi shook his head. “Not yet. She said she wanted to wait until you woke up.”

“Well,” Sam said. “I’m awake now.”

Avi helped her sit up and put on a clean t-shirt that someone had left her, since her old one had a bullet hole and was covered in blood. She had a scar on her abdomen that shone a little with the magical stitches, and her other side was scraped and bruised. It was slow moving but with Avi’s help, which was limited given how sore he still was, she was eventually sitting up in the cot and fully dressed. Avi insisted on going to find the others to bring them to the room, rather than have her leave. He brought Rani, Misaki, and Maureen back with him.

Misaki was the first to react, falling to the ground and wrapping her arms around Sam in an enthusiastic hug.

“Sam! You’re okay! Oh, sorry.” She released Sam after Sam let out a yelp of pain. “Oh man, we were so worried.”

“Indeed we were,” Maureen echoed the statement.

Sam’s eyes sought Rani’s. She looked as tired as Sam felt but her lips twitched into a smile when their eyes met. Sam reluctantly tore her gaze away to look at the others.

“How did you guys find us?”

Misaki grinned and pulled out her crystal. “My tracking spell was still up. Once you guys came within range, it went off like crazy. We just had to follow it through the subway and then we found you.”

“Sounds like you got there just in time,” Sam said. “Thank you, guys. Seriously.” She directed the words to Maureen as well. “For everything.”

Maureen bowed her head in acknowledgement. “You can thank Misaki. After you left, she spent the whole time trying to convince me to send people after you. I couldn’t just send my people into danger, so the logical course of action was to go myself.”

“You lost people?” Sam asked.

“A few.” Maureen confirmed. “Everyone who came volunteered for the mission. And we gained new people, even a few we’d lost.”

“Everyone that we rescued made it back here,” Misaki explained. “There were a couple of other people who were taken at the Easy Street raid.”

“That’s so great,” Sam said. She reached for Avi, who squeezed her hand in response. “There were a lot of things that we didn’t expect.”

“Zoey, the least of them all, I suspect.” Maureen crossed her arms and looked between Sam and Rani. “What happened? Was it really her?”

“It was,” Rani replied. “In the flesh. No illusion.”

“So they saved her,” Maureen said. “That seems purposeful. Did she say how they were keeping her hostage, or why?”

Rani and Sam shared a quick look.

“They... weren’t,” Rani said carefully. “Keeping her hostage.”

Maureen blinked at her. “What do you mean?”

Rani sucked in a deep breath and let it out again. “She’s with them. She was spouting their bullshit and I’m pretty sure she meant it.”

“How can you be sure she wasn’t acting under duress?” Maureen asked.

“They’ve done something to her,” Rani explained. “I know she’s a level one but the kind of magic she was doing...” she shook her shoulders, like a shiver had gone down her spine. “She cracked a hole in the ward.”

“What?” Everyone else in the room asked at once. Sam might have smiled at the theatrics if they weren’t discussing such a serious subject. Well, maybe the corners of her lips twitched a little.

“Yeah,” she confirmed for them. “She punched right through it. Barely broke a sweat. And then she-” she shuddered at the memory. “I’m pretty sure she was going to kill me.”

Avi squeezed her hand tighter. Misaki gasped quietly.

“She was using the kind of power I’ve got,” Rani said. “When I’m not exhausted.”

“She was a powerful woman,” Maureen said. “But she wasn’t that powerful. And if she’s chosen to side with them...”

Sam made a face. “I don’t know if chosen is the right word. She didn’t sound right.”

They all turned to look at her, even Rani seemed confused.

“Didn’t you notice that weird smile on her face?” she asked Rani. “And the way she was talking... like she’d been indoctrinated or something. It didn’t feel right.”

Rani considered that for a moment. “You think they brainwashed or her?”

“Or something.”

“I know we have no love for the OMA,” Maureen spoke up. “But brainwashing? That’s not something that can be achieved with magical means and doing so with traditional means seems a little far fetched, even for them.”

“It’s not something that we know can be done magically,” Sam argued. “What if someone with Rani’s power could do it?”

Rani shook her head vehemently. “No. I do stuff with more power. The rules still apply to me though. I can’t affect people’s minds.”

“Okay,” Sam said, taking her at her word.

“It seems so shady, even for the OMA,” Misaki spoke up.

“Yes,” Maureen said, putting a hand on her shoulder. “I think that’s what worries me most. We thought they were terrible before but kidnapping magic users and keeping them as prisoners? That’s quite the escalation.”

“Right.” Misaki agreed enthusiastically. “I mean, do we think they’re doing this all over the place?”

“Speculating will only cause us distress,” Maureen answered. “We should stick to what we know, or can know. That man you spoke to, did he give you any insight into what was going on? Or why they wanted you so badly, Rani?”

Rani and Sam shared a look again, this one more questioning than the last. Sam opened her mouth to answer but Rani beat her to it.

“No,” she said in a rush. “He didn’t give us anything. Just a bunch of shit about how my going with him was best for everyone.”

Sam could see the doubt written in the furrow of Maureen’s eyebrows, so she added: “He wanted Rani cause she’s powerful, obviously. Maybe they wanted to use her for something or get her out of the way. Either way; they’re not going to get what they want.”

Maureen turned to study her. Sam prickled under the attention but she held her ground. She’d told bigger lies to a lawyer and cop father combo; this was nothing.

“Well,” Maureen said, assumedly finding what she’d been looking for. “We’re all very glad that you’re here and not there. We’ll be having many conversations about this in the coming days,” she looked from Sam to Rani purposefully. “But for now, I think everyone should get some more rest. We’ve all had a big couple of days.”

Sam thanked her as she and Misaki left the room, leaving just herself, Avi, and Rani.

Avi turned to her with a raised eyebrow. “You lied to her.”

Rani blanched. “You told him?”

“She didn’t tell me anything,” Avi countered. “I can just tell when she’s lying.”

“It wasn’t a total lie,” Sam tried to defend herself. “They did want Rani because she’s powerful. But it’s not exactly the OMA who wants her...” She looked imploringly at Rani, who rolled her eyes and then huffed. She sat on the ground next to them and gestured for Sam to continue.

She recounted the entire event to Avi with a few additions from Rani. She made sure to go back as far as finding the motto in the employee’s email signature.

“Holy hell,” Avi muttered as he took in all the information. “So, you’re telling me you’re in a classification that’s above level one?”

“That’s hardly the most important takeaway,” Rani said. “But yes.”

"It's super important," Avi protested. "Especially if there's more of you. Nothing exists above level one, at least not officially. Which means they've managed to keep it a secret all this time. Probably so that they could round you all up themselves for this spell they're talking about."

"Do you think it's possible?" Sam asked him, like she'd been wanting to since Jesse had first told them about it. "Can they really put magic back in a box?"

He shrugged in response. "I mean, a spell revealed all the magic in the first place. If they knew what spell was cast to make it happen, the actual spell and not the one they were trying to cast, then theoretically they could reverse engineer it and undo everything."

"Shit." Sam muttered. "No magic. Can you imagine?"

"I'd rather not," was his answer.

"What do you think about everything else?" Sam asked. "What about this secret society business? And Zoey?"

Avi grumbled and ran a hand through his hair. "It's a lot. Definitely. I don't know if we're wholly qualified to make decisions about this with just the three of us."

Sam and Rani shared an uneasy glance.

"I don't know if we want to --"

A knock at the door interrupted them. They all looked at each other for a second before Sam broke the silence with a "come in!"

Misaki poked her head through the door, grinning when she saw the three of them.

"Have you guys been partying in here the whole time?" she asked. "Without me?"

"What? No!" Sam protested. Then she frowned. "How long ago did you leave?"

Misaki shrugged. "Couple of hours."

“Yikes.” Avi laughed. “We were supposed to let you rest.”

Sam pouted. “I’m fine.”

“Well, rest will have to wait a little longer,” Misaki told them, opening the door the whole way. “I wanna show you something.”

Once they helped manoeuvre Sam to her feet she was okay to walk on her own, albeit very slowly. Misaki led them down the hallways to the main gathering area. As they walked through the archway that led them into the main area, she threw her arms open in a kind of “ta-da!” gesture.

Someone had set up a music player and two old but operational speakers and was playing the local commercial radio station. Some people were already bopping their heads along or tapping their feet. There was a table set up with food, nothing even remotely close to a party spread, but after the week they’d had, it looked like a feast. There was even a couple of cans of soft drink at the end of the table that Sam imagined had come from an old vending machine somewhere.

It wasn’t much, but it brought a smile to her face all the same.

Avi appeared beside her to sling an arm over her shoulders. “You wanna dance?”

Sam shook her head. “I’m just gonna stand here and try not to fall over. You should though.”

“Suit yourself,” he said, and there was no heat behind it. He turned to Misaki. “Misaki isn’t it? Do you dance?”

Misaki’s face lit up. “Oh boy, do I.”

Avi grinned back at her, extending a hand in offering. “Then please, show me what you can do.”

They moved closer to the make-shift sound system and began to dance, albeit a little more subdued than she usually saw Avi dance. They were grinning like mad at each other and Sam’s chest warmed at the sight.

She heard the crack of a can being opened beside her and turned to see Rani offering her a drink.

“Thanks,” she said, taking the can and having a sip. “Oh man, that’s so flat.”

“Yeah, they’re pretty terrible,” Rani agreed with a soft laugh. They both took another sip though as they watched Avi and Misaki dance.

“You must be glad to have your boy back,” Rani said after a little while.

“I am,” Sam confirmed. She clutched the can in her hand a little tighter. “He’s not my boy though.”

“Oh?” Rani asked, so faux casual that it was obvious to even Sam. “Could’ve sworn you guys were like, a couple or something, with how you were freaking out about him.”

“Yeah, of course I was freaking out,” she said. “He’s my best friend. I’m lost without him.” She took a long sip from her drink. “We’re not really compatible romantically though, seeing as how I’m super gay.”

Sam was treated to the hilarious sound of Rani snorting into her drink can, or maybe snorting soft drink up her nose. Either way, Sam gave her a few moments to recover her composure before speaking again.

“Have I thanked you yet?” she asked.

“For what?” Rani tried to clarify, wiping her mouth. “I got you shot.”

“I got me shot,” Sam countered immediately. “And for helping me find Avi, obviously. You weren’t going to but then you did.”

Rani was silent for a moment. “I never apologised for dragging you into this,” she said. “Not really. And I am. Sorry, I mean.”

Sam didn't look away from Avi, who was twirling Misaki around. "You didn't drag us into it. We got ourselves involved. And you don't owe us anything."

"Then I guess I helped you because it was the right thing to do," Rani tried.

Sam made a buzzer sound with her mouth. "Nope. One more time."

Rani rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. "I guess it's possible that I just like you guys."

"Yes!" Sam fist pumped in triumph, causing them both to devolve into a fit of laughter. When it died down, she cleared her throat and looked around at the underground folks. "It's not over though, is it? Not by a long shot."

"No," Rani agreed with a sigh. "I didn't tell Maureen all that stuff about Jesse's secret group because I didn't want to put her and all these people in more danger. But you, and Avi, and I know. I'm just not sure what to do about it."

"I think Avi has some ideas," Sam said. "He had his thinking face on, back in the room. And we should tell Misaki, at least. She'll want to help."

"I can't believe we just escaped these people and we're already talking about what to do." Rani rubbed a tired hand over her face.

Sam leaned over and bumped their shoulders together gently. "Look, we're not doing anything today, alright? Just enjoy this moment here, right now. We survived a shitstorm together and whatever comes tomorrow, we'll tackle it the same way. Together."

Rani turned to look at her, their faces so close that Sam could feel Rani's breath on her cheek. Rani's eyes searched her face and Sam held her breath the entire time, waiting and cursing herself for waiting at the same time.

"Together," Rani said eventually. She turned back to watch the others.

Sam pressed their shoulders together and took another sip of her flat, warm soft drink.

END

Final word count: 14,152 (manifesto), approximately 33,783 (exegesis), 63,886 (novel)



Did you catch all the webpages?

- [Break Open](#)
- [Playlists](#)
- [UF Recipes](#)
- [Wainscots](#)
- [Booklist](#)
- [D&D](#)
- [Deconstruction](#)
- [Post-colonialism](#)
- [Chapter Mark-Up](#)
- [Secret Societies](#)
- [Quiz](#)
- [High Theory and Why It Didn't Work](#)
- [Zombies](#)
- [Thesis Proposal Remix](#)
- [Failure](#)
- [Choose Your Own](#)

Works Cited

All images used in this document, unless specified otherwise, were sourced from pixabay.com, whose content license can be found [here](#). All images used on the webpages, unless specified otherwise, are sourced from Pixabay and the Wix database.

Aaronovitch, Ben. *Rivers of London*. Gollancz, 2011.

Anatol, Giselle Liza. "The Fallen Empire: Exploring Ethnic Otherness in the World of Harry Potter." *Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays*, edited by Giselle Liza Anatol, Praeger, Westport, CT, 2003, pp. 163–178.

Andrew, Scottie. "Quidditch Is Changing Its Name to Quadball to Cut Ties with J.K. Rowling." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 20 July 2022, edition.cnn.com/2022/07/20/us/quidditch-name-change-quadball-cec/index.html.

Anheier, H.K. (2010). Secret Societies. In: Anheier, H.K., Toepler, S. (eds) *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society*. Springer, New York, NY. https://doi-org.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/10.1007/978-0-387-93996-4_120

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. 1st ed. London: Routledge, 1998.

Attebery, Brian. "Introduction: Fantastic Empires." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 26, no. 1 (92), 2015, pp. 1–3.

Attebery, Brian. *Strategies of Fantasy*. Indiana University Press, 1992.

Baahn, Per, and Fatma Fulya Tepe. "Hybridity and Agency: Some Theoretical and Empirical Observations." *Migration Letters*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2016, pp. 350–58, <https://doi.org/10.33182/ml.v13i3.288>.

Barthes, Roland. *Image, music, text*. Fontana, 1977.

Batty, Craig, and Allyson Holbrook. "Contributing to Knowledge in Creative Writing Research: What, Where, How?" *TEXT*, vol. 21, no. Special 44, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.25868>.

Bertens, Hans. *Literary Theory: The Basics*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2007.

Bhabha, Homi. K. "Cultural Diversity & Cultural Difference". *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2006, pp 206-212.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 2004.

Bolt, Barbara. "The Exegesis and the Shock of the New." *TEXT*, vol. 8, no. Special 3, 2004, <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.31958>.

Bolter, Jay David. *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing*. Erlbaum, 1991.

Bookpapi [@bookpapi]. "Replying to @crystaldawnsf I'm not an authority obviously but it's what I think it's appropriate thank you for asking! #booktok #bipoctiktok #authorsoftiktok #readersoftiktok #latinostiktok #latinetiktok." *TikTok*, 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@bookpapi/video/7130694232423091502>.

- Brady, Tess. "A Question of Genre: de-mystifying the exegesis." *TEXT*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2000, <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.35896>.
- bramblepatch. "What is your Hogwarts house?" *Words Mean Things*, 19th March 2023, 4:12AM, <https://www.tumblr.com/bramblepatch/712152306235457536/what-is-your-hogwarts-house>
- Brien, Donna Lee, et al. "'Fail Better': Doctoral Examination and the Creative Field." *TEXT*, vol. 17, no. Special 22, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.28306>.
- Briggs, Patricia. *Moon Called*. Ace Books, 2006.
- Brooker, Sam. "Proposing, Disposing, Proving: Barthes, Intentionalism, and Hypertext Literary Fiction." *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia*, vol. 27, no. 1-2, 2021, pp. 6–28., <https://doi.org/10.1080/13614568.2021.1906955>.
- Bush, Stephen S. "Nothing Outside the Text: Derrida and Brandom on Language and World." *Contemporary Pragmatism*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2009, pp. 45–69, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18758185-90000116>.
- Butcher, Jim. *Storm Front*. Penguin Putnam, 2000.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/flinders/detail.action?docID=683946>.
- Butler, Judith. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, edited by Diana Fuss, Taylor & Francis Group, 1991. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/lib/flinders/detail.action?docID=1144411>.
- Cadden, Mike. "Genre as Nexus: The Novel for Children and Young Adults." *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*, Routledge, 2011, pp. 302–13, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203843543-28>.
- Cannadine, David. *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire*. Allen Lane, 2001.
- Carey, Brycchan. "Hermione and the House-Elves: The Literary and Historical Contexts of J. K. Rowling's Antislavery Campaign." *Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays*, edited by Giselle Liza Anatol, Praeger, Westport, CT, 2003, pp. 103-16.
- Carey, Janene, Jen Webb, Donna Lee Brien. "A Plethora of Policies: Examining Creative Research Higher Degrees in Australia." *Creativity and Uncertainty: the 13th conference of the AAWP*, 27 Nov 2008, Sydney Australia.
- Carnes, Mark C. (Mark Christopher). *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America*. Yale University Press, 1989.
- Cart, Michael. "Reviewing Children's and Young Adult Literature." *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*, Routledge, 2011, pp. 455-66, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203843543-41>.

- Chabal, Patrick. *End of Conceit Western Rationality after Postcolonialism*. Zed Books, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350223097>.
- Clare, Cassandra. *City of Ashes*. Simon & Schuster. 2008.
- . *City of Bones*. Simon & Schuster. 2007.
- . *City of Lost Souls*. Simon & Schuster. 2012.
- . *Clockwork Princess*. Simon & Schuster. 2013.
- Coats, Karen. "Young Adult Literature: Growing Up, In Theory." *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*, Routledge, 2011, pp. 315–29, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203843543-29>.
- Critchley, Simon. *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*. NED-New edition, 3, Edinburgh University Press, 2014.
- Colfer, Eoin. *Artemis Fowl*. Viking Press, 2001.
- . *Artemis Fowl, The Last Guardian*. Viking Press, 2012.
- Clute, John, and John Grant, editors. *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. Orbit, 1997.
- Clute, John. "Urban Fantasy." *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy: Themes, Works, and Wonders*. Ed. Gary Westfahl. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005. 852–54.
- Di Filippo, Paul. "Worlds of the
- Danius, Sara, and Stefan Jonsson. "An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak." *Boundary 2*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1993, pp. 24–50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/303357>.
- "Derrida and Difficulty." *The Philosopher's Zone* from ABC, 7 Feb 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/philosopherszone/derrida-and-difficulty/13118694>.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- . Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016.
- . Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Eades, Quinn and Susan K Martin. "The Supervision of a Hybrid Thesis: Bodies, Walking and Text." *Writing in Practice: The Journal of Creative Writing Research*, vol. 2, 2016. <https://www.nawe.co.uk/DB/wip-editions/articles/the-supervision-of-a-hybrid-thesis-bodies-walking-and-text.html>.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. 2nd ed; Anniversary ed. Malden, MA; Blackwell Publishing. 2008.
- Ekman, Stefan. "Urban Fantasy: A Literature of the Unseen." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 27, no. 3 (97), International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, 2016, pp. 452–69.

- Elliott, Anthony. *Contemporary Social Theory an Introduction*. Routledge, 2009.
- Ensslin, Astrid. *Pre-Web Digital Publishing and the Lore of Electronic Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2022.
- Feder K., Ellen. "Power/Knowledge." *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts*, Ed by Dianna Taylor. Routledge, 2014.
- Finlayson, Katrina, et al. "The Potential of the Exegesis and the Challenge of Symbiosis." *TEXT*, vol. 21, no. Special 44, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.25863>.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. 2nd ed., Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1991.
- . Foucault, Michel., et al. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76*. Picador, 2003.
- Freeman, Matthew. *The World of the Walking Dead*. Routledge, 2021.
- Gaiman, Neil. *Neverwhere*. BBC Books, 1996.
- Grant, Mira. *Blackout*. Orbit Books. 2012.
- . *Deadline*. Orbit Books. 2011.
- . *Feed*. Orbit Books. 2010.
- Grossman, Lev. *The Magicians*. Viking Press. 2009.
- Go, Julian. *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Halberstam, Jack. Jack Halberstam on Queer Failure, Silly Archives and the Wild. *YouTube*, uploaded by IPAK Centar, 5 September 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iKDEil7m1j8&list=PLYJu5cgO7zC0eCrif1izYjOCLKbuzyp3&index=16>.
- Halberstam, Judith. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke University Press, 2011.
- Hall, Stuart. "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities." *CULTURE*, NED - New edition, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 41–68, <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctttsqb3.7>.
- Hammond, Adam. *Literature in the Digital Age: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Harris, Charlaine. *Dead Until Dark*. Ace Books, 2001.
- Heffernan, Amelia. *Harry Potter and the Dangers of Secret Magic Schools: The Imperialism of Hogwarts and Subverting the Trope Through a Contemporary Australian Perspective*. 2017. Flinders University, Undergraduate honours thesis.
- Heilman, Elizabeth E, and Anne Gregory. "Images of the Privileged Insider and Outcast Outsider." *Harry Potter's World: Multidisciplinary Critical Perspectives*, edited by Elizabeth E. Heilman, RoutledgeFalmer, New York, 2003, pp. 241–260.
- Hendricks, Gavin P. "Deconstruction the End of Writing: 'Everything is a Text, there is Nothing Outside Context'." *Verbum Et Ecclesia*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1-9. ProQuest, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v37i1.1509>.

- "His Hero." *Adventure Time*, written by Kent Osborne, Niki Yang, & Adam Muto, directed by Larry Leichliter & Patrick McHale, Warner Brothers, 2010.
- Hoffman, Marcelo. *Disciplinary Power. Michel Foucault: Key Concepts*. Edited by Dianna Taylor, Acumen Publishing, 2011.
- Horne, Jackie C. "Harry and the Other: Answering the Race Question in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter." *The Lion and the Unicorn* (Brooklyn), vol. 34, no. 1, 2010, pp. 76–104, <https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.0.0488>.
- "Intro to Recycled Cinema." *Community*, season 6, episode 8, NBC, 28 Apr. 2015. Netflix, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81247517?trackId=255824129>.
- Irvine, Alexander. "Urban Fantasy." *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*. Edited by Edward James & Farah Mendlesohn. Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 200-213.
- Isa Party [@isaparty]. "#greenscreen like the fact u made a point to say the game is cyberpunk means u really dont know anything about the genre other than neon signs in a foreign language and robots" *TikTok*, 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@isaparty/video/7128003364008348974>
- Istvan Csicsery-Ronay. "Science Fiction and the Imperial Audience." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 26, no. 1 (92), 2015, pp. 7–18.
- Jenkins, Henry. "'Cultural Acupuncture': Fan Activism and the Harry Potter Alliance." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 10, 2012, pp. 59-, <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0305>.
- Joyce, Stephen. *Transmedia Storytelling and the Apocalypse*. Springer International Publishing, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93952-0>.
- Kearney, Richard and American Council of Learned Societies. *Debates in continental philosophy: conversations with contemporary thinkers*. Fordham University Press, 2004.
- Knight, Stephen Thomas. *The Brotherhood: the Secret World of the Freemasons*. Granada, 1984.
- Krauth, Nigel. "Evolution of the Exegesis: The Radical Trajectory of the Creative Writing Doctorate in Australia." *TEXT*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.31314>.
- Krauth, Nigel. "Exegesis and Artefact as a Woven Work: Problems of Examination." *TEXT*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.25111>.
- Kroll, Jeri. "The Exegesis and the Gentle Reader/Writer." *TEXT*, vol. 8, no. Special 3, 2004, <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.31963>.
- lalaleliana-blog. "i really like the advice..." *love is the Maker's best gift*, 14th June 2015, 2:32AM, <https://www.tumblr.com/lalaleliana-blog/121436961180/i-really-like-the-advice-write-marginalized>
- Landow, George P. *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.
- Le Lievre, Kerrie Anne. "Wizards and Wainscots: Generic Structures and Genre Themes in the Harry Potter Series." *Mythlore*, vol. 24, no. 1 (91), The Mythopoeic Society, 2003, pp. 25–36.

- L'Estrange, Sarah. "'Close to Cultural Appropriation': Is It Wrong for Authors to Write from Another's Perspective?" *ABC News*, 28 June 2018, www.abc.net.au/news/2018-06-28/australian-authors-debate-write-what-you-know/9905754.
- Levenda, Peter. *The Secret Temple: Masons, Mysteries, and the Founding of America*. Continuum, 2009.
- Lynch, Katherine E., et al. "Queering the Romantic Heroine: Where Her Power Lies." *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol.3, no. 1, 15 Oct 2012. <https://www.jprstudies.org/2012/10/queering-the-romantic-heroine-where-her-power-lies-by-katherine-e-lynch-ruth-e-sternglantz-and-len-barot/>.
- MacKenzie, Norman. *Secret Societies*. Crescent Books, 1967.
- "Masquerade." *TV Tropes*, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/Masquerade>.
- Matthews, Amy T. *Navigating the Kingdom of Night*. University of Adelaide Press, 2013.
- McGillis, Roderick. *Voices of the Other: Children's Literature and the Postcolonial Context*. Garland Pub., 2000.
- Mead, Richelle. *Blood Promise*. Razorbill. 2009.
- . *Frostbite*. Razorbill. 2008.
- . *Vampire Academy*. Razorbill. 2007.
- Mearls, Mike, and Jeremy Crawford. *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook*. Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast, 2014.
- Mendlesohn, Farah. *Rhetorics Of Fantasy*. 1st ed. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008.
- Mendlesohn, Farah, and Edward James. *A Short History of Fantasy*. Faringdon: Libri Publishing, 2012.
- @MichellCClark. "'never quit' sounds great, but sometimes, you gotta quit." Twitter, 12 Nov 2021, 11:38 a.m., <https://twitter.com/MichellCClark/status/1458964762230931458>.
- Miller, J. Hillis. "Preposterous Preface: Derrida and Queer Discourse." *Derrida and Queer Theory*, edited by Christian Hite, Punctum Books, 2017, pp. 24–67.
- Mills, Sara. *Michael Foucault*. Routledge, 2003.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke University Press, 2003.
- Moten, Fred, and Stefano Harney. "The University and the Undercommons: SEVEN THESESES." *Social Text*, vol. 22, no. 2, Duke University Press, 2004, pp. 101–15, https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2_79-101.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia : the Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.
- Norris, Christopher. *Deconstruction Theory and Practice*. Revised Edition. London: Routledge, 1991.

- Norton, Mary. *The Borrowers*. Dent, 1968.
- prismatic-bell, saoirseronanswife. ""in this essay i will explore" memes piss me off..." *Vienna Waits*, 23rd March 2018, 2:35PM, <https://www.tumblr.com/blog/view/prismatic-bell/172158839851>
- Ostry, Elaine. "Accepting Mudbloods: The Ambivalent Social Vision of J.K. Rowling's Fairy Tales." *Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays*, edited by Giselle Liza Anatol, Praeger, Westport, CT, 2003, pp. 70-87.
- Roberts, J. M. (John Morris). *The Mythology of the Secret Societies*. Secker and Warburg, 1972.
- Rosen, Peter. *The Catholic Church and Secret Societies*. Cannon printing, 1902.
- Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Raincoast Books, 1998.
- . *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Raincoast Books, 2000.
- . *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince*. Raincoast Books, 2005.
- . *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Raincoast Books, 2003.
- . *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. Raincoast Books, 1997.
- . *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. Raincoast Books, 1999.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. 1st ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Sakhkhane, T. *Spivak and Postcolonialism Exploring Allegations of Textuality*. 1st ed. 2012., Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1057/978023034941>
- Sarup, Madan. *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*. Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988.
- Saunders, Isabella. (2018). Post-colonial Australia: Fact or fabrication? *NEW: Emerging scholars in Australian Indigenous Studies*. 2. 56. 10.5130/nesais.v2i1.1474.
- Schweitzer, Dahlia. *Going Viral: Zombies, Viruses, and the End of the World*. Rutgers University Press, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.36019/9780813593180>.
- Scott, Craig R. "Hidden Organizations and Reputation." *The Handbook of Communication and Corporate Reputation*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2013, pp. 545–57, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118335529.ch43>.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.
- Skult, Petter. "The Role of Place in the Post-Apocalypse: Contrasting The Road and World War Z." *Studia Neophilologica*, vol. 87, no. sup1, 2015, pp. 104–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393274.2014.981963>.
- Sharp, Joanne P. *Geographies of Postcolonialism: Spaces of Power and Representation*. SAGE, 2009.
- Simmel, Georg. "The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies." *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1906, pp. 441–98, <https://doi.org/10.1086/211418>.

- Sorensen, E. *Postcolonial Studies and the Literary: Theory, Interpretation and the Novel*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230277595>.
- Spencer, Kerry. "Marketing and Sales in the U.S. Young Adult Fiction Market." *New Writing* (Clevedon, England), vol. 14, no. 3, 2017, pp. 429–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2017.1307419>.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Bill Ashcroft et al. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2006. 24-28.
- . Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism". *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. New York: Routledge, 1996. 269-272.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, Donna Landry, and Gerald M. MacLean. *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Stanfill, Mel. "The Unbearable Whiteness of Fandom and Fan Studies." *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2018, pp. 305–17, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119237211.ch19>.
- Stoney, John. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. 4th Edition. The University of Georgia Press, 2006.
- "The UnMasqued World." *TV Tropes*, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TheUnmasquedWorld>.
- "The Walking Dead: Season 10 Ratings." *TV Series Finale*. 6 April. 2021, <https://tvseriesfinale.com/tv-show/the-walking-dead-season-10-ratings/>
- van Zyl, Susan. "Derrida, Foucault and the Other Difficult French." *Scrutiny 2*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1999, pp. 49–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18125449908565941>.
- Vervaeke, John, et al. *Zombies in Western Culture: a Twenty-First Century Crisis*. Open Book Publishers, 2017.
- Vuong, Ocean. "Ocean Vuong: "When I write, I feel larger than the limits of my body." | Louisiana Channel". *YouTube*, uploaded by Louisiana Channel, 6 September 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5NuCrAkjGw>.
- Wasserman, Emily. "The Epistolary in Young Adult Literature." *The ALAN Review*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2003, pp. 48-, <https://doi.org/10.21061/alan.v30i3.a.12>.
- Webb, Jen, et al. "Talking It over: The Agony and the Ecstasy of the Creative Writing Doctorate." *TEXT*, vol. 21, no. Special 44, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.25862>.
- Webster, Nesta Helen. *Secret Societies and Subversive Movements*. 2nd ed., Boswell, 1924.
- Wilkins, Kim. *Young Adult Fantasy Fiction: Conventions, Originality, Reproducibility*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Williams, Paul. "Exegesis as Manifesto." *New Writing*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2022, pp. 61–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2022.2025848>.

Williams, Paul. "The performative exegesis." *TEXT*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2016,
<https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.25306>.

Winkel, Heidemarie, and Christel Gärtner. *Exploring Islam Beyond Orientalism and Occidentalism: Sociological Approaches*. Edited by Heidemarie Winkel and Christel Gärtner, Springer, 2021.

Wizards RPG Team. "Mythic Odysseys of Theros." *D&D Beyond*,
<https://www.dndbeyond.com/races/410993-satyr>.

Yoo, Joanne. "Writing out on a Limb: Integrating the Creative and Academic Writing Identity." *New Writing*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2017, pp. 444–454.,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2017.1317274>.

Young, Helen. *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018.