



The Sulphur Diaries

Georgina Kamsika

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PaperBooks

Today:

“There is blood everywhere, on the walls, on the tables; I’m not sure what I just stood in, but it’s slippery.

Johnny! I scream, to be heard over the racket from outside, but there’s no answer and I can’t see him in the dim light. There’s a wet thump against the outer wall, though I daren’t look out of the windows. If I do, I might never be able to look away.

The shrieking outside is like nothing I’ve ever heard, and I freeze. Clenching my hands to stop their trembling, I peer into the gloom. Soft red light from some torches show me nothing but a puppet-show of shadows fighting outside. I recognise some of the locals: Mr Higgins, the Croft twins, their shapes easy to pick out as they struggle against the imps.

There seem to be more of them now. Where are they coming from? I remember calling to Lyle – not even an hour ago, however much it feels like days – but why are these imps attacking, why–”

“Thank you, Miss Murphy,” Detective Inspector Mehta interrupts me mid-flow. “When you say 'imps', what do you mean?”

I’m surprised back into the present, confused for a moment at how real my memories had felt. But instead of being trapped in the village, surrounded by fighting, I’m safe

in a small, windowless room that smells of dust and paperwork. Sitting opposite me at the same small table is Detective Inspector Mehta.

I stare at the woman who just interrupted me. No smart police uniform for her; she's dressed more like a Cosmo shoot for a New York businesswoman. Snappy woollen coat, linen trousers and an empty expression stamped on her face.

Looking away from this stranger, someone more familiar catches my eye. Brian Hall, my welfare contact since my mother disappeared when I was six. Sensible, earnest, and utterly boring, he's peering at me over his thick glasses, a smile mostly hidden behind his thick beard.

"Honestly, Brian," I say, swiping at the wetness on my cheeks. "I'm trying to explain but I can't do it unless I tell the whole truth. If Constable Mehta—"

"That's Detective Inspector," DI Mehta interrupts again, this time stopping the tape recorder.

Slumping back into my chair, I try to stop my lower lip trembling as I stare at the table.

"I'm sorry, Detective Inspector. It's been a hard day..." I clasp my blood-stained hands together at the edge of the plastic table and sniff to hold back any more tears.

"It's quite all right, Alice," Brian reaches across the table to pat my hand. "You're doing well. DI Mehta, I've known Alice and her, ah, background, for some years now. Perhaps if she gave you a bit more info, this might begin to make more sense?"

I blink away the tears and look gratefully at Brian, nodding in agreement. "I can do that. I can start from the beginning...tell you what I know."

"Walk me through it." DI Mehta leans towards me, her elbows sliding forward on the hard plastic tabletop. "Step by step, day by day. Help me to understand." She waves her hand, one sweep encompassing the blood on my clothes, the

photos of bloodied bodies that lie scattered on the table, and I nod again. The DI clicks the tape recorder back on and settles back in her plastic chair.

“Here’s the thing; because everyone else in my village lies and cheats without even blinking, I value truth above all things. You can trust me...all of this will make sense if you let me explain what happened. I mean, I try not to judge people, but when your father lets you down and the village Elders refuse to help – what else could I do? Okay,” I sniff and swipe at the tears on my cheeks with the back of my hand, “then I’ll walk you through the whole thing, day by day – just like you asked. We all knew someone was going to die today. The funny thing is, I thought it was going to be me.”

21 days ago – Saturday:

Imagine that your perfect man is standing right in front of you – with looks you adore, a personality you can't resist – then imagine that, actually, instead of swooning, you find that you can't stand the sight of him.

That's how I feel as I look at my ex-best friend, Johnny Hunter. With his glossy black hair and perfect blue eyes he looks far better than any eighteen-year-old should. Despite our two-year age difference we'd been friends since the crib, but not long after Johnny hit sixteen, he dropped me without looking back. He made it clear that our friendship meant nothing, and he went off to be Mr Popular with the cool kids, leaving me by myself. I can't stand him and refuse to talk to him if he ever tries to talk to me, the jerk. And annoyingly, he does keeps trying to talk to me, but I try never to let him speak.

Johnny laughs at something Poppy Croft must have said, his eyes crinkling as he smiles, and I remember back to when I used to make him laugh. Well over a year ago now, ever since his Beltane, ever since –

“Stop staring, Alice.” Cazza's voice interrupts my inner emo. I glance down at the floor, then up at the sky. Hmm. Nice clouds.

“He's going to notice, and it'll only annoy you,” Cazza says.

She's right, my only friend. She knows how each time he catches me looking, he smiles. He only turns away when I don't smile back. Somehow, this only infuriates me more.

"So, it's another dull Sunday night – what plans have we got this week?" I change the subject, inspecting my chewed-up nails.

Cazza sighs, blowing air up through her immaculately coiffed red hair. A year older than me, she had her Beltane last year and so, with her glamour, she's stunningly beautiful. Not that it makes a difference. Being my friend means she's not part of Johnny's gang. I'm lucky that she's loyal.

"No films or good shows on telly, no parties. Oh, Mr. Mason is having a desecration ritual, it might..." Cazza stops when she sees my face. "Okay, okay, no more rituals this weekend. What ideas have you got then, *Miss Grumpy*?"

Leaning back on the wall outside the chippy, I shrug. Even with the greasy heat streaming out of the door, the bricks are cool through my t-shirt, and I shiver. Opposite me, distant flames light up the village, casting shadows that flit from door to door like thieves.

"I feel like an anthropologist, discovering a new species of human." I tilt my chin to indicate what I mean.

Cazza follows my gaze, watching as the village's most popular girl, Heather, stalks into the shop like a catwalk model. Flicking her gaze back to check if Johnny is watching, Heather drapes her arms on the counter, filling poor Mr Jarvis's face with her underage yet well-developed boobs.

"I hate her," Cazza murmurs, and we both sigh.

Matt Goodbody, the village leader's son (and token village idiot), struts into the shop towards the alcohol bottles. Not even checking on Heather's success as a decoy, he pulls a couple of vodka bottles from the wall and saunters

back out. He's almost across the square to rejoin his friends, when a black cat leaps from the shadows onto his shoulder.

Everything goes very still then; even the wind seems to die back to nothing. For a moment, the cat is unblinking, glaring at Matt, its tail frisking from side to side. Then it lowers its head and purrs, tail straight up in the air.

"Damned spies," I hiss at the cat. "Of course it approves of deception and stealing. Brownie points to Matt."

Caz elbows me hard in the ribs but I ignore it, annoyance bubbling in my gut as Matt struts back to the group, triumphant, vodka bottles held aloft. Heather skips out of the shop and grabs a bottle for herself from Matt.

Eyes fluttering, she wiggles up to Johnny, offering him the bottle. For a moment it's as though he's looking at me, but it's hard to tell for sure in the flickering light. He smiles at Heather, but shakes his head and folds his arms. I release the breath I hadn't even realised I was holding.

"Alice, look at him." Cazza nods towards the rest of Johnny's group. "Now what's he up to?"

I try not to look interested, tilting my head so I can watch them without seeming to stare. Matt is attempting to pull himself onto the roof of the Hanged Man pub by climbing the guttering. His friends are circling at the bottom of the wall, baying and jeering. I look around for Johnny, but he isn't in sight. Heather bounces up and down, her volleyball boobs jiggling.

"Who knows, but if we're lucky he might fall off," I mutter.

"Hullo, Murph." Johnny's smooth voice at my shoulder makes me jump and squeak like a mouse. Great.

I flicker my eyes to my left to acknowledge him, my lip automatically curling in annoyance at his smile.

"Johnny," I shrug one shoulder. Hopefully it's dark enough that he won't notice my flushed cheeks. My stomach

churns at the faint hint of spices on his clothes, a once-familiar aroma that now sickens me.

“Just wondering how it’s going?” He leans against the wall next to me, shoulder to shoulder, seemingly watching Matt’s idiocy but really peering at me out of the corner of his eyes.

“Same as last month when we weren’t speaking, either. And the month before that one, really.” It’s strange, we used to be so close, but everything he says, everything he does, now irritates me to Hell.

Johnny mutters something that I don’t quite catch, but I refuse to ask him to repeat it, chewing my bottom lip as Matt catches the bottle of booze thrown up to him on the roof. His cronies all cheer, the sound drowning out Johnny’s continued mumblings.

It’s when I notice Johnny’s hands moving in the fixed gestures of a spell that I jerk away from him, my brow drawing down as I glare.

“What the...? What magic are you casting on me? I knew it was dodgy, you bothering to talk to me!”

“Murph. Alice. There’s a spell on you already...I was trying to find out what it is. Please –”

His face is sincere, his eyes pleading; but I don’t trust him, especially as he’s still working up that spell, a faint magical glow shimmering over his skin.

“Get away from me, Johnny.” I try to back away, but with the wall behind me, there’s nowhere to go. I clench my hands into fists, nails digging into my palms.

“Alice, listen to me. Someone’s cast *something* on you, let me get rid –”

I shake my head, barely listening to him, a primal urge to flee locking down my brain. I don’t have any magic skills like him and he’s easily a foot taller than me, and I feel trapped.

Caz is the one who rescues me, stepping forward to clasp Johnny's hands, holding them still and nullifying his spell.

"I don't know what your problem is, but she's asked you to leave. So please, leave."

His hands glow orange for a few moments as the unused magics fade, but he pulls free of her and steps back. I can't look at him, cold fury making my body shake.

"Caz," he turns to her, eyes wide and pleading. "You know me, you know how much I care for Murph. I was only trying to help."

Cazza doesn't reply; she just tips her chin a little higher in defiance and steps closer to me. Johnny waits for something more from her, before sighing and stepping back.

"I'm sorry. I'll fix this, Alice, I promise," Johnny calls over his shoulder, as he heads back to his real friends.

"You okay?" Caz rubs my shoulder. "I could feel that spell from where I was standing. *Lucifer*, I knew you two had fallen out, but, to try and cast magic on you against your will..."

Her voice trails off and she turns to look at him as he sits on the edge of the fountain in the square. The adrenaline pumps through my veins, making my limbs shake and my stomach heave.

"I... I have no idea." I rub a hand across my forehead.

"You used to be so close." She rests her head on my shoulder. "I was always the hanger-on, the gooseberry with Mr and Mrs Right."

"It's like I can still remember how close we are – well, were – and I miss that. I miss him. But at the same time, it makes me want to throw up if he talks to me."

Johnny rejoins the others standing outside the pub, watching Matt stumbling along the roof. His shadow melts into the darkness and I look up at Matt, trying to relax as my shivering finally subsides.

Matt sways, cheered on by the people below him, and starts to do a bump and grind dance along the slates. He's showing off, chugging the vodka and kicking his legs, when his feet slide out from under him. They tangle in the gutter and he hangs there for a second, his arms pin-wheeling as he tries to regain his balance. But he's lost it, face collapsing in fear as he tips over the edge. There's a sickening crunch and silence for one brief second, before the night is filled with howls of laughter at the pools of blood and brain matter splattered on the cobblestones.

Then *they* come. The spies. Hordes of cats that swarm out of the darkness, black shadows slipping through the walls towards the convulsing form. Even from my distant vantage point, I can hear faint licking and purring noises. Soon Matt's body is covered with a living carpet of cats. The purring intensifies until it sounds like an aeroplane engine droning across the square.

There's a huge, heaving breath. Then another. Matt sits up, fully healed, the spies yowling as they tumble off him. All of his friends are laughing and poking at him. Heather helps him to his feet and he throws her over his shoulders in a fireman's lift.

"I'm Superman!" he yells, charging around the square. "I'm invulnerable!"

The cats melt back into the shadows, their work done, one of the conditions of the pact upheld.

"I hate this place," Caz grumbles, and it's hard to disagree.

First Interlude:

“So, let me get this straight. You're trying to tell me that no-one in your village ever dies?” DI Mehta asks me, one eyebrow almost to her hairline. “Because the cats don't let them?”

I don't look at her, keeping my eyes fixed on Brian's face. He rolls his eyes at her then winks at me, making it clear he still supports me, despite the coppers' scepticism. I throw him a grateful smile before explaining myself to the tabletop, fingers clenching so tightly that my knuckles are white.

“No, it's not because of cats, and of course people die. Of old age. At 114. That's the age agreed, and that's why who is allowed to have kids is controlled by the Elders.”

I try not to sound frustrated, but this copper seems to be deliberately misunderstanding me. How different is it out there, outside the barriers? I have no idea.

“Agreed death dates? I must admit, it sounds like a sci fi film,” Brian chips in. “Agreed with who?”

“With the demons,” I mutter through gritted teeth. “I have mentioned the pact to you before.”

“I know.” His smile drops, and he looks down at the thick file in front of him on the table. My file. “But it's mostly because of those stories that you even have a social worker.”

“Demon stories?” DI Mehta's voice sounds even cooler than before, if that's possible.

“Yeah, well, the thing is...” I pause and rub the bridge of my nose. I figure that what's normal to me might send her for the men in white coats. “The thing is, to the south of the village is the reason why we're all trapped in this Godforsaken place. The Pit. A Hell-gate. Whatever you want to call it. It's a gateway to where the demons live.”

“Alice has mentioned them to me before.” Brian's smile is firmly back in place, the file that has recorded my 'insanity' temporarily forgotten. “Something about the demon providing the power for everything.”

“Right. Well, leaving the demon thing for a moment...” DI Mehta gives Brian a cool, appraising glance, before turning back to me. “Beltane? You've mentioned it twice now.”

“It's just an old name for May Day, I think, possibly Celtic,” – I see Brian nodding in agreement – “but here in Crawemere, it's our annual rite to adulthood. Once you get to sixteen, you're still not classed as an adult until your first Beltane. You have to stay 'pure',” – Brian blushes, but DI Mehta doesn't even blink – “until the ceremony, but once it's over you're an adult, and get your glamour. One of the perks of living on a Hell-gate is that a magical glamour affects you at all times. Everyone's imperfections melt away; no bent noses, no spotty faces or huge chins. Every woman has shampoo advert hair, and every man a six-pack to go.”

“That seems pretty...shallow?” One of DI Mehta's perfectly-shaped eyebrows rises, to show her disbelief.

“Well, it's not just about the glamour – there are other benefits. You don't get sick, you don't die, remember?”

“Right, because the cats are demons?” The policewoman's eyebrow is still mocking me.

I exhale as audibly as I can, rolling my eyes for good measure. I'm explaining things any two-year-old in Crawemere would understand.

“Not what I said. The Elders make the deals with the

demons, but demons are trapped in the pit. The cats are like...hmm...go-betweenes, to keep an eye on us, to enforce the pact.”

“You've mentioned elders before. Explain them to me.”

“Wait – all villages aren't run by Elders councils?”

The policewoman finally cracks a smile, and shakes her head. The thought of no governing body of men surprises me more than her smile. I start to daydream about the freedom that must give.

“Alice, the elders?” Brian prompts me.

“Oh aye, sorry. The Elders are the men who run the village. They control everything, and the quality of your life depends on whether you're in favour or not. They say if you can have kids, or if you have to work the shops.” I shrug. “Until all this, I didn't have much to do with them. They mostly leave you alone until Beltane.”

“How many elders are there? Give me some names so I can speak to them about all this,” DI Mehta asks.

“There were five of them. Johnny's dad, Mr Hunter, uh, Eric, and his uncle Jim were on there. Then these nutters John Bates and Ted Hill, both cronies for Pa, who were as mean as the other two were nice. Pa was the real leader...”

DI Mehta grabs her pad and starts scribbling. “You're saying their names in past tense. Are you telling me all of them are dead? I have no record of either Hunter parent. Or Jim – Cooper, is it? None of them are listed as deceased here.”

“Well, I'm trying to explain that. I was getting there...it's a long story.”

“It's okay, Alice, we know you're doing your best.” Brian frowns at the policewoman, before nodding to me. “Go on, love. What happens next?”

21 days ago – Saturday Night:

I push the door shut, wincing as the old iron hinges creak. It's well after my curfew but the house is dark, so it might be okay. I'm padding up the rickety stairs in my socks, when I hear my father's voice from ahead of me.

"Where you bin?"

I flinch, torn between running back downstairs or sprinting the last few steps to my room. In the end I keep my eyes on the floor, and take the last few stairs up to the landing.

"Hi, Dad. We were just hanging around the village, watching some of the rituals –"

"S'four am. Rituals finish at midnight."

I see his feet stop near me, a hole in one grey sock exposing a toenail that his glamour shows me is neat and clean. The familiar liquid musk of whiskey doesn't quite cover his body odour, however.

"Yeah, then me and Caz just got chatting. You know us girls..." I try to inch away, but his feet shuffle to block my path.

"I do know girls. Filthy little beasts." A hand snakes out, grabbing my chin. Cringing, I let him pull my head up, but keep my eyes averted from his face.

"Look at your lips, all puffy. Have you been dirty with boys again?"

“Dad!” I jerk my head away and step to the side. “Stop it. I’m not like that. We were just out, okay? I forgot the time. Ask a cat!”

I push at him, wincing at the spongy feel of the beer gut that his glamour strains to hide. He totters and lets me past, but his voice follows me.

“Don’t you go off whoring like your mother done, girl. I know what you summoners are like – always off sniffing out a bit of something. But you’re not free to be dirty with boys yet, remember? You got to save yourself for Beltane. The spies’ll tell me if you done anything. I don’t want anyone else touching my daughter –”

The thick wooden door cuts out his voice, and it also stops the bastard being able to hear my sobs. I lock the door and lie on the bed, looking out at the skyline. The orange glow is strong tonight, the Hellfire working overtime on some poor soul. I sit, wide awake as the tears dry on my cheeks, and wish that the soul in Hell was my father’s.