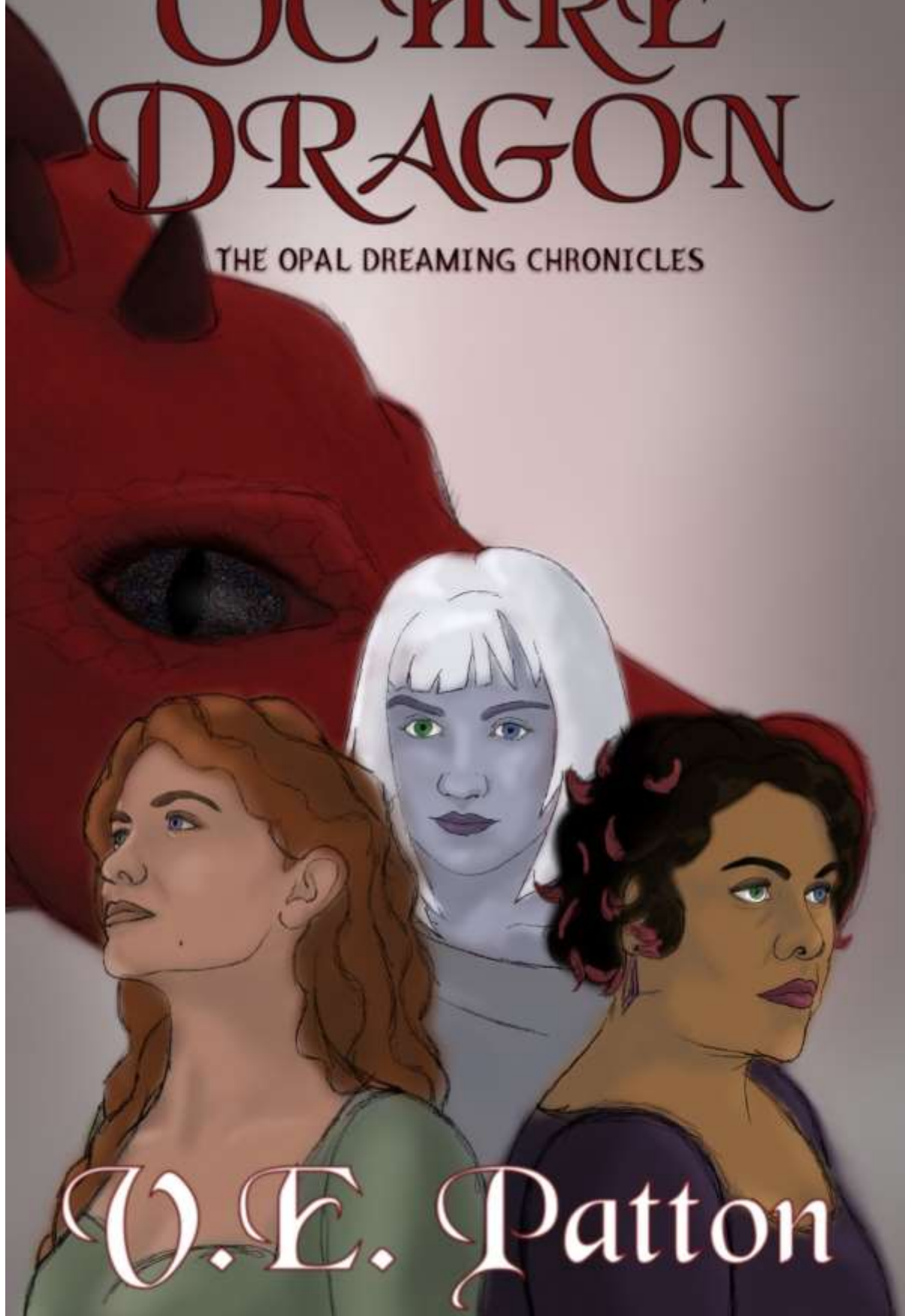


OCHRE DRAGON

THE OPAL DREAMING CHRONICLES



W.E. Patton

OCHRE
DRAGON

THE OPAL DREAMING CHRONICLES
BOOK 1

V. E. Patton

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This is a work of fiction.

The characters and situations contained in this book are figments of the author's over active imagination and any similarities to real people or events are entirely coincidental.

Seriously, do you really think dragons exist?

The author would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people who are the Traditional Custodians of the Land on which she lives, and pay her respects to Elders past and present of the Kulin Nation, and to all other Indigenous Australians who have been telling their stories for thousands of years.

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The Dogs of Doom come way too soon
When Fate's Foe emerges
She will be chosen for her Grace
Though driven by her Urges
Unless controlled against her Whims
Life's Destiny unfurls
The Chosen Ones when they Become
Will save or damn our worlds...

A fragment of the Chosen Ones Prophecy

CONTENTS

SIBLING RIVALRY	1
DAYDREAMS	11
AMBITION	22
ASSASSIN	33
GATEKEEPER.....	42
PLANS	49
PLOTS	53

PROLOGUE

Sibling Rivalry

*The future has an ancient heart
We wonder how they came apart
Through loss and love
And loss again
When will this soul's journey ken
The hand of woe
Misery's foe
Down
And
Down
And
Down
They go*

Excerpt from The Lament of the Cosmic Mother

Falling, tumbling through an endless dark ocean of stars.

So cold. So alone.

The tiny humanoid newborn, bloody placenta still attached via a thick blue cord, cried out and her form changed – she *shimmered*. Her dark curls and smooth, shadow-blue skin roughened to a scaly red. Her eyes blackened, and her arms and legs became four stout limbs tipped with sharp talons. Tiny wings emerged from her spine, and a furiously lashing spiked tail beat against the void. She shrieked her anger, and blasts of sulphurous fire erupted into the implacable Cosmos.

She *shimmered*, keening her loss, and her scales became thick, grey skin – smooth, sleek, dorsal and tailfins. She swam the currents of the frigid timestream, shedding salty tears, her eyes now blue.

The Cosmos remained obdurate.

She *shimmered* again, her eyes turning livid in a face now of dark granite, mottled skin. Rough, spatulate hands whirled fiercely, battering at a rainbow of seven aetheric threads that chased and tried to ensnare her.

She *shimmered* yet again; now a mass of willowy vines, eyes verdant green. Branches twisted frantically to escape the confining threads.

She *shimmered* once more; then dissolved into air, blown this way and that, frightened now. The seven energies strove to contain and comfort. As their agitated forms ringed her, she howled, and slipping away.

So cold. So alone.

In time, her wails subsided to hiccups and puffs of mist. As the aetheric threads anticipated her pause to shimmer again, they linked and wove a net. A small puff of her mist-being observed and separated, hurtling away from the main. It sped off faster than light, frightened but determined to stay free.

What remained of her exhausted soul *shimmered* back into her human form, gasping, dying. Her dark hair had blanched to a shock of white. She let the seven dancing colours approach. They vibrated, soothing and crooning. With eyes now reflecting the ocean of stars, the newborn reached puny hands for the undulating threads. Sensing her surrender, the threads enlarged and merged, forming a soft rainbow shell around her: at her feet red, then orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. At the top of the cocoon, bright, white light – a link from her own soul – darted out. It wove into the threads and capped the covering, enclosing her. Each colour of the rainbow anchored a tendril into the withering placenta, feeding and re-energising it.

She breathed, she warmed, her hands and feet shadow-blue again. The rainbow sang to her, her hiccups ceased, and her eyes – one green, one blue – closed. The cocoon hardened and began to spin, rotating alone in the starry sea. There was no sign of her missing wisp.

- - -

The cosmic timestream is fickle. Moments or aeons later, a fine gold brume circled the rainbow casing. A tendril of gold touched the cocoon and shared its thoughts with the occupant.

Hello, little one.

Such a violent beginning.

Such a lonely life ahead, so many sorrows and so much loss.

Yet you are destined to bring so much joy and power for those that matter.

I've waited for so long.

Will you be my way Home?

I must return to where I belong.

You are my key.

The gold mist spun the cocoon, tumbling end over end until it changed direction and shot towards a pulsing yellow star. It became an arc of bright, white light; a blazing trail across the velvet night sky of a blue-green planet. On into daylight, it slowed near a massive stone monolith that was shaped like the cast of a deity's footfall erupting from the ochre soil. Near a simmering oasis, the cocoon

slowed. It settled on the damp leaf litter beside a small billabong. A harsh, hot morning dawned, drawing the thick eucalyptus fragrance from the drooping leaves of a handful of tattered timber sentinels guarding the precious pool of moisture.

The gold mist withdrew, reforming into a flaxen-haired female, accoutred in sparkling gold armour, her hip-length braid tied off with a silken band. Removing her dragon-horned helm, she pivoted. One hand opened wide, and golden light misted into the still air. Animals and insects of all sizes and shapes were drawn toward the glow. Mungi, older sister to the Elemental Four, and the most powerful energy elemental, lowered her hands to her hips. She contemplated the gathered menagerie, her lips pressed together with a hint of anxiety even as her tawny eyes catalogued the growing crowd.

From the red earth, another female form arose, green and verdant – her long, khaki hair fluttering leaves, her thin hands reminiscent of twigs. This was Bamal, earth elemental and First of the Elemental Four. The atmosphere churned with the smell of humus and life.

A fiery dragon screeched above them, diving towards the gathering. His wings folded, and as he plummeted, his red, orange, yellow and white scales smoothed, until a broad-shouldered, red-skinned male stood before them on two legs: Guwiyang, fire elemental, the youngest of the Four. Sparks crackled from the tips of his wild, white hair as he settled.

From the nearby billabong, another male – Badu, water elemental – stepped out, leaving wet footprints as his pale blue form approached his siblings. He shook his copper-brown hair, spraying water on his fiery brother, who hissed at him. Badu was the Third of the Four.

The leaves on the nearby trees stirred to attention, and a willy-willy – a small whirlwind – swirled dry, red dust: Guwarra, air elemental and Second of the Four. Her translucent white female form emerged from the whirlwind, her hair continuing to twist in an aetheric breeze. Deep blue eyes watched her siblings as they followed her hands, as she trailed them down her shapely figure. A self-satisfied smile quirked her thin lips. Her sisters tossed their heads at her vanity. Her brothers turned to each other, ignoring her.

"And we're waiting for big brother Time, again," Badu complained as water continued to drip from his shoulder-length curls and down his body, disappearing into the red sand.

"Does anyone see the irony in that?" Guwiyang planted his hands on his hips, matching his eldest sister's stance. Fire smouldered in his black eyes.

Bamal huffed, tossing her long tresses over her shoulder, and combing them back with spindly fingers. She stroked the tree beside her, and it quivered towards her touch.

Mungi's eyes tightened. Bamal, of all her younger siblings, annoyed her most. She couldn't resist touching this or that creature or plant, nurturing them, patiently urging them to grow. Badu was the opposite. A being as slippery as his water element, he was hard to hold and the most impatient of her siblings. She could see he itched to begin.

"Let's get this done," Badu urged. "With this soul, we finally have a tool powerful enough to bring these humans to their knees. This will show Mother that her little human pets are no more than

that. Their spirits are weak and selfish. They cannot rule, they cannot create, and they cannot care for the land, sea, sky and air."

"Always you forget Energy," Mungi accused her younger brother, though she was pleased with his rebellious rhetoric. He had agreed to her plan swiftly and entirely.

"And Time." A male humanoid, purple-black skin, slipped through from another plane and snapped into the moment with a hint of cosmic frost.

"Late as ever, Brother," Guwiyang grouched.

Time performed a mocking bow to Mungi and the others, his long, unbound black hair sliding around his shoulders like silk.

"I arrive exactly on time, as always," his condescending smirk revealed him as the most arrogant of the other five.

"Let's get it done," Guwiyang glowered at his oldest brother, before turning to Mungi for instructions.

With the Cosmic Mother's six outcast offspring gathered, Mungi began. She took a deep breath. This event advanced so many of her plans. Vengeance would be hers. She composed herself, flicking off the remnants of her earlier anxiety. She'd waited this long: a few more years would pass in a blink. And she had plenty of strings to pull and weave while she waited. Her single-minded gaze met each of her siblings.

"As agreed, each of us places a gift of magic into this abandoned soul. The gift should lay quiescent until a particular event or emotion activates it. I'll leave it to you to choose your gift's threshold, but make sure it's low enough to trigger when the creature is young. With each gift building on the others, the chance of this soul becoming the catalyst who causes all out Armageddon expands exponentially.

"Once all the gifts are triggered, chaos will spread like a contagion. Each use of the gift will further fray the planet's aetheric network. Other humans will find their magic unravelling and uncontrollable. There'll be nothing they can do to stop it. Humans are greedy and ambitious. They'll tear themselves and this world apart." Mungi paused, soothing her ire.

"Naturally, we'll be asked to step in and save them from themselves. The only solution being to wipe them from existence before they infect the other worlds and the Seven Realms of Heaven. Mother will realise we're wise, selfless and compassionate, and we'll be welcomed Home."

- - -

Time watched as Mungi forced each of her younger siblings to meet her eyes. Her intense focus demanded a nod from each of The First Four. But pride at her own cleverness clouded Mungi's vision: she failed to see the uncertainty that Time noted lurking in the gaze of all but one of the four. Time avoided her gaze and crouched next to the cocoon, his hands stroking its rainbow shell.

"Brother?" Mungi moved to stand next to him. "You have doubts? Wasn't this your idea in the first place?" Mungi's brow creased with annoyance as Time stood and gestured at the cocoon.

"What about this soul? It's not receiving our compassion – quite the opposite. It isn't fully human by the way, so it may not respond to your prodding in quite the way you expect."

"What do you mean not fully human? What do you know about its heritage? I found it cast out through one of your precious gates from a human world. Barely born, obviously unloved."

Time declined to remind her that they weren't his gates. Nor was he intending to tell her that he'd found a way to use them, and that he'd been using them – a lot. The less she knew about the gates the better.

"How do you know it's unloved? Someone wove this cocoon for it after all," he said. Time leant and stroked the warm surface again, absorbing the soft healing energy, and sensing a familiar feminine scent.

Mungi's gaze narrowed as he straightened. "We agreed on this plan. The sacrifice of one for the good of the many was accepted by all. Don't you want to return to Mother? To return Home?"

Time paused for a heartbeat. His gaze took in the rainbow cocoon and then each of his siblings, finishing with Mungi.

The siblings stilled.

He'd spent such a long time alone with Mother. Mungi was the playmate he'd begged Mother to make. Mungi had always been able to persuade him to get into mischief, to scheme and play tricks. And he loved her for it. Though every now and again, his conscience pricked.

After Mungi, the Mother had created his siblings to guide and guard the four elements of earth, air, water, and fire. They followed his lead. It was really his fault they'd all been cast out. Guilt momentarily clouded his thoughts. He could choose differently. But they all looked up to him, and thought him infallible. It had been such a small lie, and he did so enjoy being the object of their adoration.

I can always intervene later, or earlier. He had all the time in the Cosmos now that they'd been banished to this universe. Mother had no right to restrict his creativity. As her firstborn, he should be able to shape and give life to creatures as he pleased – or to take it from them. Surely, she made mistakes too. What did it matter if his mistakes were crowding the Seven Realms of Hell? If Mother wasn't absent so often, he would have learnt better control. It was all her fault. She gave birth to him. He withdrew his hand and straightened.

"You're right. It's of no consequence. Let's get done and get out of here. Being on this physical plane irritates me. I dislike corporeal existence."

A collective sigh of relief rippled through the siblings. Time was the most unpredictable of the them, his magic strong and his anger legendary. Each of the youngest four had spent aeons in isolation at some point for a perceived slight against their oldest brother. Only Mungi had escaped his wrath.

"What is it? What's changed?" Mungi asked.

Time looked at Mungi's face, and her eyes searched his. He considered confiding his doubts to her. She had always been his favourite sister, and she so wanted to go Home. She must miss Mother as he did. He loved Mungi dearly. But what of the other? Had it really been a dream? Or one of his Mother's erstwhile lessons? His sister put both hands on his arm, gifting him a burst of lifting energy.

She smiled. He contrasted her golden touch and pale hair with the memory of auburn curls and fine copper fingers stroking his skin to fire. He hoped he didn't regret his choice. He returned Mungi's smile and answered, "Nothing has changed. The plan goes ahead. We'll find our way Home. It's our birthright."

Mungi half-smothered a triumphant smile, and turned calmly to the mob of assembled animals. Her glance settled on a female feline, a hellcat.

"Hello, little mother." She beckoned, and the hellcat inched forward on her belly, head lowered. The golden elemental stroked her, tickling behind her black tufted ears, and the animal rolled over and bared her belly in submission. Mungi laughed and rubbed her tummy as the feline purred. Bamal stepped over and stroked the hellcat's head. She gazed into the cat's eyes, noted her sagging belly and engorged nipples.

"Mmm, just right. Take me to your cubs my love. We have a task for you." The hellcat leapt up and padded off through the bush, tail twitching. Bamal addressed the gathered wildlife. "Follow."

Mungi lifted the cocoon on an energy thread as she followed the hellcat and her sister.

The strange procession of animals and siblings flowed – walking, flying or crawling according to their species, following a worn track through the dusty bush away from the billabong. There was no need for the hellcat to hide her lair in this desert. The feline's confident walk showed she was top of the predator chain.

They climbed for a few minutes and arrived at a minka, a shallow cave created by a fall of tumbled rocks at the foot of a small ragged cliff. The mob dispersed around the front of the minka according to species. Guwiyang *shimmered*, his dragon form flapping up to the clifftop as lookout, though there was no one likely to challenge this gathering. Time let his own awareness slip unbidden into his brother's. From here, Guwiyang – and Time – could see the stone monolith and the surrounding desert valleys as slashes of green against the ochre dust.

Time withdrew from Guwiyang to watch the scene in front of him as Guwiyang returned to the ground. The mother cat slipped inside and brought out a mewling cub, only days old. She went in again and again until eight small, furry bodies blinked in the bright light, tumbling over each other at the feet of the Elementals.

Bamal smiled and crouched down to touch each one on the head, giving each a protection blessing. She was the earth elemental, so all these creatures were close to her heart. A heart that she so often wore on her face. Time could see her doubt resurfacing. She held her charges close. Their trust in her protection was absolute.

Mungi must have felt Bamal's energy waver too, and she placed a heavy hand on her shoulder.

Bamal stood to face her sister, and the determination in Mungi's eyes frightened her into stepping aside.

Mungi looked at the cat. "A sacrifice for you, little mother. A small burden. Will you care for this precious soul?"

The feline sitting placidly beside her offspring dipped her head once.

You do not refuse a goddess, especially one who controls the energetic fabric of the Cosmos, Time thought wryly.

Mungi smiled, flicked a hand, and the rainbow cocoon began to dissolve. The seven colours unravelled into single threads. Each thread circled the head of a different cub and entered through their eyes, leaving the smallest untouched.

Mungi shrugged as seven of the cubs stilled, absorbing the energy. Time suspected she had not anticipated the threads having a mind of their own. The cocoon's human passenger remained sleeping, the cord and placenta still attached. At a gesture from Mungi, the hellcat padded forward and chewed through the umbilical cord. The babe cried out at the withdrawal of nourishment, its face scrunched with anger as it breathed in a lungful of warm air. The mother cat's rough tongue licked it all over, the rhythmic strokes encouraging its breathing, and comforting the baby's cries. That complete, the hellcat grabbed the placenta and devoured it in two swallows.

Mungi touched the child's forehead with one hand, and the remaining cub with the other. With complex energy threads she began to bind their forms together, though the effort it took showed in the sheen of sweat on her face. She leant forward, willing them to join. Eventually they *shimmered* and became one. The cub's eyes flashed black, grey, red, blue, green, then settled to tawny, matching the rest of her litter mates.

"It's done." With a smug look at her handiwork, Mungi stood, tossing her braid over her shoulder. "At last, we've taken a real step on our way Home." She inspected her siblings and impatiently motioned them forward.

"Come, come. Bestow your gifts – your darkest gifts, remember. We don't want any new rivals for Mother's attention."

Guwiyang and Badu jostled to be first. As the youngest, they competed at everything, always trying to outdo each other. Many lands bore the scars of their battles to prove their dominance.

Guwara slipped in ahead of them, dissolving and reappearing next to the cub. Mungi stopped her sister. Guwara was always the most disengaged member of their group. Guwara was content to spend her time drifting over the world, in her element, untouched by the inhabitants on the surface.

"Concentrate, Guwara. This is important: your darkest gift." Guwara shrugged off her sister and touched the cub with one slender hand. "It's done."

The remaining siblings bestowed their bound gift of magic on the tiny cub. Then Time crouched finally to touch the cub's downy white head.

The cub opened her eyes, and one green, one blue stared back at him. He paused with delighted recognition. *Maybe more than a dream then.*

His fingers tingled when he examined a small red star peeping out from the soft white fur of her chest, feeling the faint trace of the motherline thread there. He sobered and whispered, "Ah, little one. Even as we try to control you, you have a choice to change the outcome. In the end, the decision will be yours. I have no doubt she'll be looking to find you. Enjoy life, little flower." He touched her forehead and her eyes flashed to amethyst as a black thread joined the others. A ring of fur around her eyes darkened.

Bamal addressed the circle of birds and animals. She gestured to the stone monolith in the distance and the trees whose branches waved closer to hear her.

"You've seen this child, these spirits. They have an important role in the world, and not only this world. You must all play a part in protecting and caring for them. For some, this will be hard, and for some, a joy. I charge you to do what you can and spread the word. The littlest one especially will need your help, your friendship, and your love. She will walk a lonely road until the day of Armageddon dawns. And then..." she paused and gazed down at the eight cubs snuggled up against their mother's belly, suckling and massaging with their tiny claws.

Mungi stepped in to stop her sister undermining the plan by becoming maudlin, and spoke to those gathered, "And then... we will see. Care for her well. All life depends on her. She is the key."

With a haughty nod to the other elementals, she donned her helm, dissolved into gold mist, and disappeared. One by one, each of the siblings departed until only Time remained. He stepped closer to the cubs and stroked the smallest one. From his heart, a silver thread appeared – a fatherline thread. It slipped into her soul to join the others. He stood back, feeling the thread explore its new home.

"Well, that was unexpected." He contemplated snipping the thread, as the youngest cub paused in her drinking and gazed trustingly at him. He sighed. "What will be, will be. The future is mine to see. Or so I thought." With one final wry glance, he left.

- - -

A divine being emerged from a tree where she'd observed the event unfold. In this physical plane, the Cosmic Mother was all colours and none, constantly shifting. Her form was voluptuous, sensual, and nurturing. Her hair finally settled to long and black with sparkles of white, reminiscent of the ocean of stars. Her dark, full-lipped face was breathtaking with large almond-shaped eyes of amethyst, like her eldest son's.

"Ah, my foolish children, can you not see that I have room in my heart for everyone and everything?" She observed the gathered fauna and the surrounding flora, who were drawn towards her beautiful energy.

"Dearest Time, my first, my treasure. Even now, your heart doubts. Forcing the future is not the answer. Your need to strive and to win is not a gift of mine. You chose this life, these lessons; and many will suffer as you learn. We could have remained two, just you and I. Alas my heart is too soft."

She touched the tree that had sheltered her in its trunk, its bark creamy smooth. She stroked the soft feathers of a tiny brown bird perched on the tree's lowest branch. She glided towards the cubs who had settled in for a drink and plucked the smallest from its mother's teat. She held it up by the scruff.

"And now you've chosen this tiny soul, already a part of you, and burdened it with a heavy responsibility and such a dark future." The cub struggled in her grasp, black-rimmed eyes closed, mewling for its mother, milk dribbling from its pink mouth.

"Perhaps it can all be laid at my door. Perhaps I should meddle – a little." She drew a circle on the cub's belly with her finger, and a tiny rainbow serpent appeared in her hand and slid through the cub's skin to settle deep in its pelvis. She hugged the cub close, kissing her furry head.

"For every dark shadow they've given you, there is an opposite of light, though neither one is good or bad. They're merely what each of us makes of them. In every gift, I've placed a gate. Open and close the gates with darkness or light – the choice is yours. Choose well, little one. On you, the future of this Cosmos depends."

The cub squirmed, indignant. Its claws scratched at her hands, drawing a tiny red bead. "So, you're not going to be a compliant tool then."

Her captive eventually settled in her arms, absorbing the Mother's gentle energy, and sniffing to capture her scent. It licked at her cradling fingers, its rough tongue lapping up a droplet of blood unseen by the Mother, its contented purr building.

The Mother hugged the cub close once more, then placed her back on the ground. Determined, the cub climbed over her siblings to the last vacant teat.

"You are the key – for this world, at least." She smiled to herself, "Let the fun begin."

She opened her arms and twirled around, laughing out loud with joy, head thrown back, black tresses spinning. The animals capered about, enemies forgotten in the moment. Flocks of birds wheeled overhead, and trees and grasses swayed to the silent music streaming from her form. Rainbow lights sparkled from her fingertips, darting about and touching everything. The stars in her hair shone and twinkled. She danced in circles, stamping her feet, voicing an ancient wordless chant. When she stopped, the air pulsed – and each animal and insect was a little stronger, each plant a little greener, while earth and rocks vibrated with stored energy.

The Mother lowered her arms and did an abrupt about face, beckoning to two birds that perched on the edge of the entertainment, watching, and waiting. They couldn't refuse her summons.

"The Trickster and the Sage." She nodded regally to Magpie and Owl as they settled on the nearest branch, keeping a little distance from each other. One warbled, turning his fiery amber eye on her. The other ruffled her spotted feathers, blinking and sitting in stiff disapproval of such frivolity.

"And who has sent you? Who watches this little soul and dares to spy on these world-changing events? Who has strings tied to those children of mine?" She stepped between them, stroking the plumage of both birds, delving into their minds. Both allowed her hands to smooth their backs. She withdrew, her smile turned shrewd.

"Mm, so that's the way of things. Well, watch you shall. And... " She touched each bird on the throat. A thread of rainbow light trickled from her fingers into the birds and a delighted laugh burst forth. "Now you will have to share the information both ways, and you will be unable to speak of anything that would bring her harm." She nodded to the two birds. "You can keep this child company on her long journey, tell her stories, comfort her, and give her advice. If she'll listen." She turned to the circle of creatures behind her.

"You are all guardians in one way or another. These next few months will be her most cherished time. Let them be beautiful, carefree memories. Ward her as you would your own; we are all one – always. And thank you for the dance."

Her appreciative bow took them all in, and she vanished, leaving a hint of lavender and a soft, enchanting memory.



Daydreams

*The Ten Tenets were created by the people for the people.
They are to be followed by ALL people.
Cultural Guardians will ensure compliance.
By order of the Federation Committee.*

Excerpt from Melba Dome: The Ten Tenets Year 1 PC

The dual computer screens blurred, and Alinta Morrow sandpapered her lids, rubbing out the grittiness of exhaustion for the tenth time in as many minutes.

Jeez, I'll need an optical regen if I keep this up. I shouldn't let these things slide so far.

She knew how hard it was to get permission for tank time if a critical body part deteriorated, even at her job rank. Yet the Federation castigated anyone who couldn't complete their allocated work on schedule and on budget: a budget that did not include sick leave or tank time.

Who wants to spend days in the sensory tank anyway? She grimaced at her own sarcasm. Imagine, days of doing nothing; time to think, reflect, relax – just floating in a sea of protein. Heaven on a bloody stick.

Weariness dropped her head to the back of the chair, and she inhaled a lungful of the musty recycled air. Her dark lashes fluttered down, shutting out both the dreary office and the ubiquitous, Federation-mandated 'WATCH OUT FOR YOUR NEIGHBOUR' sign plastered above her screens.

She drifted.

Ali had a gift for memory and order, perceiving the world in patterns and seeing sequence and symmetry in her mind in glorious three-dimensional detail. She could keep track of and connect millions of people, items, events, and dates in her head. And she could access this secret third eye tapestry with her physical eyes open if she chose.

As a child, she'd thought her gift magical, and imbued it with a character of its own. It was a laughing ochre red dragon who flew through her mind and her world, weaving rainbow threads from the tips of her shiny black talons and blasting fiery holes in imaginary monsters to make Ali laugh.

When she'd first realised that other people didn't see their world with a textured rainbow overlay, she'd been afraid. Her gift made her different, and different was *not* what you wanted to be in the Dome – especially when you were already a Federation ward living on borrowed everything.

The child centre supervisors had called her a liar and a cheat for her aberrant wisdom and frequently threatened her with realignment from the Grey Shirts – the Federation Committee's cultural enforcers. Her mostly older dorm-mates labelled her a weirdo. They beat and bullied her into a ghostly, silent existence until an education lottery plucked her from obscurity at ten and transferred her to a school in the North Quad.

So for decades, Ali had kept her wealth of knowledge to herself, learning to only display her skill with a middle-of-the-road anonymity. Not too smart, not too stupid – something average and boring. Average and boring kept you under the Cultural Guardians' radar, which *is* where you needed to be in the Dome. Despite every cultural decree ever issued by the Federation Committee, interactions with the Grey Shirts were *not* good for your health.

There's gotta be something better than this. Year after dismal year of the same grey, dull, monotony. If only I had some real bloody magic. Then I could zap myself away to somewhere better.

Magic – that was Ali's not-so-secret obsession. Scant though fiction was in the Dome, she nurtured her childhood illusions by reading anything and everything she could about magic and fantasy.

She was lucky – most Domers didn't get to handle real books anymore. Post-Crack, hard copies were only for libraries, the Museum, and rich collectors from the Dome's East Quad. But her project work involved cataloguing those East Quadder's collections while everyone else had to rely on their Fed Comm issued and very temperamental personal communication device – their comli.

Ali especially loved stories with feisty heroines and fire-breathing dragons. It was harmless escapism that helped her navigate the endless drudgery of life in the Dome with wishful thinking. Imagining herself as a dragon with mysterious talents was one of her favourite entertainments in long, boring meetings. She'd picture herself using various special powers to escape from the room in unusual ways, or plan what mythical or lowly creature she'd turn each of her colleagues into if she could. Her sometimes untimely smiles at her own antics drew a few odd glances.

Those few odd glances were fine; they kept people from getting too close.

As if anyone would want to get close to little old me anyway.

Most of Ali's colleagues were younger and spent their time and energy wheedling and jostling for the attention of Ali's boss – climbing the job ranks as fast as they could. At fifty-two, Ali had no ambition for rank or privilege, she'd made peace with her ordinary life – mostly. Her plans for conquest lived only in her dreams, along with her dragons.

Yearning tickled the edge of her awareness, tugging at her gift, frustratingly close. It was always this way when she thought about dragons and magic. She felt something swim nearer, brightening as it eased through the murkiness in her mind, a familiar sense of – something.

No. Someone.

Impatient, she stretched towards that someone. The shadow behind her lids whirled from dark nothing into a shade of deep dark red. Then the someone loomed, an enormous shadow crowding the space.

Ping. Ping.

Ali's comli sounded a task reminder, its palm-sized plas screen flashing, and whoever it was slithered away leaving her bereft. A dismal black fog followed in its wake.

Drats.

Ali's gift, what had been her practically perfect picture of her own life, was now full of gaping holes – holes about which she had no clue. Starting about twelve months ago, missing hours, days, and sometimes weeks had begun to disfigure her previously unblemished memory. The absent sections made her edgy, and she sometimes felt as if her life was an unravelling tapestry whose threads she couldn't grasp to stop it disintegrating.

Feck, I know it's there somewhere, this, this... whatever. I've forgotten something basic, somewhere. I know I have. If I can find that one event, the rest will fall back into place and everything will go back to where it belongs, including me.

Another deep breath, eyes firmly shut, and she drifted deeper.

The lean face of a girrin – a young girl – glimmered into being behind her lids. Snow-white hair, shadow-blue skin, and a glimpse of eyes coloured like her own swung away to negotiate the steep bank of a verdant, overgrown creek.

It's her.

She'd dreamt of this girrin before.

Running water danced noisily over sharp black rocks then divided into several streams, each easing their way through scattered stone and deep red earth. A riotous tangle of green plants, bushes, trees – the kind of things she'd only ever seen in history vids – worked together to deny the girrin access.

Ali's skin pricked with breathless heat. She smelled fecund dampness, and heard the crack of dry twigs crushed underfoot. Vibrant colours assaulted her wretched Domer senses. She squinted, her eyes burning in the bright sunshine. The Dome skin always filtered light to a muted, dismal beige; and its ever-present dust-grey coat dimmed the light even further. Robotic cleaners failed to keep more than a few square clicks clean at any one time.

Ali shook her head, but the dream remained.

Why am I always dreaming about her?

The flint knife slipped in the girrin's sweaty grip as thirst kept her edging towards the water. Her swollen tongue tried to dampen cracked lips, and her stomach growled in chronic hunger. Ali felt herself slipping. She merged into the girrin and knew in her bones the weeks of struggle: hunting for diminishing game and scrounging for wild berries as summer's warm bounty faded to autumn in the mountains.

Unreal. Ali tried to pull out of the dream. Domers lived in steamy, humid, controlled sameness all year round, and ate processed rations from the Quad Store.

She slid back into the girrin, at the mercy of dream's strange virtual reality.

Ali felt the girrin's flutter of hopelessness, and her hands trembled in sympathy. She paused, one palm steadying her descent on a branch, the bark rough and dry beneath her fingertips.

Ali glanced towards her hand, feeling the unusual texture, and blinked at a younger hand than hers with shadow-blue skin grasping the tree limb.

What the...?

- - -

Insects hummed, birds screeched, and a tickling breeze sighed, playing with her fine white hair, snagging, and loosening her long braid.

Someone was watching.

Dee waited.

Slowing her breathing, she wished herself invisible, wished her magic was more reliable, and that she could access her Grace – her storehouse of magic – at will.

Dee had felt this watcher before. The Brown Lady. A second heartbeat. Surprise. A Red Lady too. She'd never had two at the same time. Unlike most of the beings that haunted her existence, the intention of the two women felt distant, harmless. Yet they were closer than ever before – the Brown Lady almost as though she moved under her skin.

“No, I am not she. I am Dee,” she croaked.

- - -

“And I'm freaking Ali,” Ali declared, though the girrin Dee didn't appear to hear her response. Ali tried again to disengage without success, though she could sense her own hands now, glowing a soft but insubstantial red. She became aware of the other woman watching and turned to see her coming closer. When she looked directly at the her she could see the trees through the woman's body.

Dammit, what the bloody hell is happening? Who are these people? Ali tried to wake herself, but the dream refused to let go.

- - -

Dee wiped her sweaty palms on her coarse brown trousers, moving the knife to her left hand. Tucking in a stained grey shirt with her right hand, she stepped to the edge of the creek. Taking a last scan of her surrounds, she squatted and leant over to scoop a handful of precious liquid into her mouth.

The reflection in the water showed three surprised faces, all with one green eye, one blue. Dee pivoted to confront the others, her knife slashing at their bellies.

- - -

Ali leapt back, her eyes snapped open, the chair thudded against the wall. She was back in her office, heart pounding, a fine sheen of sweat dampening her skin. Her mind refused to process what her eyes saw – the faint rosy glow of her fingers fading to brown. She blinked to clear her vision.

Feck, what was that? Who was that? Where was that?

She ferreted a crumpled hanky from her skirt pocket and wiped her clammy face and hands.

That was so real. This bloody dreaming's getting worse. It's taking over my days now, not just my nights. I've so gotta get some sleep or the Grey Shirts'll realign me for sure. Unless they already know what's happening and they're waiting for me to break down.

Her paranoid tech-head neighbour Andie had a theory that the Fed Comm were experimenting with thought control through the monthly inoculations every Domer received. The Fed Comm assured everyone that the vaccines kept them safe from the plethora of Outside diseases that snuck in through the thousands of disintegrating filters.

Bloody Feds trying to influence my thoughts with some new spy tech. Make me do something I don't want to? Bloody hell, I'm already as obliging as I can possibly be. What else do they want from me? Surely at least my thoughts and dreams are my own?

Annoyed, she moved her chair to the side and looked under the desk, feeling along the edge for any kind of electronic bug. Then she opened the desk drawers and shuffled half-heartedly through them.

Don't be ridiculous. No one's gonna bug you or bother trying to influence your thoughts. You're not the bloody Fed Chair for Fed's sake. A drab little drone, that's you. You do exactly what you're told and very little else.

Something about that thought made her squirm. There was more to her than that. Ali ceased her search. She rubbed her eyes again, smudging what little makeup remained. With a sigh, she walked over to inspect the damage in the small wall mirror by the door.

Her black curls, cut unfashionably short, ended with fuchsia pink tips; her own tiny rebellion against the drear FEN, the Federation Expected Norm.

I am such a rebel.

Skin she liked to call 'coffee froth brown' was now a shade paler after her heart-jumping daydream. Her nose was a little too pronounced, and she had what, decades ago, had been well-defined lips. Now her generous mouth carried deep corner lines, matched with a spray around her eyes. Lives were long in the Dome, so she could look forward to another half a century working without a blink. And though the Fed Comm may have eradicated a bunch of diseases, the years still marked their passing for citizens who couldn't afford cosmetic regen.

Ali's eyes were dark-ringed with fatigue and bright with adrenaline from the dream. Most Domers had eyes some shade of brown between amber and chocolate, with a sprinkle having hazel and green. Ali had one sapphire-blue and one emerald-green eye. Even though they were wildly non-FEN, no one ever mentioned them – at least not in her hearing. She'd decided years ago that other people didn't want to admit to seeing them. The cataclysmic melting pot of the last three centuries had blurred

ethnic groups into a single race: survivor. She didn't need to check her facts with her gift. Ali had never seen anyone else with eyes like hers – not in real life.

Echoes of the young girrin flickered in her gift. Ali's nose remembered the myriad of smells, the warmth, water, and moist decay. Her hands feeling the texture of the rough bark.

The light, bloody hell, the light was so bright. Everything was so clear and colourful. So... new.

Her fuchsia tips felt anaemic in comparison.

Why would it feel so real? Why did they both have my odd eyes? But that young girrin's skin was kinda blue. No one blue-skinned under the Dome, possibly copper like the auburn-haired one though. Maybe it's my past lives leaking through like that crazy lady said?

A random woman, ragged and malnourished, had grabbed her three nights ago as she'd been leaving the North Quad Store. Her bony fingers had latched onto Ali's wrist, and she couldn't shake her off without dropping her rations. So instead she'd smiled politely and waited for her chance to break away.

Then she'd stopped and looked into the woman's dusty face, and felt a staggering surge of compassion as she'd glimpsed what the woman's existence must be. Her long hair had been matted with filth, her skin caked in years of grime. The nails that had clutched her were broken and dirty. The pungent perfume of poverty had wafted from her stained clothes and unwashed skeletal body. Yet bizarrely, those ancient copper eyes had held nothing but gratitude and adoration.

Ali's gift had vibrated, the tapestry undulating with blue and green waves.

"I've stayed true my Lady, I've lived as ya asked, even though *They* think I'm crazy. It's kept me magic hidden, same as yours. My drift time's comin' soon though. I can't watch any more. I know They're comin' for me. Grey Shirts are comin' for me."

She'd drawn Ali closer, checking both ways like a conspirator, her foul breath making Ali's eyes water as she'd whispered into her ear.

"I know ya dreams are growin'. They're ya other lives leakin' through. I've felt the energy, the magic, seen the memories trying ta merge. Ya gotta remember 'em all. The world needs ya ta remember. Remember Jiemba, ta open the Gate."

Her face had crumpled then, tears tracking muddy squiggles down her grubby cheeks.

"I need ya ta remember, ta tell me it'll be all right. That ya'll be there to open the Gate when I come Home. It's time to come Home, Alinta. We need ya."

The woman had let go, sobbed uncontrollably for a moment, and then hobbled away, muttering to herself. A few other citizens shopping late had looked askance at Ali, no doubt wondering why she'd attracted a weirdo, and wondering if it was contagious.

Probably wondering whether to report me to the Grey Shirts. Watch out for your freaking neighbours.

Nothing the woman had said made any sense. It was straight out of a fantasy novel. As a teenager, she'd harboured a secret idea that being born with different coloured eyes made it certain she'd

be a heroine in a fantasy. But now that people were sprouting this stuff aloud, it was way too freaky. Energy, magic, memories, gates. She was just a crazy old woman, and she'd obviously mistaken Ali for someone else.

And yet, when she'd spoken her name – Alinta – it had fallen into her mind like a warm caress. Her gift had gone a little berserk, coloured threads racing around her mind like wildfire. Nothing came of it though, and her gift settled back to wary somnolence.

The Federation's ubiquitous cams – their so-called *safety* cameras – would no doubt catch the woman illegally sleeping rough in the North Quad, and then the Grey Shirts would pick her up for realignment. Still, Ali had wasted a few hours the next morning researching past life memories and magic. Trying to avoid being nabbed defying the Feds' Sixth Tenet, '*Mind Your Own Business*', she'd logged onto a public computer, so her search couldn't be traced back to her private comli. Nothing helpful popped up apart from finding out that Jiembra meant 'laughing star' in a defunct pre-Crack language. And strangely that same language had included Alinta which meant 'fire or flame'. After work, she'd even done an unsuccessful drive by of a few poorer suburbs along the West Quad border to search for the old woman. Eventually, she'd called herself an idiot and gone home, admonishing herself for *not* keeping to Tenet Six.

Anyway, if what she said is true, I've surely got more crazy memories than any one person could have lives. Her gift's unnatural tics were shuffling peculiar memories through her life tapestry into places they could not possibly belong, including this young, blue-skinned Dee. She'd showed up in mysterious dreams and flashes on more than one occasion and at all sorts of ages. Ali plonked herself back in her chair, running a hand through her hair, then tucked a wayward curl behind her ear.

They can't all be mine. Can they? Can I have lived so many lives? Am I going crazy? This is so not FEN.

Her heart slowed, and her mood plummeted as she stared past the mandatory Federation Community Guidelines that monopolised one wall of her tiny office. In the unlikely case that any Domer citizen forgot what was expected of them, the Federation Expected Norm, the FEN, was plastered in every living, working and community space. Her gaze slid over the faded Ten Tenets that were scarred into her DNA. The tenth admonishing '*WATCH OUT FOR YOUR NEIGHBOUR*' glared back.

She followed a scummy water stain that meandered down the peeling partition into the faded carpet. She rarely noticed the slightly funky stink of her workspace anymore, though now it pinged olfactory senses that were still in shock from the aromatic bouquet of her daydream. Her gift was fruitfully occupied in the background cataloguing the odours, sounds and colours. Not that she'd ever need to use the information here. She wrinkled her nose and focused on the outline of the stain.

Looks like an island map. Kind of familiar. I wonder where it is? Wonder if there are any other people there. Her gift sifted through the history of her planet, analysing the evidence.

A little over three hundred years ago, the Crack had severed global communication on Torpid. The planet had been called Earth for thousands of years before the Crack – officially it still was – but

for regular citizens like Ali, the nickname Torpid, with its stagnant and sluggish overtones was the name they used. Despite more than two millennia of global development, planetary disintegration had only taken a few months. Surviving the initial upheaval of the geostorms and earthquakes had been the prime task on people's minds – then surviving the devastation of the aftermath, infrastructure destroyed, and anarchy threatening.

The Domes had been the best option with the air full of poisonous, radioactive dust. Hundreds had been rapidly cobbled together with technology hastily shared and adapted to solar power. Sun, they had plenty of, despite the dust. Once sealed inside, the survivors of Melba Dome soon lost track of any other Domes or continents. Each Dome became self-sufficient and isolated. For all they knew, Melba Dome held the only living people left on Torpid. It was a sobering and uninspiring thought.

The office lights and com screens flickered. The power brownouts had become an almost predictable part of Domer life in the past few years. The Fed Comm assured everyone that all was well, but it didn't feel or smell that way. More and more machines went unrepaired, and the stink outside air-filtered buildings had become so thick you could almost cut it with a knife.

Restless, Ali gave up looking for answers and drifted to her window. She flicked her only family heirloom, a twisted gold ring on her left middle finger with her thumb, feeling the embedded rough-cut ruby with every third flick.

She didn't remember any relatives who might have given her the ring. She'd always considered that incongruous, given her gift. Her citizen files claimed she'd been abandoned not long after birth, left in a West Quad hospital nursery with no record of her parents. She'd longed to believe that she'd been kidnapped, and dreamt of her mum and dad arriving out of the blue one day to rescue her from her lonely childhood and take her home to their fabulous East Quad estate, or to slip her through a magic portal into the real world.

Her hopes had faded with each birthday.

She'd been fostered for a short time when she was nine with a woman she'd called Nanna, but the woman had been Nanna to a platoon of kids – a veritable army of apprentice delinquents. It could've been worse. As a Federation ward, she could've spent her entire youth in the detention centres, pimped out to whoever had the grift for their supervisors. Winning the education lottery and attending a school in the North Quad had made a world of difference. With her skill for memorising and knowing how things fit together, she'd readily made a niche for herself. Not too big, not too small, middle-of-the-road anonymity again.

Four decades later, she now had her own office in the City Grid: the central business district of Melba Dome. Admittedly, it was a tiny cubbyhole off the conference room and main reception area for her floor, but she *was* the sole occupier. Very few Federation workers could boast their own workspace, scummy stain or not, let alone a window on the world.

She had no idea why her job as a mid-level project manager had suddenly warranted an office twelve months ago. Besides, it wasn't exactly salubrious – her window mostly looked out on the building

next door. To see the ragged city skyline properly, she had to get up and stand close to the window as she did now.

They only give offices to smart, reliable workers who deliver without complaint.

Compliant, butt-kissers you mean. Your dreams and those weird episodes began not long before you got the office, you know.

She stomped on that thought.

Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, girrin.

In the Domer Federation the popular adage '*Don't ask questions you don't want to know the answers to*' was more like a dictum for life, and was a common response to the Sixth Tenet's '*Mind Your Own Business*'. Better than good advice in this post-Crack world, it was a survival strategy for continued existence. There were some uncomfortable truths out there.

It was easier to fly under the radar, stay quiet and play dumb. To do what you were told and conform to FEN. You were less likely to be accused of sedition and realigned or disappeared that way. Dissent against the Domer Federation was stomped on swiftly and brutally. Grey Shirts and Feddies – the local law enforcement – saw to that.

Naturally, that bred a defiant underground in Melba Dome. With generations of self-righteous survivors in the West and North Quads refusing to buckle under the yoke of highbrow East Quad politicians before the Crack, insurgents abounded in this isolated southern dystopia. But factions fought the Feds and each other with equal vigour, so nothing really changed.

Nothing changed... except that conscientious citizens like Ali often ended up as collateral mortality statistics. Truth be told, Ali often wondered if the Fed Comm cared as much about the losses as they espoused. Deaths meant fewer mouths to feed and house, and more places in the lucrative Mumma Lottery. Domers were just numbers to the Federation – too many numbers.

Despite their contrariness, the majority of Domers were chronically risk averse. There was a lot of underground talk, but most would do – or not do – anything to keep the status quo.

Stick with What You Know, Ali admonished herself. Tenet number nine.

She unconsciously smoothed her right thumb over the bump of the citzcode implanted on the underside of her left wrist. Citizen 75.313.492.105.

Ali's workspace dimmed as she mused, lit only by the blue light of the com screens and a soft yellow autoglobe that switched on because she'd worked past dusk, again. She stirred for the glimpse of sunset – the horizon a smear of orange and pink through the pollution haze inside the Dome. Wisps of greasy smog flirted with the tattered, grey skyscraper forest. If you ignored the funk of about half a million people living under one roof and didn't know that the concrete towers were full of unhappy, unhealthy workers grinding away for the Federation, the scene held a surreal beauty.

At least the air inside her workspace was triple-filtered. Her nose wrinkled again at the thought of heading out into the foetid stench of the city. Though the Dome pumps worked night and day, the smell of this pocket of humanity living cheek by jowl was pervasive.

Ali shuddered and rubbed her arms, unaccountably chilled.

Damn goose running over my grave. Thanks Nanna for that superstitious nonsense.

Though Melba was possibly the only surviving Dome on Torpid, for Ali it was a box with too many sharp edges and too much conformity. She preferred soft, flowing lines and reconnecting circles. She doodled curves and curlicues on everything, and her favourite drawing of three intertwined rings peppered her notepads and comli – no doubt there was a Fed Com file on her somewhere that stored all the images for later. Sometimes, the overlapping area became a flattened eye with a vertical pupil. Often, her three rings became fierce dragons, each biting their own tails. Habitually she drew them surrounded by twisted flames, old-fashioned keys all adorning the branches and roots of a single enormous tree. Hours spent poring over old books at work helped her imagination supply images aplenty, but these themes came back over and over.

What if they ARE my memories?

Don't be ridiculous. This is your life. It's small, but you chose it. Get over it. Wishing won't change it. Besides, what more could you ask for? You've got a job, a place to sleep and people who need you.

She squirmed at that. *OK, well two out of three ain't bad.*

Night leached away what little colour the drab Dome held. With the descent of darkness, the yearning jerked back – a physical ache in her chest. Ali moved closer to her grimy window.

It's more than the unfulfilled chasm of uselessness that haunts every human on this dying rock of a planet. What am I missing? Is there something I should be looking for? Something worth living for? Something bigger than me, worth taking a risk at sticking my head up out of the crowd?

Ali's mind skipped to her dream of visiting Outside. She'd be able to smell non-recycled air, feel real earth, touch real trees. She'd tried keeping plants in pots at her apartment, but with her long work hours, it had felt cruel taking them to die a lonely death by dehydration.

All she'd done about her dream was glance at a few brochures, watch a few vids and imagine doing it. She hadn't applied for permission to leave, hadn't begun the fitness program she needed for the trek. She tightened her belly but let go with a sigh. Outside was a long way off in more ways than one.

The Dome had finally been opened almost ten years ago. Embarrassingly for the Feds, rumours abounded that they could've opened it a half century earlier. It'd taken rebel factions busting holes in the Dome edge and repeatedly breaking the filters to get the population's attention that the Feds were basically holding them prisoners for no reason. But it was hard to imagine a place where there was no magnetic field to run the flocar system. A place where you had to ride non-AI machines or walk. She'd been to the edge of the Dome and seen the dustbowl outside the walls. For generations, they'd been taught that the devastation continued for thousands of kilometres. But now reports were trickling in that the countryside was recovering much quicker than the Fed Comm had led the population to believe.

Yet most Domers stayed in their polluted, crowded tenements and bent their backs to the Federation grindstone. The aversion to change was hard to break. Centuries of Tenet Nine dictating *'Stick with What You Know'* would take time to temper.

Besides, there were untamed flora and fauna out there. Ali shuddered at the stories of insects in their millions that could infect or kill you with one bite. The Fed Comm *loved* spreading those warnings. Three hundred plus years without bugs was one bloody good reason to stay Inside. It'd take generations to ease people away from the vapid security of the Dome – much longer than it had taken to cram them in when the Crack happened.

A few brave souls had ventured Outside, without any precious resources from the Feds of course. Some even stayed Out, making small self-sufficient communities. Occasional trinkets and fresh foodstuffs had hit the black market, but they were way out of Ali's price range. Then a few citizens had contracted a kind of madness at the whole open air thing, and had to be medicated and returned to the Dome. There were lots of well publicised we-told-you-so and head shaking when this happened. In the last few years the surge of early pioneers had slowed to a trickle.

Enough, Ali. You know you're too chicken-shit to go Outside. Even a daydream of being in the open gave you the heebie jeebies.

She laughed and stretched her arms over her head to ease the long day's aches. It was then she noticed the short slash in her shirt.

Exactly where the girrin tried to gut me. She looked closely, realising that the edges were jagged and the tear only a few centimetres long.

Jeez, I have holes in my gift and an old woman mistaking me for some saviour. To top off this craziness, my night dreams are becoming daydreams and one of the characters has sliced my shirt for real.

Ali burst out laughing, and shook her head at her wild imagination.

Get a grip. Daydreams are just that. You probably jagged it on one of the desks in the gopher pen. All their furniture is old and splintery. It's definitely time to go home.

Still smiling, Ali stuffed her comli and a stack of work folders into her dilly – a handbag that was so much more – and flung the overloaded carryall over her shoulder.

She thumbed off her computer screens, and headed for the door.



Ambition

*The Dogs of Doom come way too soon
When Fate's Foe emerges
She will be chosen for her Grace
Though driven by her Urges
Unless controlled against her Whims
Life's Destiny unfurls
The Chosen Ones when they Become
Will save or damn our worlds*

Excerpt from the Yarran Journal, translated Nina Nightshayde,
Chief Occultist, Order of Occultology, Geboor Librarianium, Mirrabooka 3314

My foetal scan could be wrong. Adventurer and analyst both start with A. Maybe I'm the victim of some freaky typo?

Merindah's vision blurred over the squiggly black glyphs. She kneaded her temples, smearing a little magic into her copper skin, knowing she'd pay for disrupting the negentropy – the order and structure of the cosmic aether – later. Magic wasn't free. Manipulating it messed with the natural aetheric patterns, created the chaos of entropy in the fabric of the universe, and there were always consequences for that.

Entropy's such a bitch. Deep breath, blow it out. I am destined for great things. I'm sure I've got the genes for cosmic adventures. I just need someone or something to give me a break. All I'd need is a little extra training in aether. Mmm, which also starts with A.

Even wishing for that felt too fanciful to be true. She harrumphed at herself. No amount of training was going to promote her out of this wretched job. And who would waste their time training her puny talent anyway? She'd already tried experimenting on her own, and still bore the scars of a botched shortcut. Her belly itched in sympathy and she tightened her fingers on the book to stop herself scratching at the healing skin.

Nope, only a major new aetheric discovery will do it.

Merindah needed something that could save the entirety of Heavens Gate – her world – and zoom her to the top of everyone's favourite researcher list at the same time. Then she could adventure wherever she wished. She touched her thumb to her smallest finger and tapped her forehead three times with the remaining three – entreating Sága, her personal goddess, to grant her ‘wonder, wisdom and wit’. She tapped the same three fingers three times on her heart, appealing to Sister Diligence, one of her world’s fourteen virtuous goddesses, to grace her with ‘effort, expertise and excellence’.

Easy.

Eyes clear, she twitched her yerlendj – the innate magical sense and intelligence that denizens of Heavens Gate carried in their genes – then ignited her magic and scoured the page for clues. Her enhanced vision slipped between the faded ink of the symbols to the frayed fibres of the yellowed parchment, and then deeper to the infinitesimal rainbow energy surrounding individual molecules.

Merindah's esoteric research involved hunting for obscure aetheric links between the spiritual, the scientific and the magical. She spent her days mentally and magically sifting through dusty parchments and crumbling tomes for hints of the Portals. Like every other student of the arcane on Heavens Gate, she yearned to be the one who found the key to opening a Portal. She belonged to an unpopular minority, an Order of esoteric cosmologists who believed the Portals were gates for traversing the Astral Spheres of divine existence between this world and Heaven.

Why else would our planet be called Heavens Gate if we weren't meant to open the way to Heaven for Hecate's sake? If only my yerlendj was stronger. It's so unfair. What I wouldn't give to find that key.

With the Portals at her fingertips she'd have access to the Aether Tree, the Tree of Life, the source of the Cosmos and every existence under Heaven. And then she'd have the answers — to everything and everyone. Her sometimes irritating ambition and always unquenchable curiosity would be sated – at least she hoped it would. As would her unvoiced wish for a little payback. Perhaps she would deny Portal access to every single person who'd ever snubbed or wronged her over the thirty-three years of her life.

Merindah had done her share of 'wronging' others on her way to this moment – there were few in this fading world who hadn't. She hated to admit that her conscience did give her the odd sleepless night.

She could be nicer once she had the power. At least that was her plan. She'd nudged a few ethical boundaries, obtained some of her artefacts from irregular sources, plagiarised a few obscure papers. So far, she'd seen little benefit – or detriment, for that matter. She was still in this poky lab, unknown and unpublished after more than a decade of work. She had to be more ruthless to get what she wanted, to get *where* she wanted to go – and that was through a Portal.

Librarium analyst roles didn't rely solely on foetal scans to identify a person's appropriate profession. While perspicacity was mandatory, a position on the District's Portal Collaborative staff depended more on yerlendj than intellect and discernment. Yerlendj was more than just magical

acumen, it gave its bearers the potential to detect and control the energetic threads that bound the order of all things – to manipulate aether.

Merindah's elusive and inconsistent yerlendj barely scraped her across the competent line as an aetheric mage, however. While she had shown promise as a child, her magic had stopped developing almost overnight after her mother died, just after Merindah turned thirteen. Luckily her family's genetic pedigree bumped her onto the Librarium's recruitment short list.

Thank Holy Hecate for famous ancestors. Wish I was more like Auntie Jean. That woman was a force of nature. All lightning, thunder and big fats drops of rain on a parched desert. People ignored her at their peril.

The Nightshayde family's political connections then bought off the competition to squeeze her into a junior job on the staff. And of course, it helped that she was female.

Thank the Cosmic Mother for that! I wouldn't wish to be a bloke for all the tea in the North. Mmm, but what if someone offered me enough magic to unlock the Portal in exchange? Would I change gender for that?

With few exceptions, males didn't possess the temperament for investigative research. They were best supervised as field grunts and manual workers, leaving the leadership of vital intellectual work and running the planet to women. Men weren't exactly viewed as less than women: all beings were equal under Heaven. Or at least that's what they were taught in school. It was just that women were *naturally* better at most things than men. After all, men's contribution to world leadership had almost destroyed the planet half a millennium ago – again. They were kept in check now for their own sake, and for the sake of the rest of humanity – namely, women.

Merindah's Librarium position required her to use her yerlendj to examine the miscellaneous artefacts that appeared on her desk with monotonous punctuality every month. According to her annual review she was 'working steadily'; though her decade of plodding progress garnered scant interest from anyone outside her own Order, let alone further afield.

Each of the seven Librariums on Heavens Gate had their own Portal Collaborative of dedicated researchers. Each hoarded their scant learning, unwilling to divide potential fame and fortune. Merindah wanted a piece of that fame and fortune. She wanted a seat on the Portal Collaborative. With that kind of influence, she could research whatever she wanted. And get a bigger lab.

I'm so far away from fame and fortune that it's not funny.

Merindah sighed, unclenched her hands, and eased the fragile volume flat. She closed the cracked leather jacket before she did any damage. She glanced at the five stubby texts squatting like poisonous toads on her right. None of them offered a glimmer of promise for her aspirations. She could just make out the slight almond and vanilla whiff of deterioration in the stack, and hoped it didn't mirror her career prospects. A slim, deep red journal was all that remained. And, unlike the rest of the books, it seemed oddly well preserved.

Maybe it'll hold some salacious gossip that I can blackmail their descendants with.

A recent excavation somewhere far out west had uncovered a cache of old books in a thousand-year-old temple ruin.

Merindah lifted her chin and smirked. "Ha! Take that Nina Nightshayde."

For the first time ever, Librarium authorities had expedited the handful of books directly to Merindah for an opinion. Her young stepmother Nina, the Librarium's Chief Occultist, never failed to wrinkle her sharp nose dismissively at Merindah's endeavours, academic or otherwise.

Family rivalries aside, competition between Orders within each Librarium was as fierce as that between the facilities. Her acquisitive stepmother stalked any and every opportunity for reputation and influence, championing herself and her aetheric craft above all. Merindah's Esoteric Cosmology Order held a dismal last place in the pecking order at Geboor's Librarium, while Nina's Occultology occupied the pinnacle. That position was aided in no small way by Nina's impressive yerlendj, and her discovery and translation of a new fragment of the Portal Prophecies five years ago.

Like everyone else on Heavens Gate, Merindah could recite the new fragment word for word. Of course, saying it was one thing, but grasping the meaning and implications for the continuation of her planet's human race was an entirely different story.

And it was a story that no one had yet been able to interpret convincingly.

The Dogs of Doom come way too soon

When Fate's Foe emerges

She will be chosen for her Grace

Though driven by her Urges

Unless controlled against her Whims

Life's Destiny unfurls

The Chosen Ones when they Become

Will save or damn our worlds

Sadly, the antique philosophical treatise on the Music of the Spheres and Fibonacci sequences she'd just examined had no story to tell. It offered no useful secrets, not even a hint. She plonked it on top of the other five.

Another useless toad. A bedtime read, bound to put you to sleep in less than a minute. And not the link I'm looking for.

Disappointment, like an odious relative at a Librarium dinner, guffawed loudly in her mind and wrapped her in its loathsome embrace. She shuddered.

With only the personal journal left to examine, a quantum leap in circumstances remained a distant tease. Merindah drew the journal closer and ran her fingers over the two binding-bumps on its spine. She lay the journal flat and traced the three conjoined glyphs on the cover with her index finger. The overlap of the three circles was filled in, but had a thick vertical line traversing its midpoint.

Looks a bit like a flattened eye.

She'd seen this before, somewhere in Geboor. Her fingers twitched, sensing stone.

Ha. It's like the eyes on the old pictographs of dragons in the Librarium. Carved on the stairwell into the deepest archives. Is it connected? Or only a coincidence?

"There are no meaningless coincidences. Coincidence is a clue," the Head of her Esoteric Cosmology Order, Yaxa Cody, had often propounded to her students. "Our lives are ruled by synchronicity – meaningful coincidences. Your job as an aetheric researcher is to find that meaning."

A sniff of familiarity pinged a distant chord in her mind. She brought up the memory of tracing her fingers across the eye on the wall of the Librarium basement, and marvelling at the sharpness of the outline, knowing that the carving had been there for hundreds of years, even though no had seen a dragon in the flesh for hundreds of years before that.

Focusing again on the journal, she wondered how many others had touched the embossed symbols before her.

What kind of people were they? What lives did they lead?

She centred herself, activated her yerlendj, threaded a trickle of magic into her touch, and re-traced the mark.

Nothing. The familiarity evaporated. She persisted, took another deep breath and with eyes firmly shut, drifted deeper.

Merindah floated above a scene. She glimpsed the lean face of a young girl with snow-white hair and shadow-blue skin. The girl swung away to negotiate the steep bank of a verdant, overgrown creek.

An older woman stood behind the girl. Unlike the girl – who matched this bright place – this woman was indistinct, as though she was not quite there. And the woman's attire: a loose purple blouse and tight dark skirt, didn't match the stained grey shirt and coarse brown trousers of the girl.

Merindah's analyst mind began to take notes. Though she was disconnected from her body back in the Tower lab she felt no fear – she was here to See. Her heart beat a little faster.

The young girl eased her way down the sharp bank towards the water, the older woman following mistily behind.

Merindah eyes ached in the burning sunshine and bright colour, this planet was young. This was not Heavens Gate. Her own sun was much older and the light softer. She wondered if this was a past Seeing or a future Seeing. Perhaps her dedication to Sága had finally born fruit and her magic was manifesting as visions. She calmed herself to focus on the scene.

Merindah could see the girl hesitate at the water's edge and took herself closer. The girl's hands trembled as she reached to steady herself. Merindah sensed her fear, her aloneness, her hunger. She observed as the older woman gravitated closer to the girl, peering over her shoulder. Merindah hovered close behind, watching. Watching the older woman watching the girl, the two of them drifted closer till their forms began to merge.

“No, I am not she. I am Dee,” the young girl croaked suddenly.

“And I’m freaking Ali,” the older woman said, though Dee didn’t register that she had heard Ali’s response. The older woman’s form tried to disengage, and her hazy hands glowed a soft red as her body separated slightly from the girl’s.

For a moment Merindah thought she saw another shape – this one enormous – begin to coalesce around the pair. She floated closer, but the massive form dissipated. She watched and waited.

Dee squatted and leant over to scoop a handful of water into her mouth. Ali leant forward and Merindah found herself leaning too.

The reflection in the water showed three surprised faces, all with one green eye, one blue. The girl pivoted to confront her watchers, her knife slashing at their bellies.

Merindah leaped back. Her eyes snapped open, and her chair rolled away from the desk. She was back in her tower room, heart pounding, feeling the fine sheen of sweat that dampened her copper skin.

Sága’s stockings, what was that? Who was that? Where was that? I’m almost certain I just had my first Seeing. But that girl had my eyes, and the older woman did too. What does that mean? Merindah’s heart began to slow its gallop.

How do Seers have these all the time? How do they know what it means?

Her analyst inclinations kicked in. She rescued her chair, sat down, and grabbed a notebook. In measured words, she recorded everything she’d seen, felt, and thought during the experience. She considered any triggers and finished the entry by posing a series of possible explanations. Whatever had initiated it, she wanted to do it again. She was *not* going to let that red journal out of her sight. It had to be connected to that.

Exploring the archives for images of that flattened dragon eye symbol was now high on her list of actions. Merindah paused as the large shape that had begun to manifest over the other two women tickled at the edge of her mind, its definition just out of reach.

She shrugged. At the moment, she couldn’t make a link to her current research – but it didn’t matter. It had been so *real*. She was desperate to tell someone, someone who could help her work out what she’d done and what it meant. Still, she knew to be wary around who she shared it with.

This was *hers*.

Merindah scooted her chair back and stood, stretching her hands over her head, and wriggling her fingers towards the flaky painted ceiling until her spine popped.

Yaxa Cody, that’s who I need to share it with.

The head of her Order would know if it was a true Seeing – and was the least likely to steal her glory. Yaxa was already influential. Merindah tried calming herself, but excitement bubbled over and she flung open the door to her lab. Her exuberant exit from the room frightened a mage student hurrying past. The young woman squeaked and dropped several heavy books. Merindah noted the dark blue stripe on the hem of the student’s pale blue Esoteric Cosmology robes as she gathered her volumes.

A first year then. Easily frightened. Not my fault.

Merindah beckoned her closer. The young woman's flushed face reflected her scare though she bobbed her head. *As she ought.* A qualified mage, even a junior one with minor talent, did not apologise to students. Right now, Merindah was too busy trying to look nonchalant about her Seeing experience to worry about anyone else's feelings anyway.

"Go to Mistress Cody's Rooms, and tell her assistant to give me the next available appointment to see the Head," she instructed. Her excitement sharpened her voice. "Go now, no delays. I expect to see you back here within the quarter hour."

The young mage knew better than to make excuses, but Merindah saw her surreptitious glance at her belly.

Before she could give the student an earful about respect, the young woman nodded and hastened away, hugging her unwieldy armload.

Merindah closed the door and pressed her head against it, breathing slowly. She peered at her belly to see what had drawn the student's gaze. Rather than a food or ink stain, there was a slash in her shirt, right where the young girl in the Seeing had lunged at her with a knife.

Seven Sisters save me. It was real. I was there. She fingered the jagged edge of the small tear.

It was time to gather her thoughts. She'd discarded her shoes hours ago, and the cool wooden floor soaked into her aching soles. She loved the feel of the natural surface, and her yerlendj slithered into the aetheric signature of the timber. She felt the resilience of deep roots anchored in the soil. Smooth branches that reached for the sun, surviving floods, fires and famines buoyed her spirit and strengthened her resolve. Somewhere in their distant past, these floorboards had been part of the Aether Tree.

If only I had more magic for my yerlendj to work with. Then I know I could delve deep enough to experience another Seeing or to find the link. If only.

Well, wishing doesn't make it so. Get on woman. You're thirty-three. Soon you'll be too old for fame. You're half way to the dreaded sixty-six already. Time's running out, and not just for you.

Still though, a thrill of excitement shivered through her body as she remembered the brightness of the light. She wondered if other Seers had this type of immersive experience, then sternly instructed herself to be calm. One event did *not* make her a Seer. She scanned the leather-bound volumes and paper folios lining three walls of her tiny lab, every author a legend in Portal research. One day, her work would line someone's walls too.

The square racks and straight corners nagged her. By the end of each day, the lab always shrank to coffin size.

At least one wall's curved.

She perused the smooth, white stone of the outside wall. It currently sported a plethora of her research images, stuck on in apparent spontaneous disorder. Ancient paintings, colourful mandalas, antiquated alphabets, each item numbered with her own peculiar code and all connected with multi-coloured threads tracing the aether links she'd explored. It looked more like the efforts of a drunken

spider than of a respectable academic. First things first. She copied some basic facts from her recent experience onto clean sheets of paper and tacked them to the wall.

No threads to connect to yet. Wait for more information.

For Merindah, numbers and letters told a story – a colourful tale of time and adventure. Her gift for dramatising alphanumeric symbols and assigning them with colour and sound caused her no end of teasing as a child. She perceived mental images in her own unique way. Numbers were music, hence the labyrinthine representation of her research and the symphony it performed in her mind.

Once her birth mother had explained that not everyone understood letters and numbers in that way, she'd learned to keep her perceptions to herself. Then, when her mother died, her gift had grown quiescent. Lately though, those unique perceptions had leaked more and more into her scientific brain, skewing her objective findings, and granting her flashes of intuition, all linked to the streaming patterns of numbers and letters in the Cosmos.

Yawning brought in a lungful of Portal history, her nose tickled by the accompanying dust. Her brow furrowed, lips pressed tight. She wanted other people to speak *her* name with awe and respect. Maybe this Seeing would be the key. Perhaps her yerlendj was finally developing after lying dormant for so long. This research would be her breakthrough, the one that got her noticed by the right people and out of this boxy cell.

And through the Portal to another world. The link is there – it has to be. What am I missing? I know magic and spirit are connected. I know I can explain them with science. So what does my Seeing have to do with it all?

She shook off her vehemence with a flick of her long fingers, dispelling the negative energy. She made a diamond over her lower belly with her hands, shuffled her feet to widen her stance and closed her eyes, focusing her yerlendj. She breathed in the smell of old paper and history mingled with a hint of sour coffee and stagnant flower water from a vase on a nearby shelf. She wrinkled her nose.

Ugh, totally ruining my Zen. Note to self: must replace flowers and throw out coffee dregs. Scratch that. Note to self: reconsider habit of picking flowers on random cliff walks and leaving them to rot.

She focused on her belly again and tried to capture the stillness.

Nope, not happening. The excitement of her Seeing refused to subside.

Her hands dropped and her eyes – one green, one blue – opened. She'd always thought being born with odd-coloured eyes meant she'd have anything but the ordinary life that she had. Her mother had always told her she was special. And she had believed it – right up until her mother died and left her father and a new stepmother in charge of her life. But now she'd had some sort of dream event about two other women with those same eyes.

Why?

Tucking errant curls behind her ears, Merindah ambled to the single window of her lab and shoved the bottom half up, wincing at its habitual reluctant squeal. She wondered for the millionth time

why her Order had abandoned technology for magic with such zeal. Surely technology wasn't all bad. She envied other Orders who'd found a compromise and allowed existing technology to support ongoing development of their magical specialty. *I'm sure their windows and doors open and close smoothly.*

She levered in her battered copy of Jensen's Orbital Senses to keep the pane propped open. The sharp sea breeze readily dispelled the stale odours in her fifth-floor tower lab. Leaning her elbows on the cool stone of the sill, she cupped her chin in her hands. Merindah's mind drifted across to the crowded city opposite, where a plethora of faint life threads swirled, tickling her yerlendj.

The Librarium and its cramped enclave clung to the rocky cliffs at the edge of the Anthozoan Sea like a limpet at low tide. Towers and blocks connected in a haphazard network strung between the Ivory and the Obsidian Towers on opposite sides of the campus. Buildings were added on as each new theory and sponsor surged to prominence, and renovated with each swing of the influence pendulum among the Librarium's Orders.

By contrast, Geboor – the capital of the island nation of Mirrabooka – perched at the other side of the tiny half-moon bay like a celestial goddess brought to earth. Elegant ivory spires were surrounded by petticoats of pearly dwellings, edged with a frothy lace of bleached marketplaces that flowed with surreal majesty to connect the turquoise ocean and cerulean skies.

Merindah frowned. The idyllic illusion preserved a thin facade for a people under the shadow of extinction under their dying sun. The end of the patriarchy's destructive rule saw technological advancement stagnate and prowess in non-mechanical fields rise to prominence. But mental enlightenment failed to provide the much-sought freedom from corporeal existence that most of humanity aspired to.

Lives were easier, healthier, and longer now, but thirty odd centuries of sameness had sucked humanity's innovative spirit dry. The unearthing of the Yarran Journal and the first Portal five hundred years ago had changed all that. One of the early partial translations from the journal hinted that a capacity to work magic could be significantly increased with selective breeding. Anyone with even a suspicion of any magical ability had shot to the dizzy heights of global celebrity overnight. So-called experts had emerged from the woodwork.

But after the initial wave of enthusiastic, but ultimately fake entrepreneurs had a sceptical populace baying for blood, the governing World Council reverted to science for an answer. Their first crucial step saw genetic engineering to strengthen the power to manipulate aether become mandatory. Initially there were naysayers, those who decreed messing with genetics and manipulating aether would bring down the wrath of Heaven. *From all seven of Heaven's realms no doubt.* Nowadays, most people had at least a little skill at magic – enough to help with their everyday chores anyway. And of course, some had much, much more.

So many people scurrying about their little lives. All ignoring their fading sun and dying world. So few know of the life-changing work that goes on behind our famous white walls.

Infamous white walls more likely, taxes and more taxes to fund the Librarium's work. But all for their – our – own good.

Heavens Gate was old, and its raw resources grew scarcer every day, despite the ‘re-use, re-cycle, re-purpose’ mantra that was drummed into every citizen from birth. Even with severely regulated birth control and voluntary euthanasia at sixty-six, the planet's dissolution continued. It was all too little, too late. Humanity had plundered too deep for too long. Global temperatures and oceans rose, food bowls withered, and natural disasters peppered the news with uncomfortable regularity as their sun began its death throes. The remaining tribes of humanity clung to existence on coastlines that had been a long trek from the sea hundreds of years ago. Still, the oceans both fed them and kept the rising humidity bearable. Merindah suspected they'd be aching for the humidity once their star stopped warming the planet and they began the long decline into the cold dark of eternal night.

With their own world disintegrating around them, the World Council focused on finding the key to expand and mine the many other worlds hinted at in the Yarran Journal. The translations were frustratingly fragmented and obscure. Speculation by the best minds on the globe had determined that the journal was – amongst other things – some kind of manual for the Portals.

Merindah also foraged for details of the Yarran Prophecy's Chosen Ones, their origin, their arrival, and their legacy. An existing legend fragment forewarned that the Chosen Ones would emerge to save or damn her world. It was widely believed they'd miraculously appear to unlock the Portals and lead Heavens Gaters to salvation and glory. As long as their ‘Whims’ were controlled, whatever *they* were. And with the year augured for Armageddon looming in the not too distant future, the demand for answers was developing a frenetic urgency.

The sea breeze lifted wisps of hair from Merindah's face and brought her the tang of ocean saltiness along with the mouth-watering aromas of a shoreline barbecue.

I could do with a snag – both the sausage and the Sensitive New Aged Girl.

She chuckled to herself.

You are a sad excuse for a woman. You need some downtime.

Another waft of delicious food floated up. Families often pooled their food reserves to relax together at the end of the working week.

Mmm, barbies. Must be Friday again. Where did that week go?

The weekend's eve drifted snippets of a family relaxing to her window.

Friday night. Was I supposed to be somewhere?

Feminine voices laughed.

She frowned at two carefree children, a girl and a boy, playing tag along the sand with their mothers. The cherished under-fives were free from the burden of their gender and foetal scans until their fifth birthday. Most magical abilities didn't manifest until then. After that you were either training for a job, doing the job, or training the next person for the job until you died or took the Green Dream

at sixty-six. If you did work of value and couldn't be replaced you were allotted another five years. At least, you were if you were female.

Don't they know it could all be over before their children have children of their own? Ugh, what a grouch. I definitely need to get out of this lab. And I need some better company, someone who knows nothing about what I do or who my family is. Maybe someone I could get to know intimately? A little physical release could relax my mind.

The busy streets quietened abruptly into a twinkling swirl of lights as the sun set in tangerine and copper flares over the mountains. The laughing families had gone home, and only the soft, rhythmic sweep of the waves remained. Even the ubiquitous gulls were silent tonight. Merindah eased back from the window and rubbed her elbows. She checked her watch.

Damn, I've been daydreaming for an hour. Where is that dratted student?

She stomped to the door and dragged it open again. A note fluttered at her feet, and she bent to retrieve it. Her appointment with Yaxa Cody was tomorrow at midday. With a grimace, she realised that an apology to the student for her fright might have encouraged the dratted woman to knock on the door and let her know earlier.

She straightened and re-entered the office, slamming the door for good measure.



Assassin

Tenet Ten: All citizens are required to watch out for their neighbour and immediately report anomalous behaviour or events to their nearest Cultural Guardian or Federation Representative.

From Federation Expected Norm: The Ten Tenets, Melba Dome, gazetted 14
March 35 PC

Ali sighed and pressed her forehead against the cool glass of her window. It was late. Her mind was fuzzy, gorged on work and worry, and now too full to function after another long day at the com screens. Below, the twinkling twin lights of flocars – the Dome’s magnetic powered vehicles – snaked their way through the crowded streets, white in one direction, red in another.

All going home to their pointless little regimented Federation lives. Putting one foot in front of the other, going nowhere, with a capital N. All wishing they were somewhere else. And Somewhere Else sounds like a better place than this.

Ali dreamed of living in the East Quad, but suspected the closest she'd ever get was a share-house in the South. Every aspect of Domer life, including permission for where you lived, was overseen by the Fed Comm and their interminable guidelines.

Theoretically, the Fed Comm included representatives from each Quad to ensure citizens had an equal voice under the Dome, and that the more vulnerable citizens were cared for. After three hundred and eleven years living under Fed Comm rule, however, not a single Domer was surprised when all decrees ultimately benefited the East Quad – the most spacious, well-resourced Quad under the Dome. East Quadders, Easy Easties, already had more than anyone else, and the Fed Comm’s definition of ‘vulnerable’ was notoriously flexible. Corruption was as much a part of Dome life as the humid stench and capricious power grid.

Fed Comm members wrangled endlessly for influence, but everyone knew that The Chair made all the key decisions and had done for decades. The enigmatic force that was The Chair courted obscurity and never spent time in public, which left the separation of fact and fabrication surrounding her difficult to navigate.

The Chair's anonymity is protected by law. Wonder why she worries about people knowing who she really is when she has so much power? Other Fed Comm members trying to kill her and become The Chair? At least I don't need to worry about people trying to assassinate me. I'm already invisible. One day I'll just turn beige and merge into the carpet. No one'll ever see me go. They'll vacuum me up as dust.

She smiled at her fanciful image.

The window glass warmed suddenly, burning against her forehead. Ali leant back and reached up to steady herself on the pane with both hands. The glass under her palms heated. A mottled rainbow texture appeared, spreading beneath them. The window seemed warped, not quite right.

Jeez, what the hell?

She blinked a few times, took her hands from the glass, and shook them. Her fingers were glowing with a ruddy phosphorescence.

This is not happening, not again.

Wait, again? Ali's gift flickered with hazy images. *Where did 'again' come from? When has this happened before? That last crazy daydream that's when.*

She shook off the random thoughts to concentrate on her hands. With the glow, she could see right through the machinery of her right middle finger, the one replaced with a cyber unit after her accident at primary school. The ring on her left hand glowed too, the ruby pulsing like an emergency beacon.

She jerked back. Behind her reflection, the conference room door eased open, outlining a hand and shoulder. Ali turned, stumbled in her high heels, and fell awkwardly to her hands and knees. Her clumsiness saved her life. A flash of silver flew above her head and pinged on the metal window frame behind her.

"What the..." Heart in her mouth, she crawled under her slimline desk.

Damn, I should've kept the big-arsed metal desk that was here.

Ali peeked up at the image outlined on the window by the soft glow of the com screens. A slight figure dressed in black stepped into the room.

I really wish I had some bloody magic. Then I'd be invisible.

She tried focusing her mind on her belly, the apparent centre of magical energy, according to all her reading and research.

My magic power is invisibility. No one can see me if I don't want them to.

Her belly churned, and her hands began to shake. Her mind registered something familiar about the reflection.

A she?

A memory tugged at her, something about the stance.

Shit, shit, shit! What the Fed's goin' on?

Ali realised the intruder would soon work out there was only one place she could be.

Why isn't Sophie bloody interrupting now? Ali's personal administration assistant – her addi – had an annoying habit of disturbing Ali at exactly the wrong moment – a lot.

This woman will be on me in a moment to do... whatever she bloody well wants. I'm invisible. I'm invisible. I'm invisible. Her gut flipped, heat churning. Rainbow auras framed her vision and a monster headache loomed.

What in Fed's furry fanny is she doing? I'm nobody. I'm invisible. None of my work is classified, I'm a glorified project manager – a proje for Fed's sake. Where's my bloody comli? On the desk. Where on the desk? Right-hand side, on the edge.

Ali crept back a little way and raised her hand to sneak her fingers onto the surface.

Bloody hell!

She withdrew her hand as it started to glow again. She took a breath, rested back on her haunches, and shoved her hands into her armpits to hide their light.

I'm invisible. They are not glowing – that shit is just a dream. There's no such thing as magic. I'm asleep. And if I'm not, I'd like to be invisible.

Get a grip, girrin. Breathe.

She checked her hands. Normal, no glowing, and her ring was just a beautiful, twisted band of gold holding a deep red stone.

See! You did make the whole thing up. But... just in case.

She used her tech-ed finger to feel along the desk surface.

If she smashes that, at least it won't hurt. And I've got a spare at home.

The assailant crept further into the room. Ali could see her bottom half from under the desk: soft soled boots, fitted pants, and knees bent, ready to spring. She saw a flash of silver in the woman's gloved hand and her heart lurched.

Ali's finger touched her comli. She eased the slim unit towards the edge until it slid into her sweaty grasp.

Now what? I can't com the Feddies. I'll be dead before they answer. Think, think. You've gotta save yourself, girrin.

She clutched the comli to her belly to hide its tell-tale green screen glow. Then she slipped one shoe off, and gathered her limbs into a crouch. Holding her comli close to her chest with her right hand, she poised her thumb to swipe and press. With her left hand, she gripped the shoe and got ready to launch.

You can do this. Come on, you can do it. You can do it. You've got surprise on your side. She surged to her feet behind the desk, throwing her shoe in the opposite direction as a distraction, and swiping the comli's torch on at the same time.

As the assailant shielded her eyes in the spotlight, Ali stepped back further, preparing to make a run for the foyer door. She miscalculated, bumping into the arm of her chair, which unbalanced and

fell crashing into the back wall. Another silver flash spun by her head as she staggered. Mouth dry, pulse pounding, gut heaving, she floundered towards the door, expecting pain or worse at any moment.

The door opened before she reached it, a pale hand slipped in and swiped the main light on. Ali wrenched the door wider, and staggered into Sophie's stylish embrace. Ali slammed the door shut behind her with one hand and they fell in a tangle of limbs.

Sophie was too svelte to cushion their fall however, and Ali's breath whooshed out as she banged her right elbow and knee on the hard tiles of the foyer.

"Quick. We've gotta run. Code Black, intruder."

Sophie rubbed her own elbow where it had hit the floor.

"What? Wait. Are you all right? I heard a crash."

"Ninja attack, silver thingy." Ali's words felt all wrong. As if someone else had control of her mouth. Her mind struggled to make sense. Her gift scrambled to catalogue the last few moments, and connecting threads raced across her internal memory display.

Sophie wriggled out from underneath her and stood. She straightened her grey pencil skirt over her slim hips, and raised a delicately drawn eyebrow at the ladder in her stockings – a victim of the fall.

"Come on, we've gotta run!" Adrenaline surged in Ali's system as she staggered upright on shaky legs, still wearing one heel. She couldn't understand why the assassin hadn't already come after her. There was no time to lose. She tried to grab Sophie's arm and drag her towards the stairs.

"Ali Morrow." Sophie channelled her best teacher's voice and loosened Ali's manic grip. "No one has been in the office for the last two hours. You must've dozed off again and had a nightmare. It's been a long day, the latest of many. You know you haven't been sleeping well. And you have been having those vivid dreams." She slipped past Ali, reached for the office door, and disappeared inside.

I should save her. I'm her boss. She's my responsibility. 'Watch Out for Your Neighbour' and all.

But all Ali could do was shake and clench her teeth, jamming her knuckles into her mouth, feeling her teeth sharp on her sweaty skin, and tasting her fear. She wanted to run in the other direction, flee for her life, and leave Sophie to her fate.

If the assassin stops to kill her, then I can escape. Ali felt sick at being so gutless. Indecision kept her frozen to the spot, expecting a scream at any moment. With her eyes glued to the door, rainbow sparkles began to crowd her vision.

A trilling female voice hooted with laughter in Ali's head. She clutched her temples. ***You should SO run.*** Impossibly, the voice sliced through her brain like a hot knife.

She's not who you think she is. She'd definitely run if the shoe was on the other foot.

"Who's there?" Ali rasped, fear drying her mouth.

Come on. Did you see what I did there? Shoe on the other foot. You're only wearing one shoe. SHOE-ON-THE-OTHER-FOOT. Surely that's worth a groan at least.

"Who is it? Come out now. This is *not* funny. We're in a Code Black," Ali couldn't imagine how the voice was in her head.

You know who I am Ali Morrow. That is who you're calling yourself in this incarnation, isn't it Alinta? Invisible, anonymous Proji and Cataloguer Extraordinaire.

The voice continued in a huffy tone.

And that was very funny by the way. I've been practising my comedy routines while I waited for you to come to your senses.

Ali swivelled, searching the foyer for the owner of the voice.

We don't have time for theatrics. We're close to the century congruence. It's me. Jiemba. I'm through. I'm back. We needed a life-threatening event so I could break through this ridiculous nightmare you call existence.

Ali's gift flashed a picture of a cranky red dragon in her mind. Dragon. Mammoth body, sinuous neck, enormous frilled head, covered in scales, dragon. Dark red threads charged around her gift like lit fuses, blasting holes and breaking connections in her mind's tapestry.

The dragon sat on its massive haunches in the chaos and bared a set of sharp, glistening fangs. It tilted and lowered its head so that Ali got a glimpse of one enormous eye peering at her – from inside her head. Apart from the vertical obsidian pupil, the dragon's eye was like a gigantic opal. The eye drank in light, leaving the smattering of sparkling rainbow flecks a brilliant counterpoint.

Hello breakfast.

Ali shook her head, her heart hammering a ragged tattoo. She must be going mad. The old woman had told her to remember Jiemba. Something about her shadow seemed out of sync and Ali glanced down to see that it had transformed into the shape of an enormous dragon, its head crowned with curled horns.

She dragged her gaze past outstretched wings, taloned forelimbs, and a lashing spiked tail. Its hind legs and enormous feet joined at her very real single shod pair. Her mind threatened to explode.

"No. Absolutely not. There are no such things as dragons." She barely realised she'd spoken aloud and closed her eyes as an offended huff sounded in her head.

There certainly are such things. And you and I are one. So let's get outta here. The voice turned a little plaintive. ***I wanna go Home.***

Ali squeezed her eyes tighter.

Aren't you even a little bit glad to see me? I was only kidding about the breakfast thing. I haven't eaten a human in ages. At least a couple of hours. Kidding. I'm just kidding. I only eat the bad ones. Kidding again, Well, no actually. That bit is true.

Ali put her hands over her ears.

"Not real. Not real. Not real," she chanted.

Jiembra sulked in the background, mumbling about humour and bad gigs. All of which only upped Ali's panic level. A noise had her whirling as her office door opened and Sophie strolled out, the epitome of composure.

She looks more like a bloody manager than me, all cool and graceful.

Ali did not qualify for cool or graceful just now.

"Nothing there but shadows and an over-active imagination. Come on, come and see." Sophie beckoned her closer.

How can she be braver than me? I've got at least a quarter-century on her, and she's just an addi.

I could've helped you with that. I have enough courage for both of us. And then some.

Sophie's not hearing the voice.

Well, she wouldn't would she. I'm only in your head.

Ali gulped, swallowing the bile that fear had driven to her throat.

Ugh, that burns. I am so heading to that stress session tonight.

Sophie beckoned again, her lifted eyebrow questioning Ali's hesitation.

Ali approached, limping in her single high heel, and looked past Sophie's smile. Nothing. No one. She stepped into the small room, getting a whiff of Sophie's citrus perfume and nothing else. She edged past the upended chair, bent and looked under the desk and then over to the floor beside the window.

Nope, no ninja assassin. No silver thingies.

Her body sagged. She ran her fingers through her hair, gathering the soft escapees and tucking them behind her ears.

"What about the conference room? Did you check in there?" Ali asked.

Sophie nodded. "Nothing."

"Jeez, I must look like an idiot."

Sophie patted her shoulder sympathetically.

Can't disagree with you there.

"Ali, you've been working like a fiend to get this report out. You're exhausted. And you don't eat well. Is it any wonder you're jumping at shadows? Go and save your work and I'll make you a cuppa for the trip home. Time we both left anyway. Federation won't love us if we file for burn out."

Sophie marched off and Ali listened to her confident clip, clip, clip across the tiles to the kitchen. The sound of the boiling kettle seemed so prosaic to her overwrought senses.

She realised she was still standing forlornly in the middle of her office, adrenaline churning her gut. She took a long, slow, deep breath, remembering her stress relief classes and glanced around.

"Right, nothing to see. You're ridiculously busy, so stressed that even in the daytime you're imagining wandering wild women and nefarious ninja assassins."

Seriously, why the hell would ninja assassins want to kill me? It's not like I'm anyone important. I'm nothing. I know I'm good at my job, but jeez.

You forgot a dragon talking in your head.

Jiamba sounded snarky. Ali ignored her.

"One step at a time," Ali told herself. *And that one step is to take a bloody holiday. Three weeks at least, disconnected, no tech. A wilderness adventure. That'll de-stress you, old girrin. It'd make you feel human, getting back to nature.*

She ignored the flashing warnings in her head about insects and animals, weather, and wilderness. She would prepare as she always did, and nothing would surprise her. She hated surprises. It did feel good to create a time and event, though she had yet to slot it into her schedule anywhere. Her mind filed it under 'soon'.

I can be myself on a wilderness adventure. She told herself there'd be no need to hold onto her posh City Grid work language. No need to check that every word was polite and FEN-compliant. Now all she had to do was convince her boss that he could spare her, and that the entire project wouldn't collapse without her there to hold it all together.

Who am I kidding? The only thing he'd miss is getting his coffee on time and his ego stroked. He's got plenty of minions for that.

Ali retrieved her other shoe – heel still intact – from near the printer in the corner. She swiped off the data systems, and headed for the door with a pile of files. Stuffing the work and her comli into her dilly, which was already full of the usual personal paraphernalia every Domer needed, she grabbed her coat, and caught a glimpse of her face in the wall mirror.

It's gonna take more than a wilderness adventure to make that face look relaxed.

You're telling me, sister.

Black rings darkened her adrenaline-bright eyes. *Maybe I'd prefer normal brown eyes, even though nobody mentions that they're odd.*

It's because you've shielded them. People already think your eyes are brown, the same as almost everyone else in this hellhole.

Ali refused to acknowledge Jiamba's grumbling. She grimaced at her reflection and attempted to smooth her intractable curls into place, making her large, triangular earrings jiggle. Her small personal rebellion included non-FEN bling to battle the mountains of Federation conformity.

Yep, I am such a rebel. Just an out-of-shape one. She smoothed her purple shirt over the navy skirt that covered her full hips, sucking in her belly and wishing she were fitter and thinner.

"Holiday. Adventure. Away from work. Outside."

Thank the Mother.

As she let her belly relax and turned to swipe off the light, a twinkle from the window caught her eye. Her heart gave a double thump. Still she stepped towards the glint. When she moved her head to peer closer, an oily rainbow appeared and disappeared.

Magic residue. Yours. The smugness pushed her buttons. Ali couldn't help the sputtered response.

"I don't have magic."

Ha. Gotcha. Knew you could hear me. Though you're right. You don't have magic.

Ali relaxed her tight shoulders.

You are magic.

Ali's shoulders crawled back up to her ears.

"Tea traveller's ready Ali," Sophie called from the kitchen.

Don't be a stupid proji. No such thing as magic. It's an imperfection in the glass that you haven't noticed before. Nothing in this whole Dome is perfect and new.

Except if you're on the Fed Comm or live in the East Quad.

Ali kept a firm hold of her coat and dilly and resisted touching the window with her fingers, or acknowledging the snarky voice in her head.

Well I wouldn't be so snarky if you'd listen to me and get us out of this stifling Dome. Its filters kill magic.

Straightening her spine, Ali rested one hand on her belly and tried to practise the grounding stillness thing from stress class. Dadirri the teacher called the technique or going Home.

That's what I need right now, to be going home.

Yeeha Home!

The fragrance of high, cold spaces tickled Ali's nose – along with images of soaring mountains, ragged tors, smooth bluestone walls and the comfortable companionship of peace. She sneezed. Her raging mind refused to contemplate any kind of stillness. She gave up and headed out of the office, thumbing off the light and firmly closing the door.

As Sophie handed her the lidded teacup, she reached to touch Ali's forehead, her silver bracelet flashing in Ali's eyes. Ali flinched away from the contact and Sophie moved closer, her bracelet tinkling.

Don't trust her. Don't let her touch you.

"Let me feel your forehead to make sure you don't have a fever." Ali stepped back again, out of reach. A vision of Sophie's hands as claws flashed a warning in her mind.

"Don't baby me, Sophie. I'm fine. I've managed to take care of myself for this long," Ali grumbled.

Sophie looked miffed.

"Really, Soph. I'm just knackered and a little wrung out. I'll be better after a good sleep."

Sophie reluctantly dropped her hand, seeming nervous as she fiddled with her bracelet.

Ali forced a smile and softened her voice, "Come on. We're outta here."

Their building wasn't tall or important enough to warrant a solar-powered lift for all the floors, only the top ten, so climbing the seven flights each morning and descending at night was Ali's only

exercise. She waved Sophie to precede her down the stairs, insisting to herself that she would have done that anyway.

Yeah, right.

The malodorous street scents infiltrated the dim stairwell as they got closer to street level. They stopped to insert their nose plugs at the second floor.

As they walked away from the building, the back of Ali's neck prickled, urging her gaze up. She counted the seven rows of windows to find her office, two windows from the front corner. A tightness grabbed her chest. With the level lights off, she couldn't see inside. No smart comments from her dragon friend.

A twitch from Sophie indicated that perfectly raised eyebrow again. Ali shook her head, too tired to make any sense of what had or hadn't happened. Sophie touched her arm, and Ali felt a rush of gratitude for her. She may be just an addi, but she watched out for Ali more than she needed to.

More than I deserve. What would I do without her?

Jiamba's tone was scornful. ***You wouldn't believe me if I told you. Don't trust anyone, especially her.***

Ali gestured Sophie to take the first floicar. Her old lungs could take a few more seconds of rancid air. She swiped her wristcode across the scanner of the next vehicle in line and eased back in the seat. As she reached to take off her nose plugs, Jiamba shouted in her mind.

Leave them in! The chems will shut me out again. And your building is too heavily warded.

Ali removed her nose plugs with a smirk and took a deep breath as a hiss of anti-odour zeolites freshened the air. Fed Comm insisted that's all they were: air fresheners. Then the floicar joined the serpent of red lights and headed to the outer North Quad suburbs and home.

- - -

The evening settled deep shadows into Ali's office. One shadow detached itself and stepped towards the window, watching the scene below, and watching the women leave. The small, dark figure slipped a black glove from her hand and slid two connected rings onto her fingers from a pocket in her cuff. She attached the silver-and-crystal ensemble to a terminal at her waist and gestured over the rainbow stain. With a rosy glow, the glass was perfect again.

She unfastened her device, replaced her glove, and stepped back into the shadow.



Gatekeeper

*When a century is combined
Soul bound seeks the mind
Cross cold and space
And time and place
No barrier to her Grace*

*Beware the Shayde
The lies that made
The treacherous orphans flee
The Mother's wrath
Armageddon lies in their path*

From the oracular records of the Sága Sisterhood – Mirrabooka, Autumn 3033

Merindah stomped back to her desk and folded her arms. She wanted to share her experience now while it was fresh, not tomorrow. Too much could happen overnight. The breeze from the shore had picked up and begun to blow papers around her desk. Grouching, she went to the window and forced it down, resting her forehead against the cloudy glass.

*How will the world ever see me as a world saver if I spend all my time in this musty old lab,
dressed like something the cat dragged in?*

She tried to straighten her crumpled cream blouse, tsking at the tear and scrubbing at a coffee stain on her green trousers. Perhaps she should switch to wearing the pale blue Order robes like most of her colleagues? But she'd barely passed her exams, and being such a lowly magical practitioner made wearing a mage's uniform feel a little fraudulent. She examined her still-rumpled state.

Ah well, lucky I'm not meeting anyone influential tonight.

Succumbing to her one personal vanity, she pulled her hair clip out to comb her waist-length curls into order, letting the silky auburn strands flow through her fingers. Two pencils rattled onto the wooden floor.

Huh, that's where they got to.

The headache that signalled the payback for using her magic earlier throbbed into existence, with rainbows sparkling at the edge of her vision.

Damn. Why do I get such huge headaches when I have such pathetic magic? It's not fair.

Merindah reached into the pocket of her skirt for her blue pills. She popped one under her tongue and closed her eyes, waiting for the amelioration, and trying to dismiss her childish crankiness.

I'm a different person now. Yeah, that sad, skinny kid became a morose, chubby teenager. But now I'm a joyful, curvy thirty-three year old. Her birthday had come and gone a week ago with no fanfare and zero acknowledgement from her father. She didn't know why she'd imagined he would remember. Her only other family was Nina, and it was unlikely that the anniversary of her birth featured high on her stepmother's list of things to do to achieve world domination.

She eased the tight skirt band at her waist and sucked in her belly, her mouth twisting wryly.

Who the hell am I kidding? I'm turning into a melancholy, overweight moaner. Maybe the Librarium will turn my body into parchment when I die, and they'll roll it up and catalogue it under U for unknown and useless. If I'd learnt to keep my opinions to myself while some of those blatherskite Major Mages told me their theories, it could've been a whole different story.

Merindah's oft-aired opinions and her willingness to argue for them had gotten her into more hot water than any other analyst in the history of the Esoteric Cosmology Order. A fact that Yaxa Cody, the Head of the Order, had informed her of last week during one of her semi-regular "chats."

Merindah would have preferred to make her own way through the Librarium hierarchy, but was shackled by her dismal yerlendj. The security of her position hung by a thread. There were only so many times the Head could look the other way, citing her family's generous funding, when irate Mages lined up at Cody's office demanding that Merindah be punished for her insolence, impertinence, presumption, rudeness, or any other flavour of insubordination they could think of.

Despite her run-ins with the academic establishment however, Merindah's expertise was growing. Yet very few people acknowledged her research endeavours.

Even a modicum of personal attention would be nice.

"I can promise you more than a *modicum* if you're willing to take a risk." Merindah whipped around, almost tripping into a stack of books. A sublime being floated in a rainbow swirl in the centre of the room. As Merindah righted herself, the exquisite creature stepped closer and the mist dissipated.

Her skin was all colours and none. Merindah's brain refused to process the flickering tones until her eyes registered that whoever it was shared the same dark copper shade as her own. Long, black hair dropped in shining waves to the being's waist and sparkled with silver lights. Large, amethyst eyes vibrated with a divine spirituality. Caught in her radiant gaze, Merindah felt as though her every fault was spot lit by brilliant white light.

Surely something so magnificent is more than human. Her mouth hung open. She'd heard of heavenly manifestations, but never spoken to anyone who'd experienced one.

Into the pregnant silence, the goddess – for that *must* be what she was – suddenly laughed, leant forward, and placed a finger under Merindah’s chin, gently closing her mouth.

With her laugh, the goddess's other-worldly persona abruptly faded, leaving only her earthy grin, and Merindah’s body sagged with relief and a face-cracking smile. The dregs of her headache disappeared with an audible pop. She felt buoyant. She could take on the world and win.

“Why stop at the world? Take on the *Cosmos*. You’ve got it in you.” The goddess captured her hands and twirled her round in the cramped room. Tingles of energy shot up Merindah’s arms from her touch. She watched as a rainbow of aetheric threads danced into her own being, and felt them tickle a knotted nodule near the base of her spine.

Her heart swelled, her aura exploded, and ecstasy beckoned. The music that she usually heard in her head sounded as if it were coming from the Voice. The twirling stopped and Merindah gasped, chest heaving, heart hammering. The goddess was unaffected and stopped dead, her hands on her hips and her huge smile in evidence.

Merindah managed to gasp out, “Who in the Seven Realms of Heaven are you? Wait, did you read my mind then?”

Two dark eyebrows jiggled suggestively.

“Of course, dear. And your heart and soul. And so can you. You have a veritable throng of talents and enough intelligence and Grace to mistress them all,” the goddess announced.

Completely ignoring Merindah's first question, the goddess’s eyes narrowed as she peered at Merindah's belly. Merindah sucked her gut in self-consciously and straightened, nervously tucking her hair behind her ears, and flicking the loose curls back over her shoulders. She wished she’d kept a change of clothes here. What with the tear in her shirt and the stain on her trousers, she wasn't exactly dressed for a spiritual encounter. Her robes would have been more appropriate.

A frown creased the beautiful visage facing her, and Merindah glanced away, her eyes tracing the figure's generous proportions, and her sensual warm energy.

"Mmm. Someone’s been messing with your Grace. There's a holding ward. Who thinks they have the right and the power to constrain my Gatekeeper, I wonder?"

At Merindah's puzzled look the goddess's face cleared. "Never mind that now, dearest. We'll deal with it later. Or it won't matter. Let's focus on one thing at a time."

Merindah's mind was awash with questions, desperately trying to get a handle on the strange meeting and conversation. Merindah’s questions began to tumble out. "One thing? What One Thing? Who are you? What are you? Am I dreaming? Is this another Seeing? Is it the pills? The headache? How did you get in here anyway? How did you breach the door wards?"

An elegant hand waved her queries away. "What you should be asking is what can I do for you. I *am* a goddess after all, and I'm in a generous frame of mind." The goddess said with a little quiver of excitement.

Merindah took a mental gulp. A feather of fear tickled her yerlendj, but a deeper knowing recognised something familiar about this being. The bubble of laughter, the zing of spirit tickling joy clicked into place.

"I know you." Merindah narrowed her eyes and let her yerlendj send out a questing thread. The goddess laughed and batted the thread back to its owner.

Merindah's face paled as realisation surfaced. "I've been hearing you in my head my whole life. You've been on my shoulder, in my heart."

The goddess stilled, her smile beneficent.

The presence Merindah spoke of had been with her for as long as she could remember. It had often been her only playmate in a world of few children, and she'd simply called it the 'Voice'.

Her mother had indulged this imaginary friend, but worried when the Voice was still keeping her company at ten. After multiple visits to medicos, mages, and shamans, Merindah had simply stopped speaking about the Voice, and so her mother's worries had moved on to her own health.

But the Voice hadn't gone away. It had been there during her mother's illness and death. There on the lonely nights when Merindah had cried herself to sleep, her father far away. Over the past two decades though, the Voice had become an inconsistent friend, its visits briefer and further apart. She'd thought perhaps she was finally growing up.

"You're the Voice. You're real. Are you? It's not the pills?" The Voice was real. The Voice had always believed in her. The Voice had said she had a throng of talents.

A goddess has been keeping me company. Merindah fell to her knees and lowered her head to the floor, humbled by the goddess's generosity. The Voice assisted her back to her feet and gently kissed her, first on one cheek, then the other.

"You are one of my Chosen. Always have been, always will be. Never forget that. Whenever you doubt yourself, I am only ever a prayer away."

Merindah's eyes misted, and her face ached with joy. "Then why have you been so distant these past few years? I've missed you." At the pained look on the goddess's face Merindah's cheeks flamed, and she covered her mouth with a hand.

"Oh. I am so sorry. I didn't mean to accuse you of anything. I'm sure you're busy doing goddess things and didn't have time for all my little tears." Her eyes widened as she realised she was making it worse. She clapped both hands over her mouth.

"It's become harder to visit as you've grown. Children are more open to Seeing than adults: scepticism erects barriers in minds and hearts. And I suspect whoever's been messing with your Grace has also been messing with your faith," the goddess explained. "Let's see what we can do about both."

She rescued Merindah's hands from her mouth, and Merindah shook her head and stepped back.

"Wait. What do you mean my Grace? And did I hear you say Chosen as in the Chosen in the Yarran Prophecy? Which goddess are you?"

"Now dearest, I have a bit of catching up to do, so I'll keep it brief. On this world I believe you call your Grace 'yerlendj'. Your Grace exists at the pleasure of the Cosmic Mother. Yerlendj, meaning innate wisdom, is accurate; but Grace is closer to what the Mother intended, and I should know," she smirked.

When Merindah's perplexed look continued, the goddess went on. "As for Chosen, here's your opportunity. Are you ready to hear what I can do for you?"

Ignoring the unearthly nature of the moment, Merindah felt ambition win out over caution. She nodded, and her mind raced to catch up to her emotions. "This is so freaky. I have a bucket load of questions, but fine. Let's start with what can you do for me."

The Voice clapped her hands. Aetheric threads burst into a delightful tinkling melody, and danced around her head like a cloud of angels.

"Good woman." Then her face stilled. "How much would you risk to save your world and the Cosmos? I've grown fond of it, and I'd rather not have to start again so soon. It messes with my Grand Plan."

Merindah's mouth dropped open and her gut plummeted. With shaking legs she dropped to her knees again, her hands slapped onto the timber, drawing on their strength. The Voice knelt beside her on the floor, swathes of soft violet material settled in waves around her. She rested a hand on Merindah's head, and Merindah slowly raised her eyes to meet the goddess's depthless gaze.

"You know I'd give anything. Everything. It's what I dream of doing every moment of the day," Merindah whispered. But with her dream suddenly in reach, her courage deserted her, fear taking its place. She broke into a sweat and began to shake.

This can't be real. My magic barely lights a candle. All I have is ambition and opinion. How can I save the Cosmos with that?"

"Do I have it in me to save the Cosmos?" She searched the wise eyes before her.

"Yes, you do." The goddess held a finger to Merindah's trembling lips to hold in her next question. "Because you and I are one and the same. You are a Divine being, a child born from the womb of the Cosmic Mother. You are special. You are Chosen. You are Armageddon's Gatekeeper. And it's time to come Home."

Merindah's dry mouth failed to form any of the protests that whirled around her brain.

Home. With that word, Merindah was swept up into a fragrance that smelt like a thousand flowers blooming.

How? How is this happening? How can I save the Cosmos?

The Voice responded to her thoughts. "The question isn't how, it's *why*. You have a brilliant analytical mind. Begin by asking *why* this is happening now. *Why* do you have what it takes to save the Cosmos? *Why* are you the Gatekeeper? *Why* do you exist? *Why* do you think, feel, do, and believe?"

"I wish I could give you time to go deep, way past the ambition and the vengeance, but my plan is a little awry, and the century's convergence approaches. Just keep asking why. Your curiosity will lead you to clarity. Your reflection will take you to the right action."

The goddess's exuberance muted with sorrow, the aetheric threads around her dropped to a subdued murmur.

"Your road Home will be fraught, child. Your choices will not be simple. The quest will ask more of you, and of any who aid you, than any one soul should be asked to bear."

She leant forward and wrapped her arms around Merindah. The hug felt like heaven ought to be, warm, generous, and loving. Every cell in Merindah's body hummed in incandescent joy, all except a blob of clanging grey shackled deep in her belly that rebuffed the love. The discord slipped into the background as her beloved Voice eased back, running a soft hand down Merindah's tear-streaked cheek.

"You won't be alone. Armageddon needs a Key and Fire too. I believe you met them both just a little while ago."

Merindah's eyes widened and the goddess nodded.

"You'll find unexpected friends and allies to help you battle the villains and ogres along the way. Trust in yourself to know the difference. I believe in you." The Voice stood and tugged Merindah to her feet.

"Are you ready? Will you do whatever it takes?" she asked, compassion and a universe of hope in her amethyst eyes.

Merindah stood at the precipice, a chasm of possibility and pain opening before her. She scrubbed the tears from her face, and inhaled a deep breath, absorbing the glorious scent of the goddess.

"I'm ready."

Tears glistened in the Voice's eyes. Relief flashed before her smile broke out again. "Thank you, my darling woman. We are all in your debt." She slipped a silver chain from around her neck, then opened her hand to show Merindah an amulet of black opal wrapped in twisted silver. It looked like a world held in the branches of the Aether Tree. Rainbows sparkled at the inclusions and reflected in the goddess's eyes as she tilted it to catch the light.

"It's beautiful. It's like an ocean of rainbow stars."

The Voice placed the amulet around Merindah's neck, and Merindah lifted the stone, feeling it warm her hand. As she gazed into the gem she felt herself falling.

The Voice covered the amulet and drew Merindah's gaze to hers. "Don't stare into it until you're stronger. You'll understand it more soon. Now I need to remove that gate on your power. Let Sister Shayde beware." The Voice touched one finger to Merindah's forehead over her third eye and Merindah felt her eyelids drift closed.

"Because of that constraint on your Grace, it will be better for this memory and your power to trickle out slowly over a few days. This will keep those who would hinder you unaware of your quest

until you're ready to step into your destiny. When the time is right, you'll remember. Trust yourself. You are magnificent."

One rainbow thread slipped into Merindah's mind, coiling around her memory; and a second slipped into her belly to encapsulate the grey sludge.

The Voice peered at the sludge and murmured, "Quite expertly done, dear Sister. Had I not come myself, this might not have been detected until it was too late. But alas for you, she is no longer bound. This will be an unveiling to rock the halls of the Seven Realms to their very foundation."

The Voice kissed Merindah's closed eyes and vanished.



Plans

When nothing goes right, go left.

Nanna Branwyn, Criminal Matriarch, citizen 56.114.896.402,
Resident of Dim, West Quad, Melba Dome.

Ali switched her dilly to the other shoulder so she could jiggle the key in the front door. The thumb scanner had stopped working a couple of months ago, and the building manager hadn't seen fit to prioritise her safety and privacy with a repair.

So much for Watching Out for Your Neighbours.

Luckily, it was an old building and still had actual keys. Once inside, she dropped her dilly under the small side-table and picked up an Outside Trek brochure from the floor. Ali slammed the door, locked it, dropped her keys and the brochure on the entry table. She rested her head back against the hard surface. Shoes kicked off, nose plugs out, she breathed deeply, picking up a faint whiff of lavender – her go-to fragrance for keeping Dome odours at a bearable level. Even though it was also manufactured, it was better than sewerage and sweat.

She could've taken her plugs out in the building's enclosed foyer, but her hands were full of files and the warning of that ridiculous voice in her head poked her stubbornness button. She would *not* be dictated to by an imaginary dragon. Enough people told her what to do already. Like taking work home to finish.

Just a few files to get a head start on tomorrow. She shook herself and took another deep breath, massaging the back of her neck with one hand and flicking out her earring with the other. Travelling the streets this late was risky, especially to her suburb of Vale, and her neck was tighter than a drum. Her flat in the North Quad bordered with the West; and the Nutbag North and the Wild West were a deadly combination for nocturnal violence and crime.

Maybe it's time to apply for a new place further east. Who am I kidding? A single woman my age with no children is never gonna get into the East Quad.

The Easy East, gated, secure and exclusively for people with a higher tally than Ali and her whole building put together. South Quad held most of the Dome's essential services and small living enclaves for professionals: health centres, schools, industry, defence, water, science, technology, and the flocar network grid control. Flocars weren't immune to carjackers though, despite what the Fed Comm decreed.

So for Ali, the last few clicks were always a hairy ride of watching for danger, her finger on her comli's emergency code. Everybody knew dissidents met at night when the street cams were less able to make out faces – or were even turned off in certain suburbs to save power, assuming they'd been working in the first place.

So many things were in a state of disrepair that it was a wonder they had lights at all. Brownouts were way too regular, and last month a blackout had grounded the entire flocar system for twenty-four hours. Underground news hinted at a complete breakdown of the Dome in the near future, which was vehemently denied by the Fed Comm.

Of course few of her precautions would be necessary if she'd just left the City Grid at a reasonable hour. Too much work made that deadline fly by. Or she could use the Fed-funded flobus which came with armed Feddies. It was the plain-clothed Grey Shirts who rode the bus, always on the lookout for anti-Fed activity, that made her avoid those.

Ali sighed, untucked her pale pink shirt and undid the band on her skirt. Hands on hips she surveyed her domain: a single living room and bedroom combined – a studio if you believed the building brochure.

Any excuse to squeeze another person into an itsy-bitsy space. At least the air filter works... mostly. She flapped her hands in front of her face to move the sticky air. Summer in the Dome hovered between uncomfortable mugginess and sweltering heat. Though her building at work was comfortably cooled, Ali's room lacked a cooling unit, even if she'd had the tally to keep it running. Autumn couldn't come soon enough.

Despite Ali having moved in eight years ago, the room held an impermanent feel. One of the faded beige walls held three small prints of Domer life – nailed on to make sure renters didn't accidentally pack them when they were reallocated. *You'd have to be pretty desperate to take them.* Her glance took in her three-seater couch that transformed into a sofa bed, a linen cupboard and a desk accounted for the living room. A tiny, round table and two ladder-back chairs with the fridge, sink, ration re-cycler and bench pretended to be a kitchenette. She never cooked. In the lives of most Domers, cooking was an anachronism. Ali didn't possess the black-market connections for the scant fresh produce anyway, so re-heated rations were her staple. Her miniscule bathroom closet was at least behind a closing door. There were no personal photos, no personal effects. She'd just never got around to it

Who would I have a photo of anyway?

Ali was close to very few people. She never seemed able to hang on to a friend for long, let alone an intimate partner. Emotion detracted people from *Minding Their Own Business* or from

Watching Out for Their Neighbours. Grey Shirts jumped on anger and rage in particular, but tended to view even joy and affection askance. Basically, the Federation frowned on strong emotions.

Hundreds of years ago in a bizarre attempt to reduce street violence, they'd outlawed PDAs – public displays of affection. The logic was laid out in the Fifth Tenet, which blathered on about the dangers of uncontrolled emotion, but was most often shortened to *Control Yourself*. Consequently, Domers tended to play their emotional cards close to their chests. They weren't encouraged to be demonstrative or creative. And so everything in her flat was basic, functional, and practical.

Just like me.

Jeez, stop being so maudlin, girrin. It's just a place to lay your head and feed your belly so you can get up and do it all again tomorrow.

Maybe after this project is finished I'll have time to find a nice picture for the wall, or even draw one myself.

After downing a heated ration with a cup of tea, Ali unfolded her sofa bed and dragged the blankets from the linen cupboard. As she reached to turn off the lights by the front door, the brochure caught her eye. She shook her head, smiling, and picked it up. Andie must have slipped it under her door – she'd been encouraging Ali to take a real break for months.

With a sigh, Ali settled into her lumpy bed. The strange events, or non-events, from earlier in the day replayed themselves in her head. While she contemplated, her right hand performed its habitual flick, flick, flick of her ruby ring. She stopped flicking when the ruby was uppermost, and polished the gem on her camisole. She examined her hands, remembering their strange reddish glow. All perfectly normal now.

My fingers glowing seems to be a recurring theme in my dreams. Why? And why do those dreams feel more and more real? That white-haired girrin, Dee, I could see the freckles on her shadow-blue face.

She sighed again and smoothed the crumpled brochure on her knee. It outlined an Outside Trek to a temple ruin a few weeks' walk from the Dome. The cost was reasonable – she could afford the deduction from her tally. Surely work could manage without her for a few weeks at least. Her boss Geoff had been nagging her to take a break. Her mind skittered away from the reason he'd begun to insist.

Well he shouldn't give me so much work if he wants me to take a break. He can't have it both ways.

Ali went back to reading the brochure. The isolation it promised sounded fantastic. Even now, in the quiet of the late hour, she could hear the buzz of the Dome: people, machines, filters, and the usual white noise of thousands of people living in each other's pockets.

What would it really be like Outside? Would it smell and feel and look like my dream?

The dragon voice had urged her to go out. Maybe listening to that voice *was* a good idea. She might find some answers to the gaps in her memories. It might also prove whether or not the Dome and the Federation were messing with her gift.

It couldn't hurt to go on this guided trek could it? Surely all the warnings about people-eating fauna and poisonous flora were over-dramatised. Ali resolved to do some investigating of the trek and the ruins tomorrow.

As she hovered on the border of sleep, it occurred to her that the buzzing she'd heard in her daydream could've been the drone of hundreds of dangerous insects.

She slept and dreamed.



Plots

If Plan A fails, remember that you have 25 letters left.

From Devotees of Sister Diligence – the Acolyte Journals, Geboor Temple

The Voice, in the form of the goddess Hecate, reappeared on the roof of Geboor's Ivory Tower. She drew a thread of darkness around herself, muting her divine luminescence. A subdued glimmer of her light illuminated the open circular space. A large ginger cat stalked from the shadows to her dimly glowing feet, then circumnavigated her ankles twice, sniffing at the hem of her gown.

Satisfied, it leaped onto a crumbling crenellation that bordered the parapet wall. The feline also circled the crumbling stone twice, ignoring the dizzying drop to the jagged rocks below, and finally settled on her haunches facing Hecate. She wrapped her tail neatly around her front paws and yawned, displaying a set of sharp, white teeth and a pale pink tongue. The goddess gave an exasperated sigh, hands on hips.

"Are you done playing, Justice? Armageddon is coming after all." A twitch of the banded tail was the only response. That's if you didn't count a topaz-eyed stare that could flay skin from bone.

"Time to reset. My absence these past ten years has put our plans for this world out of sync. My sister has had the temerity to put a block on my Chosen's magic. That is *not* watching out for her as I requested. My Grand Plan is in shambles. I'd hoped this Chosen would have a decade of magical experience under her belt, and significant influence with the Portal Collaboratives and the World Council. Instead, she's a frustrated novice mage full of unproven theories and dreams. She's not ready for what lies ahead. It's too much to ask of her."

The goddess began to pace, the diameter of the small tower allowing half a dozen steps before each turn. The cat observed the threads of energy swirl in agitation around Hecate's head. As the sky darkened, the threads brightened, dancing like fireflies.

The cat had to bridle her feline twitch, which longed to chase and catch the lights.

The goddess ceased her pacing, gazing into the velvet night. She didn't see the smattering of stars emerge above her or the tide smoothing the silver sands below. She sighed, resting her hands on the dusty wall, still warm from the day's heat.

"I suspect that my decade of distraction may have been a little too convenient for my sister – and possibly a few other more nefariously inclined Seven Realms denizens."

"And what a lovely distraction he was, Dark Lady." Justice purred. Her tone was droll with a just a hint of sarcasm. "I didn't see you in any great hurry to get back here. You took your finger off the pulse. I told you it was not the time for self-indulgence."

Justice began a calm wash of a paw with her pink tongue. Hecate remained silent, contemplating the subject of the distraction. Her cheeks heated, and a tingle began in her lower belly. She had lingered long past when she should have left. Justice stopped licking her fur and glared her annoyance.

Hecate shook off her memories and stepped back. Her flowing gown transformed to slick black armour, leather straps crossing her chest, and silver-embossed vambraces and greaves appeared on her arms and legs. She held out her left hand and gestured to retrieve her staff from the pocket of Shayde where she'd concealed it.

It was smooth, round, and solid to shoulder height, and then – like an arthritic hand – it twisted to form an empty, five-fingered cage. The wood was yellowed with age, the iron-shod heel dark and pocked. Her other hand gestured, and her bow and quiver appeared. She attached the quiver and slung the bow over her shoulder. With her weapons in place she took a deep breath and turned to Justice, her voice deeper, firmer. "Well old friend, what did you learn?"

"I wondered when you were going to remember my incomparable information gathering skills. Humans are such imbeciles when it comes to cute kitties."

"No one who knows your reputation would dare call you a cute kitty to your face. I'm surprised you tolerated it in *that* form," Hecate laughed.

"Needs must," Justice completed her grooming and stepped off her platform. Before she reached the ground, a massive, silver-ruffed wolf *shimmered* in her place. She padded to stand before Hecate, her eyes level with the goddess.

"There are more players in this game than you could possibly imagine. It's a veritable smorgasbord out there. Seems someone's sister has been busy blabbing about the impending prophecy. Rather than Heavens Gate being a little backwater planet dying its due death, it has become supernatural central. Factions and forces are gathering from every corner of the Cosmos, their hands ready to roll the dice; and the fate of the Comos is the winner's prize."

Hecate's face paled. "Tell me."

"Let's retire to somewhere with a little more privacy and a few less ears," the wolf suggested.

Hecate's nod was grim. She drew a doorway with her staff, and a lantern-lit room appeared. She gestured the wolf through, but before she moved, the wolf asked, "And what of the dragon? I sensed only a single heartbeat."

Hecate's eyes slid to the empty cage of her staff. "There was no dragon."

The wolf shook itself and trotted through the opening. Hecate stepped over the threshold and the door closed to a vertical black line behind her, the line narrowed to a single bright point before it disappeared.

A greater sooty owl ruffled its grey-spotted feathers and shifted on its perch in the shadows. Its four raptor talons clicking softly on the stair rail leading from the Tower roof to the floors below.

A brown mouse, half way across the rooftop, froze at the sound, its nightly quest for insects forgotten.

The owl's head swivelled. Dark-ringed black eyes in its silver, heart-shaped face considered the petrified rodent for a heartbeat before launching into the night. Its powerful wings silently caught a thread of air and it soared towards the mountain fortress and its divine mistress.

