

DESCENT

*The Dark Mother sang of Death
Her love cast off
Sold in chains
Power corrupted
Heart torn
Vengeance sworn
Nursed her pain in silence
Cold and long
Beware your dreams
Your soul she keeps
Till questing is done
And you've become
The Woman that she wants
And needs
Her purpose
Journey's End
The Cosmos lost
The Dark Mother sang of Death*

Excerpt from the Dark Mother's Song of Death, recorded in
the Book of Laments, Geboor Librarium 2328.

Bindi, I'm coming.

Bound as one, Merindah and Iluka toppled through the Timegate into an endless dark ocean of stars. The brumal void dragged the heat from the new mother's exhausted body. Blood trickled from her raw womb and she curled to hug her cramping belly. As she tumbled,

the incandescent swirl of sharp, white lights burned against her retinas, and she squeezed her eyes shut. The Cosmos attended her passage and wrapped her in its bleak embrace.

Merindah's bereaved mind and soul cried out to her lost child; the ocean of stars mourned her loss, and millions of aetheric threads wove a cocoon around her. She didn't feel their comfort, she felt only her pain. The pain of separation; her newborn daughter snatched from her arms by her ambitious step-mother and tossed through the portal of the Timegate, to who knows where—or when.

Bindi, Bindi, my darling Bindi. I'm so sorry. So sorry.

Mumma.

The poignancy of the single thought she'd shared with her daughter was bittersweet with connection and love. Merindah had sensed the amazing well of Bindi's innate magical potential—her yerlendj; her daughter was even more powerful than her mother. Bindi had quested tiny sparks of fire aether between them in the precious moments after her birth, Merindah dredged up every sensation. The smell of blood, sweat, and amniotic fluid, the throb of her womb, the ache of her labouring body, and the elation of holding her living child, Bindi's feather soft skin, her shock of dark hair, and bright, odd eyes. Merindah's heart had swelled with pride and love. Now, she pounded her fists against her chest, the heartache unbearable. A wail of grief ululated into the soulless void.

Focus. Find the child. Weep later.

Iluka muted Merindah with her exigent words, her soulmate dragon pressing for action from her soulmate. Scrambling to align and focus on the link that Bindi had created between them, Merindah felt the precious thread slither from her grasp, once, twice, thrice. Blood loss and despair crippled her attempts to quest for the thread.

Despite her decades of wishing for more power, accessing her own yerlendj was still new. The Cosmic Mother had released the binding placed on Merindah by her step-mother Nina only a few weeks ago, unleashing Merindah's own impressive potential. Potential that she'd barely explored in her quest to be the first to unlock the secret of the Timegate. Although she'd cast herself through the Timegate fully intending to save her daughter, Merindah had no idea how in her current state, and with her current skills, she could even begin. Surely she was already too late. How would her daughter survive in the void of space?

Void? Yet she herself still lived. How?

Not a void. This is the Timestream. Iluka's thoughts insisted in Merindah's head.

Is this a realm of heaven?

Not heaven.

Am I alive?

In a sense.

Why?

Endless questions jostled for attention; she had no answers, only more questions. Merindah quested for Bindi again. The thread slipped from her fingers, again. Each failure engendered further dismay. *Why Nina? Why?* The dragon answered with a surge of anger.

The barbed memory of Nina ripping Bindi from her breast and ascending the seven rainbow steps to the temple's white platform replayed in agonising slow motion in Merindah's mind. She'd struggled to follow, struggled to crawl and save her howling daughter. She'd fallen, sliding in the birthing blood that stained her thighs and trickled down her legs. She'd been powerless as Nina flung the child with her placenta still attached through the Timegate.

Comprehension still eluded her. Merindah had dragged herself to her knees, fighting cramps and haemorrhage, her eyes straining to see her daughter through her tears. A flare of red and a flicker of flame, and then there was only the ocean of stars visible through the black opal archway. The portal had begun to close, the tendrils of its blue mist gate re-forming.

Merindah's fingers twitched, once more endeavouring to weave an aetheric noose to capture her daughter's thread. With no life around her, no world matter to draw from, her efforts floundered.

The first of Nina's vindictive revelations jabbed at her concentration. Merindah wasn't a true Nightshayde. She was a nameless, homeless orphan. And for her crime of illegal motherhood, the World Council would disinherit her as a criminal, the Librarium would take her job. She'd become a pariah in the community that she wished only to save from extinction, the imminent dimming of their sun.

And the final betrayal, Bridget.

Bridget! Why Bridget? Why?

A fitting sacrifice.

Bridget's treachery savaged Merindah's wounded soul. Bridget was—had been—her best friend, her only confidante since her mother died twenty years ago. Nina had boasted that Bridget had *never* been Merindah's friend. That Bridget had been placed to spy on her for Nina. Memories of shared laughter and joys, weeping confessions and heartfelt dreams—all an act. None of it was real. Bridget's insane curiosity had been her means of interrogating Merindah for her secrets, all so she could pass them on to Nina.

Sadness became quicksand, drowning her in despair. Merindah's soul was stripped bare, her identity disintegrating. All that she thought she'd been, a lie. All that she'd wanted to be, stolen. Confused, alienated, and disillusioned; her heart broken and her motherhood over before it began. Merindah's mind felt as empty as her womb. She was ripe for dismemberment and descent into the darkness, naked, raw, and exposed.

I thought I had it all, unlimited power, global recognition, and an incredible child made with the God of Time. But each instance that I committed to the will of the Mother, I was betrayed. This pain was far beyond the scouring with fire that she'd experienced when

her Iluka leapt into her physical being. This was searing cold and smothering dark. All she wanted to do was hide. Her fingers fluttered uselessly at her belly.

The memory of Iluka brought her soul dragon's numinous presence to the fore, but Merindah curled her body tighter, and her mind strained towards the blessed darkness. She couldn't face the dragon, her disappointment, her scorn, or worse, her sympathy. Not now. Not when all was ruin, the great cosmic plan unstuck. She'd failed; stumbled at the first trial, and nothing would bring her daughter back. There was no portal in the Timestream that she could see, she had no way to return to Heavens Gate to tell them of her discovery, of their path to blessed sanctuary.

And she was so cold.

Her heart hurt so much.

The slide into oblivion beckoned and Merindah surged towards it, armouring herself with the pain and closing her mind to Iluka.

Iluka strained against the shackles of Merindah's physical form, cursing Nina's rapacious ambition. Though she'd seen thousands of species live, evolve, and ascend, Iluka shuddered at the absolute dispassion with which Nina had torn the minutes-old child from its mother's breast and discarded her through the Timegate like so much rubbish.

With Merindah unresponsive, Iluka was trapped. Their soulmate bond was resolute. There would no escape for her unless both beings willed it so. The ancient dragon resigned herself to another interminable wait; this time she would be much more alone than the last, her outlook only the inner space of Merindah's mind.

Iluka sighed, feeling every moment of her millions of years of existence. Her opportunity to intervene in the fight for control of Armageddon was gone. With her body and mind inaccessible to the realms, the Gatekeeper was off the playing board for the foreseeable future. Though the Fire and the Key were still in play, they faced an evil so powerful that even Iluka's stout heart quailed. Nina was a speck compared to the beings that sought control of the Cosmos. Armageddon loomed and success was a slim hope at best. She tugged once more on her soul tether to Merindah, but the woman's presence was faint, her torment impenetrable.

Yet, long experience had taught the dragon that patience was its own reward. She settled into a meditative state and delved deep. She set her prodigious mind to contemplating her millennia of memories, seeking patterns and anomalies, searching for any minutiae that could alter Merindah's state, and possibly her fate. There was much to consider. After spending several hundred years encased in the wall of the Ivory Tower watching the world of Heavens Gate drift past, the last seven weeks since Iluka's release had streaked by. Each moment had been crammed with new events and rich experience; each paralleled by a growing uneasiness in the aether. Entropy was a harsh mistress, but to Iluka the steep rise in

chaos seemed anomalous. Someone powerful was meddling with the cosmic balance, forcing growth and stretching reality. Negentropy would respond to reorder the structure, and the magical rebound would be devastating.

She settled deeper and let her surface thoughts drift away from the recent tragedy, tugging on other memories to dull the acuteness of the child's loss.

What will be will be.

Though Iluka was old, Badangi was older. Her visit to the elder dragon who guarded the Timegate Temple where the original Yarran journal was stored had been frustratingly inconclusive. Badangi had been slow to rouse from her centuries of quiescence in her own tower. Without a soulmate, the dragon spent most of her time between realms, barely anchored in Heavens Gate at all. Persisting, Iluka had eventually stirred her to speak, but their time for conversation had been curtailed. The desperate pain Merindah had broadcast from the other side of the globe as she came into labour weeks ahead of schedule, had struck fear into Iluka's heart. Her frantic return flight, only to find Merindah's newborn cast through the Timegate, had stirred the normally self-possessed dragon to a murderous rage. The very aether had shuddered with the cry of this child, cut off as she was hurled into the timestream by Merindah's wicked step-mother. That primal wail had seared a scar across Iluka's heart. One that would take a millennium to fade, if at all.

The dragon found herself agitated simply recalling the sound. She consciously sought a return to calm contemplation. From a corner of her mind she summoned a whiff of positivity. She knew that anger and negative emotion narrowed thought and stifled solution finding, and in this moment, she very much needed to widen the span of possibilities.

The Cosmos will not save itself. The Congruence approaches. I am bound.

As she resettled herself once more, she sensed Merindah's consciousness stirring, restless in its benumbed state.

Mumma.

The echo of the precious memory seeped from Merindah's guarded mind. Iluka watched the shadow-blue child suckling, her odd eyes of emerald green and sapphire blue darkened briefly to black flecked with rainbow as red sparks emerged from her tiny fingertips. The bond between mother and child formed an aetheric thread of deep ochre, connecting them with a small red star on each being's breast.

Iluka nodded. More information to assimilate. This child was indeed chosen; aware and manipulating aetheric fire within moments of her birth. ***It is the child that formed the bond, not the mother.*** A seed of hope planted its tiny joy in her heart. Bindi, Merindah's little flower, was magically powerful, incredibly so. She may well have survived her unexpected journey into the timestream.

But at what cost? Iluka imagined the small soul abandoned in the cold void, dispossessed of her mother or any other to care for her; to teach her. Iluka's heart contracted and her fledgling hope shrivelled. These first years were critical to the child's wellbeing, her

understanding of light and dark, and her shaping to become Armageddon's Fire. In order to save the Cosmos, the Key, the Gatekeeper, and the Fire must see creation and all its beings as worthy of the gift of existence.

Now that Iluka had Bindi's soul signature, she sought for the child herself. Her magic quested from her nest in Merindah's mind, searching for those unique threads in the multi-dimensional tapestry of the Cosmos. But her ability to manipulate the aetheric weave in her current form was negligible and the search barely covered their immediate vicinity.

The child was on her own—for now.

The cosmic timestream is a constant only unto itself. Moments or aeons passed as the woman drifted, sheltered by the Cosmos itself, her dragon soulmate a captive inside her mind and body. Eventually even subconscious thought stilled; the urgency of her child's rescue forgotten as the threads of the cocoon, and so her existence, began to unwind in the erosive elementary aetheric wind.

Merindah's physical being was lost first: her heart slowed and stopped; her breath ceased. Her body, still swollen from her pregnancy, began to dissolve. Cells scraped away in twos and threes. The dissolution gathered momentum and particles cascaded into the darkness in their millions until the sparkle of her aetheric form was all that remained.

Her mental body observed the process dispassionately and registered the casualty of each cell, then each helix of memory within the cell. Like sand trickling through the fingers of a child, so the thoughts trickled through the open weave of the woman's being. And with each loss, her mental framework eroded a little further until her emotions were released into the void. All that remained was a single gold thread, interwoven with the dragon's silver in a tiny unbreakable knot.

Rudderless, they floated.

No thought.

No emotion.

Around them, beings and worlds were destroyed and created in a never ending cycle.

With the physical and mental anchors removed, the weight of the task the Cosmic Mother had demanded settled unfiltered into the tiny filaments of their bound twin soul.

The twin souls howled and descended deeper into the darkness.

And the Darkness welcomed them home.

One by one, at first a trickle, then overwhelmed with a frightening tsunami, the brilliant stars of the timestream winked out of existence. With its own enigmatic purpose, the Darkness poised, offering Merindah and Iluka a final chance to return; to hold on to their old illusions and identities. Their only sense was a compulsion to abide in the long dark.

Betrayal, wrath, and grief sloughed from their being.

Then nothing.

They felt no point to their struggle, no meaning in ambition. Here was no place, no judgement, no light. Clinging only to each other's soul thread, they descended into the Cimmerian night.

For a time they did no more than exist.

Two single threads bound together in the womb of obsidian, unknowing.

Dormant.

Yet, gestating potentiality.

Iluka was ancient, old even as she witnessed the genesis of the timestream. An observer of the arrival of the wondrous being who birthed the stars and planets, populated them with a plethora of flora and fauna, and then brought forth those unimaginably frustrating beasts—people. She had also watched as each offspring was intentionally flawed by another powerful being; each perfect creation warped ever so slightly from its true course. At that she had felt sadness, an emotion she had not experienced for an age, and she had wondered.

Her descent cycled through raw negative emotions, each bringing a plethora of memories, hurts, and learning. Fear, sadness, disgust. One surfacing brought forth rage in the dragon's palpitating soul thread. ***So much sacrifice, death, and destruction. For what purpose? For who's ambition?***

No one answered her furious demands.

The ache of loss and imperfection shredded her soul.

She had only wanted to make things right. Her own arrogance astounded her.

She had seen the pain, felt the Mother's agony at the betrayal, and been remorseful of her own complete separateness.

Mother, what if I do not return? Who will care for my daughters? Who will anchor the Cosmos?

The questions fell into the silent darkness.

Does it matter? Does anything matter?

The silver thread stilled.

The wake of Merindah's vaunted ambition furrowed deep; shame, grief, and regret warred for dominance. Merindah was emptied, betrayed, her vaunted magical prowess useless, and her shallow aspirations unmasked.

She descended and her life replayed again and again as though her soul sought to unpick each moment, to dismember her and examine each single thread in the tapestry.

Through the filter of her daughter's brief existence, Merindah faced truths about herself that she did not wish to see.

Greed, and her pursuit of greatness and notoriety had destroyed her daughter, and herself. *My goal was pure, to save the world. But what was the cost of my desire?* She alternately keened and railed at the injustice and the bereavement; her soul thread pulsed in synchrony with the distress of Iluka's.

The Darkness remained mute.

She'd witnessed the decline, the increasing degradation of what was left of her world.

She'd watched the queues of people resigned to giving up their life at sixty-six in a desperate attempt by the world's governments to restore the balance and reduce the draw on their scarce resources. And she'd sneered at scores of others screaming their outrage, marched in shackles and thrown into the vats.

Everything dies eventually. Decay feeds new life.

She ached to be held, but when she thought of the woman who she'd called mother, she felt betrayed all over again, and she wept.

She ached for her daughter, to hold her, to make things right.

The cycling of emotions had left her numb apart from a lingering regret.

I would sacrifice it all for Bindi to live.

The gold thread stilled.

The Dark Mother appeared, strictness incarnate, the black accoutrements of her warrior's form bleeding into the Darkness. She flicked a tiny spark of obsidian towards the knotted souls that tumbled through her creative cauldron.

Nestled within the strands of Merindah's being, a tiny rainbow serpent responded, writhing to life, enlarging and emerging. It opened its jaws and swallowed Merindah and Iluka. The Dark Mother drew Justice from her belt, reversed her hold on the blade. Without hesitation, she sliced open her lower belly with the tip, and beckoned. The serpent surged towards the gash and dived into her moist, warm womb.

As the Mother's wound closed, the Cosmos shuddered at the loss of one of its seven anchors. An edge of the tapestry tore free from its bounds.

EMERGING

Federation citizens electing to leave the protection of the Dome do so at their own risk, and against the advice the Federation Committee.

Permission to permanently leave the Dome using Form 865A-45b:

Application for Individual Permanent Exit or to temporarily leave using Form 1027C-98f Application for Short Term Tourism Exit, must be submitted for review by the Minister for Environment, Water & Wildlife twenty-four months in advance of the requested exit date. All applications must then be reviewed and approved by the Minister for Health & Wellbeing.

No Federation property may be removed from the Dome without the express permission of the Federation Committee or their delegated representative, as per Tenet Three of the Federation Charter.

Update issued by Order, The Federation Chair PC XXXX

Escape had sounded so easy with a dragon's voice in Ali's head and its heart beating next to her own. But now Jiemba was silent, and this was Melba Dome. The Federation Committee ruled—everything. They owned all available resources, their ubiquitous cams watched every move every citizen made, and an army of Grey Shirts enforced their Ten Tenets. If they knew she'd vandalised the flocar she was driving, she'd be fined, re-aligned, and booted back to the West Quad.

Who was she kidding? A carefree and untangled life Outside was a slim, pale dream. Outside.

Outside the Dome. The world she'd known for all of her fifty-two years. A flutter of nerves accompanied her usually comfort laden recitation of Tenet One: *Federation Always Takes Care of You*. She grimaced, knowing that liberating—okay stealing—a magical beast

from the abode of the Federation Chair meant that in her case, the Federation's *care* would be far from comforting. Though, how they would charge her with removing Federation property from the Dome when no one could see the dragon, ameliorated some of her anxiety.

Ali put her wavering faith in the Federation's immutability to the back of her mind and mentally wrote up her escape to do list. Item number one, avoid the Grey Shirts—the Fed Comm's cultural enforcers—at all costs. She added to the “*avoid at all costs*” item, the two weird Armageddon factions who believed in the noxious pre-Crack world ending prophecy and considered Ali their Chosen One. *A Chosen One who required controlling via manipulation, mindwiping or elimination*, she thought wryly.

Item number two: get out of the Dome unnoticed. And do this despite a lack of authentic exit papers, with only supplies and equipment supplied by one group of aforementioned weird Armageddon factions to aid her survival Outside. The same group who'd left her at a utilitarian barracks near the North Gate, after they'd drugged and attempted to mindwipe her. She shuddered. Dee, the blue-skinned girl from her dreams had taken over her body and stopped their assault, briefly. That had been weird. Ali clamped down on that memory. She'd look at that one later.

On the slim chance that she made it past item two, there was item number three. Well, items three and four, really: work out if she could *really* do magic, and if there really *was* a dragon in her head. They were kind of interdependent and based on the premise that there was such a thing as magic, the idea of which Ali was not entirely wedded to just yet. She lifted one hand from the steering wheel and examined her fingers. A smattering of freckles on coffee brown skin, except for the third finger of her right hand. No freckles there, her regened tech finger was a base model. At least her fingertips weren't glowing. Another thing to think about later.

And then, there was item number five. The one which had started this whole upheaval of her ordinary life: find her lost memories and fill the holes in her Gift, the sensory three-dimensional pattern of her world. Normally a gently rippling and colourful tapestried overlay in her mind, her Gift was currently a murky grey and subdued miasma.

What the hell am I thinking? Planning to leave the only place I've ever known for fifty-two bloody years? That was discounting the hundreds of odd memories of past lives in her head, of course. Ali reminded herself that was “*Old Ali*” thinking. New Ali, who she'd decided to be a couple of days ago, would scoff at her fears and leap into action.

I can do this. I can escape Outside. I'll be like a butterfly emerging from a manky old cocoon. I'll find a quiet place to stay and work out if all this magic stuff is real. I'll treat it like a project. All I have to do is plan, resource, and implement. I'm a bloody great project manager for Fed's sake. Thoughts of calmly produced Gantt charts and efficient resource lists soothed her raw sensibilities. Ali smiled at the thought of organising and sorting people and processes into more effective configurations. Cataloguing the chaos of hundreds of books and artefacts into the harmony of orderliness. A glance out the flocar window at people

running reminded her that life under the Dome was far from harmonious. A posse of Grey Shirts had swarmed on two West Quad workers who had the temerity to be walking down a non-West Quad street. Ali could see one of the Westies belligerent stance. That wasn't going to help his case; the interaction wouldn't end well. Ali's eyes snapped forward before any of the Grey Shirts could lock gazes with her and pull her over for a cultural check too.

Bloody hell! You're gunna falter at item one. You project manage books! Not escape plans, bunyips, birds, and bacteria! You can't logic animals, insects, and viruses into compliance. The Dome protects us from all that feral fauna and flora on the Outside. And if magic was real, the Federation would have a tenet that told us what to do about it.

She halted her rising panic, scolding herself. The Grey Shirts would be all over Ali like a rash if she didn't get her mindset sorted and her actions organised. *I can do this. We can do this.* The last thought hoped for a twinge from her draconic soulmate. With no response from Jiemba, all Ali's insecurities lined up for a turn at shooting down her shaky confidence.

She'd been dabbling with the idea of a trek Outside for a while. *Or have I? Is a trek my own or some implanted memory from the creeps who keep mindwiping me? Bloody hell, I can't even trust my own memories anymore.* Tears sprang to her eyes and her breath caught in a sob. Everyone she'd been close to, people she most trusted had betrayed her. Worse, they'd been manipulating her for years, wiping her mind and implanting their own ideas and false memories. As her hurt amplified, she finally felt a rumble of Jiemba's deep red presence surge in her mind. Ali's Gift flared in response, ochre threads run through with hints of orange and yellow. The colours brought her a small measure of reassurance. Her Gift usually showed her the world's connections to times, places, events, and people. She could see the interactions and the myriad ways to connect people and things. While she called it her Gift, it hadn't always brought her joy, especially as a young ward of the Federation growing up in the tough suburb of Dim, where being different could be fatal.

Her Gift was magic. Nothing else she'd considered could account for all that had taken place over the last few months. But, she argued with herself and blinked back the tears, isn't that always humanity's answer for what they don't understand? It's either magic or divine intervention. Ali didn't believe in any god. Organised religion had mostly stuttered and faded out in the centuries since the Cracking. Survival became the guiding creed and the Ten Tenets Melba Dome's canon. Tenet Four took care of most dissenters, including those few citizens that clung to old religions: *Don't Force Your Views on Others.* Ali had decided early on that life was hard enough under the Federation's iron grip without complicating it with beliefs in capricious divinities.

Though Federation Committee didn't have a tenet that specifically mentioned magic, she'd heard clandestine whispers of additional tenets that the Grey Shirts enforced at the personal behest of the Federation Chair. She'd previously dismissed those out of hand. Maybe she should've listened closer to the gossip. Before Jiemba had gone quiet, she'd

revealed that the Federation Chair was a magic practitioner, and the Wiyanga, leader of one of the crazy factions. Who knew what the Grey Shirts enforced under her subversive instructions? Ali reassured herself with the thought the Federation didn't openly prohibit magic. She should be safe as long as she kept to Tenet Five: *Control Yourself*.

All this talk of magic had Ali's belly churning. Her gut instinct was something she needed to listen to more often. Jiemba seemed to encourage her faith in it.

In her.

A Chosen One.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood to attention, and her fingertips warmed.

Bloody hell. I can't save the universe. I can't even save myself. She paused for a heartbeat after her usual mental berating. *But I saved Jiemba. Didn't I?* She hadn't dreamt that. Dream. Two lines of people, one stealing her memories and one giving them back. People she called friends on both lines. Ali sniffed and blinked away more tears as the betrayal flayed at her bruised soul. She glanced at the ruby on her left hand, recalling the silver threads dissolving into it and emerging back out as she'd seen in her dream. She used her thumb to rotate the ring on her finger.

Flick, flick, flick, ruby.

Did the ruby hold her memories? Was it that simple? How could it be? Questions multiplied and threatened to overwhelm her, again. Conformity was her modus operandi, not rebellion. This was magic she was talking about. Magic. She tried to sense if there was anything in the ruby, holding it close to her belly, the apparent home of her magic according to Dee. *Nothing*. She dragged a hand through her short curls realising she was too willing to believe in magic without really considering alternatives. And her magic expert was a teenager with blue skin that she'd only ever seen in a dream. What if there was no such thing as magic? How could she explain what had taken place, what was taking place right now? Conspiracy theories and viral hallucinogens administered from the Fed Comm would go a long way to filling in the blanks in her story just as well as a magical explanation.

Flick, flick, flick, ruby.

Ali considered the ring. Apart from their beautiful rich red colour, rubies were prized for their hardness and durability, according to some research she'd done a few years back. The gemstones were rare before the Crack and a thousand times rarer afterwards. Her fellow citizens never commented on the sizable rock she wore though, kind of like her odd eyes. She'd never thought this peculiar before and had figured it likely they were *Minding Their Own Tenet Six Business*. Dee had the same odd eyes.

According to legend, rubies hold the power of desire and bringing of fire. Maybe if she took the ring off, her fingertips would stop the red glowing thing that they'd started to do. She frowned. That wouldn't explain the green glowing thing they did as well. Would it? She'd be happy with a few of the other characteristics though. One of them was energy, that was one reason for her flick, flick, flick ruby habit. Initially, she used it while repeating a

mantra for emotional strength and a positive attitude, hoping the ruby would magically endow it. Now, decades on, it was more like a nervous tic.

If only she could talk to someone else, check her theories, brainstorm solutions, she worked better as part of a group. But who could she trust? She'd never felt so alone. She was leery of even using a public computer to search for information. The Grey Shirts would have some way of tracing her for sure.

But I did save Jiemba. She'd liberated the dragon from Moonya, the tower house in the East Quad. Taken her into her own body—somehow. That had felt amazing, inspiring, and calming all at the same time. Felt like coming home. And she'd got it all done and dusted by lunchtime. Not long after they'd driven away, her dragon soulmate's reassurance had faded into an occasional snarky comment and as they approached the city centre, she'd disappeared entirely.

According to Jiemba, the Wiyanga had been poisoning her and siphoning off her draconic magic so she'd struggled to stay conscious for much of the time. Magic again. Ali wondered what kind of container you stored magic in.

Jiemba had assured her she'd be back in Ali's mind as soon as they cleared the Dome's influence. Until then Ali was on her own. Hence, she was heading back to the North Gate and escape. Escape from the Dome and the multitudes of people who were messing with her head and her life. Her ordinary life.

What about Dee? Dee knew about magic. She was sure to know about dragons. She and Jiemba needed to find Dee. Dee was surely Outside, there'd been no sign of the Dome in Ali's interactions with the teenager. Ali figured the girl's blue skin was a post-Crack anomaly or some kind of protective coating for the radioactive dust that the Federation insisted was still out there. With so many random facts Ali began to squirm in her seat. *I could sure use a whiteboard or a big piece of plas about now. This flying by the seat of your pants has hairs on it.*

The traffic slowed to a crawl. Ali peered forward past the lineup and watched black uniformed feddis funnelling three lanes of traffic into one. A sign attached to one of their vehicles read that they were checking every vehicle for contraband, drugs or disallowed objects.

Damn Tenet Three spot checks. Everything Belongs To The Bloody Federation. Like anyone has anything the Feds don't already know about. Ali considered herself a closet malcontent. On the surface she followed every tenet to the letter, but in her heart and head she railed against their stifling constraints. She didn't consider herself brave. Most of her contrariness remained in her head. Her fuchsia tipped black curls and dangly earrings were about the extent of her thumbing her nose at the constraining establishment.

Her flocar switched to AI as she neared the front of the queue and the checkpoint's influence. The steering wheel retracted and the pedals froze. Ali told herself there was nothing to worry about. There were no Grey Shirts, just feddies. This was a routine check.

It's not as if they had a scan that would pick up her dragon soulmate. A hysterical giggle bubbled up, breaking the tension she'd created. She wracked her brain for a reason to be in the area this time of day. The feddis could easily check with work who would wonder why she wasn't in, unless her traitorous addie Sophie had marked her as being away.

Okay, maybe I do have something to worry about. I don't want Sophie to know where I am. I don't need a delay now, and I definitely don't want a cultural alignment chit on my citzcode. Ali absently rubbed the citizen barcode tattooed on her left wrist.

The AI brought her floicar to a stop and lowered the side window. Ali thrust her wrist at the young male feddi, holding her breath against the putrid air. She hadn't put her nose plugs in hoping the check would be quick. He scanned her citzcode with a distracted nod. When his scanner screamed a klaxon warning the new recruit drew his shock rod, pointing it at her with trembling hands. Ali took a deep breath and began to gag on the fetid air. Her head pounded. She could feel burning in her belly and an ochre surge in her mind. Jiemba was trying to break through. To her horror, her fingertips began to glow a rosy red. She shoved them under her arms and tried to breathe shallowly through her mouth.

The feddi's nervous sweat added to the pungent odours of the street as he leant towards the window, the shock rod wobbling a little.

'M-ma'am are you aware you've m-missed your virals this m-month?' he stammered.

Ali breathed out slowly. It wasn't about her dragon rescue at the Fed Chair's home. 'No. I must've been so busy I forgot. I'll have them when I get to work tomorrow.' She gave him her best ingratiating smile, but he was already shaking his head and lowering his weapon.

'Sorry, M-ma'am. I must ask you to head over to the Virals Van and have them done now. Tomorrow m-may be too late. You never know what m-might get past the gates and filters tonight. *Federation Takes Care of You and You Have to Take Care of the Federation.*'

Ali couldn't believe he was quoting Tenet One and Two at her. She could tell him a thing or two about the bloody Federation Chair that would curl the hair on his skinny brown toes. With an exasperated grunt she acquiesced, too grumpy to form words. Her belly still rumbled, but she could feel her hands cooling—and hopefully fading. The feddi tapped instructions into his device and pointed it at the floicar sensor, directing it out of the queue and into the slipway towards the Virals Van. Another warning siren whined. He leant back into the vehicle, wobbling shock rod back in evidence.

'M-ma'am your floicar shows a damaged anti-odour system. Are you aware of the penalty for damaging Federation property?' he queried.

Ali gave him her best *I am totally dumb and innocent* look. Jiemba had told her the anti-odour that sprayed in every floicar contained zeolites and other chems that would shut her and any thought of contrariness out. Ali had taken her shoe heel to the nozzle before she left on her rescue mission this morning. She'd needed her focus and her senses clear. Ali nodded her head at his question. 'I didn't realise anything was damaged. It's been working just fine.'

The feddi had settled after his initial fright and judging by his more relaxed stance had decided she was a low flight risk. His hands were still a little shaky, but his voice was steadier. ‘The penalty for damaging Federation property whether deliberate or accidental is... severe. It’s a *very* serious offence.’

Ali tried not to laugh; it was obvious he’d forgotten exactly what the penalty was. No one would knowingly bring damaged Federation property to the attention of a feddi. Her stakeholder management expertise came in handy as she maintained her wide-eyed innocence. She’d had years of keeping a straight face when people were yabbering about all sorts of rubbish, so this was an easy task. When Ali remained mute, another anti-conflict ruse, the feddi cut his losses. He slapped go on the flocar director and the vehicle steered her towards the Virals Van. Ali’s traitorous neighbour Andie, make that ex-neighbour, had insisted the monthly inoculations messed with people’s heads and ensured the Dome’s citizens stayed in a kind of mindless oblivion shackled into subservience to the Federation.

Bloody hell, how can I escape if I won’t even remember that’s what I want to do?

The flocar door opened and Ali stepped out of her ensnared vehicle under the watchful gaze of an older female feddi. The woman ushered her towards the rusty brown Virals Van with a few encouraging flicks of her shock rod.

Ali was the only citizen inside and the grey-coated technician waved her closer, gesturing to an examination chair festooned with restraints, equipment, and a swathe of strategically placed duct tape holding the whole sagging mess together.

The techi swiped Ali’s citzcode and checked her comli, preparing a cocktail of virals in response to whatever the device had instructed her. The interior of the shabby van was twice as big as Ali’s flat and could treat two dozen people at once. Racks of dusty metal shelves lined two walls. Dozens of grimy boxes of chems and equipment littered every shelf. The shadowed end of the space drew her eyes. Though a sign noting “SICK BAY” declared otherwise, thick steel bars marked the area as a holding cell for recalcitrant citizens. Body scanners and an old portable sensory tank occupied the final wall. Ali blinked, remembering her thoughts of tank time being a time for thinking, reflecting, and relaxing.

I’m so far from relaxed it isn’t funny. A growing sense of alarm tickled her Gift, and it began firing. Bright red and black threads connected her visit to the hills, the Wiyanga, her neighbours, Jem the creepy guy from upstairs and her crazy admin assistant, Sophie. If the more detailed scan the techi was sure to do before she viraled Ali picked up any anomaly, the feddis would likely hand her over to the Grey Shirts for re-alignment. Then, she’d be a sitting duck if a faction wanted to do her harm. Ali began to ease her way back to the only exit point as an acrid odour taunted her nose.

I need to get outta here.

Her body tense, Ali examined the techi. The woman was young, slim, and short sighted. A pair of thick-framed specs graced a nondescript face and watery blue eyes. A worn

uniform and mouse brown hair pulled back into a haphazard ponytail completed the picture. She fitted her dusty and dishevelled environment perfectly.

Ali shuffled closer to the door, berating herself that there was no way she could deliberately set out to hurt someone who was only doing their job. She was sure the woman didn't mean her harm. She was someone's daughter, maybe someone's sister or even a mother. The techi couldn't know about Jiemba, assassination attempts, chems dulling your brain, and jobs suffocating your soul. As though she'd felt Ali's wavering focus, the techi raised her head, capturing Ali's gaze. She smiled tentatively mistaking Ali's attention for anxiety.

'It doesn't hurt. It's the same as regular chems. Just a cool touch on the skin. Then you're protected for another month.' Her chirpy voice trotted out the Federation party line as she steered Ali back towards the examination seat with a firm arm on her elbow.

Ali's mind searched frantically for an excuse, any reason to decline without raising an alarm. She pulled her arm from the techi's grip and got a frown in response.

'Just sit in the chair, there's no need to be anxious.' The techi bundled Ali into position before she could blink and tilted the chair back with the flick of a button.

'Wait. I want to... I'm late for work.' Her excuse matched her voice—pathetic. She cleared her throat to try again, but the techi was quicker.

'This'll only take a moment. And while we have you captive here, we'll get your annual check-up done too. The system must have a glitch. There's no record of your earlier examinations. You're old, so there must be a stack of them somewhere.' The techi stumbled to a stop when she realised what she'd said.

Ali tilted her head and raised one eyebrow. It was enough to have the young woman's hands shaking and mumbling the Seventh Tenet under her breath. 'Watch Your Language Lily, Watch Your Language.' At least it distracted her from the lack of Ali's records, but not from snapping wrist guards on both of Ali's arms pinning her into her chair.

Why don't I have any records? Did someone wipe them? Why would they do that? How am I going to exit the Dome if my records aren't complete? The Forms won't be able to match my details.

Ali needed to sort, connect, and understand where everything fitted together. The itch to lay all the facts of her unravelling life out in front of someone, even this stranger, was clouding her thinking and decision making. Though she much preferred to process aloud. Up till a few days ago, Sophie had been her listener of choice. *Traitorous blue-eyed bitch.*

Lily gathered a sample of Ali's saliva on a swab and a drop of blood on a slide, wiping away the excess with a cotton ball that she dropped into the stained yellow infectious waste bin. She asked Ali to breathe into the lung analyser, rolled up Ali's sleeve and applied a blood pressure cuff. She pegged an oximeter onto a finger on her other hand. When an amber light flashed on her monitor Lily checked the cuff and re-primed it. Frowning she gathered a sonic from her pocket and placed it on Ali's neck.

‘Have you been feeling unwell lately? Any dizziness or fainting spells?’ Lily asked. Ali shook her head. She was definitely not confiding in this strange young woman who talked to herself.

‘Why do you ask?’ Ali prompted when Lily continued to frown and mutter under her breath.

‘Your heartbeat is aberrant. There’s a kind of second echo that’s messing with the sonics,’ Lily replied.

Jiamba. She can hear Jiamba’s heartbeat. Ali felt frightened and elated at the same time. She risked discovery, but Jiamba was real.

‘Let’s get your virals in and then I’ll do a full ECG,’ Lily announced.

When Ali jerked Lily explained. ‘ECG is an echo cardiogram. It’ll show us what’s wrong straight away. You may be eligible for regen tank time and a new heart. Even though you’re old.’

Ali’s jerk wasn’t for the ECG, or the thought of regen, it was for the imminent virals. Before she could protest further Lily had pressed the vaccine gun to her arm. The van door slammed open and both women jumped.

VIRAL

*The Dome protects the life and livelihood of all Federation citizens.
Persons found defacing or damaging the structural integrity of the Dome or
its associated machinery stations, or planning such an act will be detained
and re-aligned by Cultural Enforcers.*

By Order The Federation Committee PC 12

‘Did you deliver the dose?’ The sharp demand loosened the techie’s slack grip on the viral gun and it clattered to the floor. ‘Did you deliver the dose?’ The black clad woman persisted, flicking the door of the virals van shut and stepping closer. One leather gloved finger pointed accusingly at Lily.

‘Yes. No. Partly. You startled me. She only got the first fraction, not a full dose.’ Lily backed towards her workstation.

‘Stop. Don’t even think about activating your panic button,’ the woman instructed, her dark green eyes fierce.

Lily’s eyes widened, and she froze. The compact woman held no weapon. She didn’t even have her hands raised threateningly. Her voice was her ammunition; strong, resonant, and undeniably in charge. ‘It will be the last thing you ever do. Now, release the restraints.’

Ali, glued to her seat, ping ponged her gaze from one woman to the other as Lily undid the chair shackles. The woman spared Ali a brief glance and a quirk of her lips that Ali suspected was supposed to be a reassuring smile. It wasn’t. She strode towards an open-mouthed Lily as Ali realised it was the woman she’d seen earlier this morning when she and Jiemba had escaped from Moonya. Ali’s eyes strayed to the woman’s hair, golden blonde to the start of her determined jaw, but then the bottom twenty centis brushed her shoulders in a silky black curtain.

Bloody hell. What's going on? Who is this woman? And why is she smiling at me? Is she smiling at me? The woman turned her back on Ali and shepherded the frightened technician into the sick bay containment cage.

'Quiet now while I get what I need and then we'll leave. No one needs to get hurt.' The cage door closed with a resounding clunk. Lily's nod was miserable, and she collapsed quivering onto the plas bench, wrapping her arms around herself.

While the woman was containing the technician, Ali had found her nerve and stood up. She backed towards the door, heart in her mouth, but stopped as the woman's head rotated to address her.

'You.'

Ali's heart galloped at this new threat. The woman's voice softened. 'You need to get out of the Dome right now. I'm sorry I didn't get here before she gunned the virals. The first fraction may still dampen your abilities. We'll just have to hope they don't send out a Dome-wide hold before you reach the gate.'

'What? How? What?' Ali couldn't put a whole question together. There were so many things wrong with what was happening. She didn't know where to begin.

The woman held up a hand, shaking her head, and setting her satiny hair swinging back and forth.

Incongruously, Ali's fingers itched to feel its sleekness. *Stop. What am I thinking? Get yourself together birri.*

'No time for questions. I'll explain later. You need to trust me. I can get you out of the Dome—and to wherever you need to go.'

When Ali's mouth closed in a determined line, the woman moved closer. Close enough that Ali could see her kohl circled green eyes were flecked with gold and her lashes were extraordinarily long. The woman's nose had taken a swipe or two at some stage and healed crookedly. That oddity was enough to give Ali pause. Most Federation loving citizens would've gotten it fixed. Below that distinctive feature, her lips were a perfect pout coloured in matte black. Ali dragged her gaze upward, her ire building despite a warming low in her belly.

'Listen, whoever you are,' she began. 'Thanks for the offer, but my *'trust me'* stock is pretty bloody low. Aside from being a good Tenet Ten citizen, *Watch Out For Your Neighbour* and all that, why on earth would I trust you? I don't even know you.' Ali planted her hands on her hips and thrust her chin forward. This was New Ali, the *I'm-not-to-be-messed-with* version as opposed to the *I'll-do-whatever-you-say*-version.

'You must trust someone Alinta Morrow. You've got too much to do before you save the Cosmos from Armageddon. And you can't do it alone,' the woman announced.

Bloody hell. Another weird faction nutbag. 'I don't know what you're talking about or who you think I am. I'm just another citizen trying to do my bit to take care of the Federation,' Ali ground out.

The woman's dark lips thinned impatiently.

'And who goes around sprouting that kind of crap anyway? All you people need realignment,' Ali said.

'You're Alinta Morrow, Chosen One, hunted by factions and the Federation for the part you're destined to play in the Prophecy. If any of the other factions realise who you are, you won't be doing your bit for anyone much longer. You'll be in an iron box manacled and medicated. Or possibly murdered,' the woman stated matter-of-factly.

Ali's face paled and her mind stuttered to a halt. A flash of empathy raced across the woman's face. Her cold-blooded tone softened. 'I'm Lee Wiinj.' Lee bent her head briefly. 'Every resource I have is at your disposal, no obligation, no constraint. I'm here to help you do whatever you want, to go wherever you want.'

Ali shook her head. 'Why? Why would you help me?'

'Because she's an outcast too,' Lily stated.

Lee and Ali turned towards the containment cage. Lily stood holding the bars, staring wide-eyed at them. 'If you're involved in the Prophecy, you believe in magic, so you're both outcasts. You're trying to bring down the Federation.' Lily's hands dropped from the bars and her shoulders slumped. 'It'll never work. *Federation Always Takes Care Of You*. They'll know. They always know.'

'Not if I can help it,' Lee told her. She dismissed Lily and gathered the samples taken from Ali, tucking them into one of her many trouser pockets. She accessed the computer and tapped a few commands. 'Okay. I've wiped your record. We're good to go,' Lee instructed. All business, she headed toward the exit.

Ali could feel a head of steam working its way towards an explosion. When Tenet Six insisted that you "*Mind Your Own Business*", how did everyone else under the Dome know so much about her and her plans? And, how did they know she'd been thinking about the temple ruins? She considered herself well-informed, but she'd never heard of them until a few weeks ago.

Do I have any secrets anymore? Is my life even my own? She closed her eyes to shut out the disturbingly disarming look Lee was giving her. It was somewhere between admiration and awe, and it was confusing the hell out of her. Ali folded her arms. She tucked her hands out of sight when she felt the tips warming. *What's happening to me. Who am I? What am I?*

'Why does everyone want something from me? Who is this bloody Chosen One you all keep ranting about?' A choked sound from the cage made both of them swivel towards Lily who had surged to her feet. One look from Lee had her plonking back on the bench.

Lee faced Ali. 'We don't have much time, so here's the short version. The Chosen One is part of a prophecy from before the Cracking. *The Prophecy*,' Lee began.

Ali laughed, her arms loosening. 'You people are nuts. A prophecy? Like in a fantasy? Or like that Nostradamus? Or Jabinda Moonshine who predicted the Cracking? Okay, that did

come true. But listen, I've read a stack of fantasy. It's all made up. Fantasy by definition is unreal, based on someone's imagination. It's all illusion. That's what makes it such compelling reading. It's escapism. We know it couldn't possibly happen.' A slight tightening of Lee's painted black lips was her only reaction to Ali's tirade.

'Regardless. Parts of this Prophecy have been verified as being from somewhere other than Earth,' Lee told her.

'Aliens.' Ali planted her hands on her hips and leant closer. 'Now I know you're Grey Shirt fodder. We don't know if there's anyone on *this* planet outside the Dome, let alone aliens from other planets.'

'Not other planets. Other realms. Parallel universes. Even some where *everyone* has magic.'

Lee's emphasis prompted a fire orange flicker in Ali's mind, reminding her about her own exotic visitor, the one currently cohabiting her body and tethered to her soul. Her surety stumbled a little and she straightened, her cheeks heated. How could she spout this disavowal with her fingertips warming on her hips? *Bloody hell, I need to be more judicious in my use of vehement denial.* Ali toyed with the idea of shoving her glowing digits in this woman's face to get her to back off. But where would she go? The Feds had all her details. Like all good citizens, she was watched, measured, and checked—and now vaccinated—at least partly. She stomped on the flutter of panic. *One step at a time.*

Lee tilted her head, waiting, as if challenging Ali to offer a rebuttal.

'Anyway, what has all of this got to do with me. I'm just a nothing projie, minding my own business,' Ali cringed at her pathetic attempt at a rejoinder. 'Here's a prophecy you can believe. Tenet Six, Mind Your Own Business or the Grey Shirts will whisk you off for a realignment.'

Lee didn't rise to the bait. She shook her head, dismissing Ali's protests. 'There are several books on the Prophecy and many different interpretations. The most relevant for you is this.' Lee's voice took on a sing song cadence as she recited the words.

*'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
Chosen Ones when they Become
Will save or damn our worlds.'*

With each word Ali's mental tapestry blazed in a flare of white light. *Doom. Fate. Foes. Grace. Grace was what Dee called her magic. She had magic. Everyone was trying to*

control her. Against her whims? What whims? Ali lived in the most controlling society history had ever known. Of course they were trying to control her. It was life as usual under the Dome. She crossed her arms again, fighting down panic. Her senses swamped her with input. She separated out the mish mash of odours from the vans medicinal contents, a whiff of the putrid Dome outside the door, and the acrid fright of the techi in the cell. Her nose registered a familiar smoky cinnamon scent which calmed her.

Control Yourself. Federation Always Takes Care of You. ‘You Have to Take Care of the Federation.’ Ali realised she’d spoken the last aloud and glanced up at Lee. Lee’s gaze held sympathy and maybe a little disappointment. *Why?*

‘No Ali, the Federation doesn’t need you to take care of it. The Federation is corrupt, those in power are sucking dry the last remaining dregs of our dying people to sate their own needs. You need to get out of the Dome Ali. Come with me. I’ll take care of you.’

Lee seemed so sincere, and Ali didn’t disagree about decaying Domer life. She was tempted on that point alone. But old Ali had been duped too many times, new Ali wasn’t supposed to trust again so easily, especially a random stranger. A beautiful, dangerous looking random stranger who stirred long ignored desires. *I can take care of myself. I will take care of myself.* As Lee reached towards her with a gloved hand, Ali stepped back.

‘Don’t touch me.’

Lee’s eyes clouded and her hand dropped. ‘As you wish.’ They stared at each other. Lee broke the impasse, stepping around Ali towards the door.

‘We need to go now anyway.’

‘Why?’

Lee turned back to face her. ‘Have you done anything recently that would put you on the Fed Comm’s radar?’

Ali’s heart lurched.

Only invaded the private residence of the Federation Chair and stolen the dragon she held captive in her tower.

‘No. Nothing unusual.’

Lee’s raised eyebrow expressed her disbelief and Ali remembered that Lee had seen her outside Moonya.

‘Really?’ The woman’s tone was dry. ‘Well, for someone who’s done nothing unusual, there are multiple red alerts out for your detainment.’ When Ali remained silent Lee changed tack. ‘If I’m going to help you, I need all the facts. The less surprises the better.’

‘Less surprises is good I suppose. Works with projects,’ Ali said, wavering.

Lee didn’t have a chance to continue as the van door swung open and the older female Feddie stepped in. Lee’s reflex had a silver star in her hand before Ali could blink. Ali’s eyes flew to her face and the implacable glare in her eyes.

The Feddie raised her hands to show they were empty.

‘Sorry to startle you. We’ve had a flash alert over the comms. The health record update flagged the target.’ The Freddie glanced at Ali. ‘A specialist retrieval squad will be here in minutes to pick her up. I’ll need help to divert them.’

Lee responded with a terse nod and turned to Ali. ‘You’ll have to get started without me. I’ll catch you up. Get out of the Dome. The longer you’re in here the more chance they have of tracking and containing you. Get back in your flocar and head north—the way you were going. Three blocks past Fed Square turn left down Little Collins Street, cross over Elizabeth and turn left into Collins Way. Park the vehicle there. Go back to Little Collins, cross the road, and walk left. Then right into McKillop Street. You’ll find another flocar there waiting for you. It has a smear of green chalk on its left rear door. It’s cued to your voice print and will take you to the West Gate without recording the trip.’

When Ali made to interrupt, Lee shook her head. ‘You can’t go through the North; they’ll be looking for you there. I have a contact at the West Gate who’s on shift for another two hours. When you reach the gate, ask for Len. Tell him Lee Wiinj sent you. He’ll let you out,’ she finished.

Ali’s head was spinning. ‘I don’t have approved exit forms.’

‘Len will let you out.’

Did she trust this woman? Was she really leaving the Dome? Her home for fifty-two years? What was she going to do Outside? ‘What if I don’t have everything I need? I’ve only got my little dillybag and suitcase with me,’ Ali protested, holding up her trusty carryall.

‘I’ve put a backpack with the supplies you’ll need for the trek in the other flocar. You can’t go back to your flat Ali. They’ll be watching. Get ahead of them.’

‘Trek?’

‘You’re heading Outside. Flocars stop at the edge of the Dome. You can get a non-AI vehicle to take you another hundred klicks, but then it’ll take you at least three weeks to walk to the Temple ruins,’ Lee explained.

‘Temple ruins,’ Ali shrieked. ‘What if I don’t want to go to the bloody Temple ruins?’ Before Lee could answer, Ali held up her hand and went on. ‘No. Let me finish. I’m not fit enough for a trek. Never got around to doing any prep for it. Me and exercise are strangers, ships that pass in the night. I wouldn’t last walking from late breakfast till early morning tea. Which they probably wouldn’t have,’ she finished sourly.

Lee frowned. ‘Ali, you can go wherever you wish. I thought you’d want to get out of the Dome, but if you’d rather take your chances with the factions here, then I’ll do my best to help.’

Ali backed away. ‘So you won’t try to mindwipe me, contain me or report me to the Grey Shirts then?’ she asked Lee.

Lee put her hands behind her back and shook her head, her silky hair doing its mesmerising dance and distracting Ali from the decision she needed to make. Ali sucked in a deep breath and made her choice. ‘Fine. Everyone can just freaking leave me alone. I’m

leaving the bloody Dome and going Outside. I'd rather face the animals and insects than the weirdos in here. But don't you follow me. Leave me alone.'

Lee's smile softened her angular face. She leant across the space between them and pressed her black painted lips onto Ali's. That kiss broke so many tenets Ali couldn't count them. A draw of heat gathered low in her belly, and she felt the warmth creeping upwards, her heart beat faster, and her tapestry hiccupped a flash of green. Lee stepped back and Ali's hands rose involuntarily, as though to draw the younger woman back in. Lee picked up the dillybag from the floor, grabbed Ali's arm and propelled her out the door past the Freddie. 'Go. Get out while you still can. I'll find you.' She shoved the dillybag at Ali.

Ali stumbled. By the time she'd righted herself, Lee and the Freddie had disappeared back into the van and slammed the door.

The young male Freddie at the roadblock called out. 'Are you okay ma'am? Did you get your virals?' She nodded, distracted, automatically rustling in her dillybag for nose plugs as the foul stench of the city slammed her senses.

'Could you get going then?'

When Ali frowned, he responded irritably. 'Your vehicle is blocking the flow. There are more citizens who need to access the van.'

'Oh right, sure. Thanks. I'll get out of your way then.' Her heart had settled and her tapestry shifted back to dull grey as the viral load streamed through her system. *Could this day get any weirder?* With another impatient wave from the young Freddie, Ali swiped the flocar into motion and back into the main stream of vehicles headed north. Her eyes swung to Fed Square as she drifted past it in the sluggish traffic. The paved spaces were edged with trash, its huge screen spewing mindless Federation platitudes. Citizens avoided looking at each other and hurried to their various destinations.

Fed Square. She said three blocks past Fed Square. More dirty buildings trickled by, a chequerboard of shop front ruins trashed or boarded up alternating with jaunty neon signs declaring their Fed approved wares. Retail was a tough gig under the Dome.

Do I take her help or not? Is she trying to control me too? Is she going to stab me in the back? Ali's mind flashed her an image of Lee, her mesmerising eyes and black lips. The warm tingle reignited. Her tapestry gave a pathetic burp of colour.

Best you can do, Jiemba? Thanks for that. Ali couldn't draw any sense of which side of the argument her soulmate suggested. Though the resumption of their tethering had brought a sense of completion, the familiarity was wearing off and the scant memories faded as she tried to chase them. Trust yourself birri. She sighed, an edge of disquiet at Lee's words about the Chosen Ones sliced sobering ice into her reverie. She shook it off.

What other options do I have? This is not a fantasy. If the Freddie's are on to me, I have to get out. Bloody hell woman, listen to you. You're starting to believe that rubbish about you being something special.

Ali began to smile. Her mouth curved in a massive grin and a giggle slipped out. *I am so not who they think I am.*

But this *was* her chance to get Outside. No matter how many hooks might be in the bait, it was a chance. Outside. Real air. Maybe even real trees. Probably the best chance she'd ever get.

Can't hurt to look and see if she did leave the flo-car and pack like she said. Besides, who would believe nice, boring Ali would dive into a clandestine arrangement with a sexy black clad woman. That thought decided her. She would show all those factions who thought they could keep her immured in this Dome. She slid her hand across the controls and turned left down Little Collins Street.

HONING

*For comes among us
Unseen by all
The Spirit Child
Held in its thrall
Fire and Earth
Wind and Water
No place is safe
From the Daemon's Daughter*

*The Spirit Child,
Of unloved Time
Reborn again
To live in chains
At beck and call
Of daemons and gods
Reclaims their Home
Unravels her curse*

Excerpt from *The Spirit Child Omens*

A terror lurked in her mind. Kalinda, a blood-red monster who whispered of violence, who urged her to punish those who sought to deny her power. Her step-father was right, she was a daemon child. Daemon, not Dee as her step-mother had called her.

She had no name from the hellcat mother who'd abandoned her as a cub.

Changeling.

Daemon.

Her step-father *had been* right. Like her step-mother, he was dead now. Daemon had shimmered into a dragon and killed him—with Ali's help. Then Wyak, the God of Fire had expunged her sheltered existence, obliterated safety and stricture alike by burning her home to the ground.

Guilt and anger wrestled and smouldered like a half-lit fuse in her belly. Her barely constrained Grace—her storehouse of magic—throbbed with emerald flame; a tainted gift from Wyak. She shuddered, remembering his fierce red face and Abyss-dark eyes delighting in the destruction of her life.

She could think of no reason why she'd attracted the ire of one of the First Four. Though her adoptive family were not devout, they'd always kept the Holy Day obligations, and taught her to pray to each divinity in their turn. Jealous deities were best avoided. The Assembly of gods had always seemed so distant from her ordinary existence. Now, as the walking embodiment of Wyak's diabolical flame, Daemon's belief in divine powers had become ineluctable.

Tiny prickles of heat tumbled through her veins, crooning their destructive seduction. Her wyldfire was poised to ignite. Falling to her knees in the thrall of her magic, she missed the stony ground's sharp welcome and the new grazes added to her scarred legs. She lifted her pale blue palms. A green-tipped flame danced on each. Her hands *shimmered*, her nails lengthened into sharp black talons, her skin became scaly and red, and a dozen flames appeared, then a multitude. Each sprite cavorted down her fingers and leapt onto the tinder dry bushes in front of her.

Daemon watched, mesmerised as leaves shrivelled, curling from dark green to burnt black. Branches reddened, became white hot, then crumbled to grey ash. Still more flames emerged on her palms. This time a legion of fiery troops raced up her scaled arms and launched from her shoulders. Dirty smoke curled, caressing her in sensual waves. Though her nose filled with the smell of char, her breathing remained untroubled, and her skin unburnt. Precious moisture trickled down her dusty cheeks.

Fire cleanses.

No! She clenched her hands. Her skin and nails became her own, and the flames snuffed out. She felt their withdrawal like a pain; sharp knives stabbed at the base of her spine.

Daemon needed water. The hunger gnawing at her belly was a familiar enough companion that she could ignore it for now. But the hallucinations of dehydration brought strange voices, and it was already so crowded in her head. The wyldfire cajoled, howled, and demanded escape.

Kalinda whispered in her mind. ***Use fire to destroy or to create. You are the magic, you control the magic, the magic does not control you.***

'Stop! Leave me alone, let me be,' she croaked, her voice ragged from disuse. She rested her forehead on the stony soil, placed her palms flat, craving grounding. With a sob

she scabbled in the dry earth, searching for a cooling respite from the molten energy in her body.

I matter. I matter. I matter.

Ali, the woman from her visions had told her that what she believed, thought, felt, and did mattered—and that's all that counted. Ali was also the woman who had taken over her body, allowed Kalinda to emerge and kill her step-father. Dee hugged herself and began to rock back and forth.

I matter. I matter. I matter.

Garule, goddess of Earth nurtured all living things. She was not without sympathy for this being that the cast out children of the Cosmic Mother had burdened with the fate of the world, and their passage Home. The sacrifice of the one for the good of the many was an uncomfortable reality when you watched the *one* suffer. Garule's older sister Meana could rail at her all she liked, Garule would not let this poisoned and pathetic child lead the planet and its creatures—her creatures—into oblivion. There must be less destructive ways to get Home.

She sensed her younger sister goddess nearby. Jindi's cool caress of air soothed the lonely fire child. Garule added a guiding thread of earth into the goddess of Air's comforting breeze, a hint of petrichor; moist, dark soil teeming with life after dryness and drought. Mutual disregard meant neither goddess acknowledged the other. Nor would either admit that for this aid they courted raging retribution from their oldest sister. Such favour to Armageddon's Key was clearly treachery against Meana's Grand Plan.

With the freshened breeze, Daemon's senses stilled, her skin cooled. The fire in her belly became quiescent, though hunger still clawed for attention. She touched two fingers to her lips, huffed and flicked a ragged breath away with a prayer of thanks to Jindi, goddess of Air. She dropped her forehead towards the dirt again and used the same two fingers to circle low on her belly in honour of the Earth Goddess Garule. Perhaps the goddesses of the First Four had not abandoned her after all. Perhaps they could intercede with their brother on her behalf.

Kill them all.

No! Maybe they're here to balance Wyak's curse. Daemon blinked tangled white hair from her eyes and tried to fashion a simple weave, to create something not drawn from fire and anger. Questing threads of air and earth she opened her palms. Soft white and green filaments twirled and twisted in the aetheric ebb and swell of the world's tides. Her fingers were clumsy, the threads tangled and unruly knots warped her creation into a useless mess. She let it go, slamming her hands on the ground and shredding her handiwork. The earth

shuddered as cracks streaked outward from the point of impact; the world held its breath. Daemon's malnourished soul screamed her pain and the fire in her belly surged.

Give me back my life! I won't be your puppet, Wyak. I won't! She wiped her dusty palms on her thighs and scrubbed her tears from grubby cheeks. Her anger swelled, the fire in her belly straining for release. She slammed her hands on the ground a second and third time, quelling the fire.

No fire. I control it. For now. Eyes closed and head tilted to the white, bright sun, she breathed in the moisture-laden air and caught a whiff of growing things.

Daemon recited her litany of goals. *Survive. Learn control. Find Ali.* Survive was a given. Learn control of her vicious Grace was a must. Find Ali, so she could explain what in the Lady's name she'd done to her, and how was she going to fix it. She dragged herself to her feet. *First water, then food.* The trail lead east and she concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other in that direction. After half a dozen successful paces, she clicked her fingers to encourage her four-legged companion. Nellie still quivered from the latest fire show, but shook herself and clopped after her friend, making a wide berth around the web of cracks in the ground.

A self-protection sensory sweep located her ever-present avian guardians. With the lack of vegetation and camouflage available, Maggie and Boo, the magpie and owl who had been a part of her life since childhood had decided discretion was the better part of valour. Daemon *was* very hungry; their usefulness was tenuous at best.

A whisper of breeze tickled her face as she trudged across the brow of another crumbling ridge, its patchwork of grey and brown stone interrupted by a scattering of straggly bushes. Late afternoon she hit steeper, rockier hills where a mob of black wallabies grazed. Unaccustomed to two-legged beings this far inland, there'd been lots of ear flicking between members. The buck stood tall to scare the interloper then gave the alarm, sending his mob bounding away. The graceful rhythm of their scattering paled when she belatedly realised her heavy footed approach had dispersed a precious source of fluid and food. An impatient bleat nudged her from immobility. *First water.*

Daemon stumbled around a huge boulder and stepped into a glorious shade. She trailed her hands along the scaly bark of centuries-old trees, inhaled their ancient fragrance, and threaded her fingers through their breeze tossed leaves. Dizzy with relief, she squatted in the welcome shadows on shaky legs, rubbed her fingers across cool stones, and holding one to her nose. She closed her eyes, connecting to the weight of earth, feeling its rocky permanence, so different from her own ephemeral existence. *Survive. Control. Ali.* Her anger rushed to a simmer, then raced to boiling point as she soldered the scars shut again. She didn't need anyone else.

Survive. Control. Her hands gripped the stone tighter, and as her anger sought another avenue for expression, the stone she held crumbled into fragments, crushed by her fingers and a surge of earth magic. She examined her palms, small cuts from the stone shards darkening

the dust with purple blood seeping from her torn skin. As she watched, the blood was drawn back into her hands, and the cuts closed leaving no trace of the injuries.

Anger was the trigger. The earth magic swelled in her Grace, its brown threads quested from her fingers, becoming thick thorny vines. She fell and lay helpless on the ground as vines shot forward and wrapped themselves around the trunk of an ancient tree, ripping it from the ground. The earth heaved at the assault.

Daemon screamed her outrage and tried to stop the magic. The vines writhed in her grasp, and became wilder, thicker, and thornier. They lifted the uprooted tree high into the air and threw it down, crushing dozens more beneath its enormous mass and throwing up a cloud of dust and debris.

As she struggled with her rebellious power, Daemon heard Nellie bleating in fear. Vines had seized the tiny goat and were crushing the life from her. Nellie's distress was the trigger Dee needed to slam the door shut on her Grace.

No! Mine to control. Mine.

The vines softened, slackened and dropped earthward, taking Nellie with them. Daemon quested a single fire thread to burn the vines. When the flame threatened to jump to the uprooted tree, she snapped it back and stomped on the sparks. She staggered to a quivering Nellie, knelt and brushed the ash and dust from her dark coat.

'Oh Nellie, I'm so sorry.' Her voice was a whisper as guilt and anger warred for dominance. She withdrew from her ministrations and dropped her head into her hands. Nellie's soft black nose prodded her cheek, her whiskery chin tickled at Daemon's shoulder. The girl reached one arm and wrapped it around the goat's neck, feeling the pounding of her friend's heartbeat, her shivering limbs. Nellie lowered her head and butted Daemon's chest. She obliged, scratching Nellie behind her soft ears and rubbing the skin at the base of her curved horns.

I should send her away. Next time I could kill her.

Nellie tossed her head, regarded Daemon with one bright yellow eye and bleated as though protesting her dismissal.

But not today. I can't leave her out here in the bush. She'd find Nellie a new home in the first village she found. She glanced up as a small shadow crossed overhead. Maggie's topaz eye glared at the destruction and then at her before winging away. Daemon levered herself to her feet and sighed. *Water.*

As the warmth and colour bled from the day, she found an animal trail at the entry of the narrow valley and followed it until a verdant billabong emerged, tucked like a blessing from Garule into the end of the gorge. Daemon paid obeisance to Garule's generosity, two fingers circling her root chakra. She wondered briefly about the Cosmic Mother's children, the highest ranking gods in the pantheon, and the push and pull of their blessings on mere mortals. A zephyr whispered against her skin and she pressed two fingers to her lips to huff a

breath of thanks to Jindi. An incorporeal shove to her back from Nellie broke her pensive pause and she shuffled forward.

The multitude of tracks crisscrossing the sandy clay indicated the local fauna were frequent patrons of the small water-hole, making the likelihood of a lurking freshwater crocodile slim. Daemon reached the water's edge, took off her tattered shoes and waded in. The mud oozed between her toes, and the blessed coolness seeped up her legs. Ignoring the sting of her scraped knees and the threat of leeches, or worse, she moved to the centre of the hip high pool, letting the moisture soak into her ragged clothes.

Her scrawny form had hardened of necessity; living rough and alone had changed her. Her nails were broken, her hands stained and scarred. The outward effects were nothing compared to how her heart had hardened. In the few weeks she'd been an outcast, Daemon's stock of kindness had been drained, and her innocence shredded. Though survival had come at a hideous cost; her misfortune and torment carried their own reward.

Dee the dutiful step-daughter was gone; her obedience, her diffidence—her humanity—flensed away with each taunt, each assault, each betrayal. She was now fiercely determined to find the key to controlling and understanding her Grace, and getting the dragon out of her head. Her magic was *her* weapon to wield. *I will be beholden to no one and no thing*. She cursed her ignorance, her youth, and her plight. Thoughts of righteous retribution for her tormentors made her burn with anticipation. Steam rose around her thighs as the water she stood in constrained the ignition of her fire sprites.

Nellie bleated at her from the shore, tempering her ire. The white flag of the goat's wagging tail was a sharp contrast to her all-black coat. Daemon dampened two fingers and traced a wavy line over her sacral chakra to appease the god of water, Sleene. She had enough trouble with his younger brother Wyak; she had no wish to invoke the ire of another dangerous deity. A tinkle of feminine laughter whispered at the edge of her hearing and Daemon spun to locate the source. The only sound now was the light breeze clattering through the spindly gums lining the billabong.

Nellie bleated again.

Before she churned the silt in the pool up too much more, Daemon cupped her hand and swallowed several mouthfuls of cool brackish water, careful not to drink too much too quickly. When she'd had enough, she filled both her water bags, waded out, and waved Nellie in. The goat charged in chest deep and drank, her tail a blur of delight.

Daemon watched her caprine companion emerge from the billabong, shimmy water from her coat, and with a delighted toss of her head trot off in search of fodder further around the water's edge. Daemon dropped to the ground under the shade of a manna gum, taking sips of the life-giving water and contemplating whether she could walk any further today. How much longer could will power alone keep her limbs moving? Hugging her arms around drawn-up legs, she dropped her head onto her knees. *What if those fiendish vines signalled*

her earth magic was as tainted as her fire? Garule, the Goddess of Earth had not come to gloat like her brother—yet. *Mother's moss! I'm so tired and hungry.*

An ensemble of creatures welcomed the dusk with a chorus of chirrups, croaks and rustles. A subdued hoot signified the change of avian guard, Boo was on duty. The ordinariness of the descending night brought a soothing calm. *At least I'm not thirsty. Food must wait.* But she needed somewhere safe to sleep for a few hours. The scythe of a crescent moon glared above the shoulders of the valley.

A shiver wiggled its way down her spine and Daemon glanced around, she drew her small blade and tried to isolate the danger that had tickled her senses. It felt distant, subdued. She berated herself for being lulled by exhaustion and the relief of water; this land was unforgiving for the unaware. Sighing, she put her shoes back onto damp feet. Fey beings followed watercourses as often as the local fauna. A rich playground like this one would attract sylphs and sprites aplenty, each up to as much mischief as they could muster with the denizens of the physical world. Creatures of the Shayde were less likely to be troublesome if left alone. With a final and fruitless glance around she replaced her knife into its bark and grass sheath and shouldered her small pack.

Her hands had warmed with the threat and the prickle of fire sprites rippled close to the surface. She squatted at the water's edge and thrust both hands into the mud. Soft clay gave way to hard rock, jarring the fingers of her left hand. The solid surface felt odd and Daemon ran her fingertips over the irregularities. The fading daylight and a sliver of moon allowed scant illumination. She followed the jagged edges of the egg-sized rock and dug it out from the surrounding clay. It was hand-wrought; smooth and dark, with a line of carved characters and a partial triumvirate that Daemon could just make out on one corner. She didn't understand what it signified, though it pinged a muted response from her Grace. The remaining symbols were unfamiliar. To her untutored view, they seemed too complex to be an alphabet. One edge of her find was jagged, as though broken from a larger stone. She searched in the mud for the other piece. Only gooey silt slid through her fingers.

She traced the interwoven lines and circles of one character, understanding prickled at the edge of her mind. A satisfied bleat drew her eyes to Nellie. The goat was munching on a spray of blackberries growing out from behind a massive slab of granite. Daemon dropped the shard into her pocket, staggered over, and shoved the goat away. Nellie bleated her affront.

'You can eat grass. Doesn't work for me.' Ignoring the many thorns, she picked and devoured every last berry from the bush, ripe or not. It was barely two handfuls. The taste of fruit mixed with a hint of her blood from the thorny pricks and scratches. As she searched for more, Daemon noticed the tangle had hidden a slim opening in the jumbled cliff face. She edged in, but her pack caught on the jagged sides. She backed out again and took her pack from her shoulders. Nellie nudged her hip.

'You first.' She dragged Nellie forward.

The goat was happy enough to get pushed into the shadowy passage which reassured Daemon that no major predators lurked in the darkness. She'd seen no traces of dingo in the crowded tracks around the billabong either. The nights had cooled as she'd gradually climbed into the Yoorong Divide; the mountain range that lay its meandering spine along the eastern coast of the continent. A cave would be warmer at least.

Shuffling sideways into the opening behind Nellie, Daemon felt the damp rock wall beside her drop away after a few steps. A musty scent prickled her nose. She paused, trying to decipher the bouquet of odours. There was magic in the mix, but it smelt musty, ancient. After her eyes adjusted to the dimness, she made out a large stone basin set on a wide pedestal. The area around the pedestal was green with moss and the floor was strewn with broken hand-hewed masonry and potsherds. A tiny rivulet wound its way from the back of the space behind the basin and out through a crack in the granite near the opening. Daemon stepped over clumps of vegetative debris gathered around some larger stones near the entrance, signifying that the cave flooded from time to time. Her life-saving billabong would become just another hollow in a raging river.

As Daemon picked her way to the basin it began to glow with a soft yellow light. She stepped back, dragging Nellie with her. The cave darkened.

Nellie pulled away and trotted forward again. The illumination didn't return until Daemon followed. As the interior lightened, she could see the outline of some kind of temple deeper in the cave. Tall dark pillars supported arches around a small domed roof. The temple stood on a platform above seven steps that had once been painted different colours; now their faded rainbow was barely visible through the layers of dust and debris. Daemon recognised the seven chakra colours, they represented the progression of mastery levels from the Gramarye Lore and were aligned to the various elementals of her world.

She'd seen no sign of external dwellings or pathways, though there may be some at the opposite end of the valley to the one she'd used. This space and the temple were ruins, unused for years. So there'd be no food. Well, an abandoned library or treasury would be the next best thing. Perhaps she could find some old texts here, something to help her understand and control her Grace. Or something valuable to bargain for food and new clothes.

Several of the temple pillars were broken, leaning drunkenly against each other, the roof barely held in place. The abandonment was possibly centuries old. The temple seemed too small to be a centre of learning and was unlikely to hold any knowledge treasures after this long. This close to Millanthrone's border, the place had likely been looted multiple times. She sniffed; the air held more than a hint of magic, there was an unfamiliar fragrance, wintry cold mixed with the dust of abandonment. She shivered and Nellie trotted to her side, leaning against her leg. Daemon's fingers found Nellie's ears and absently scratched the goat's favourite itch.

The round glowing basin was at shoulder height and as wide as her outstretched arms. Despite a bleated warning from Nellie, Daemon moved closer. She dusted off glyphs around

the base and tried to decipher the symbols. They were similar to those she'd seen on the stone she'd rescued from the silt. It was still not a language she recognised. She could read Common well enough, her step-mother had made sure of that. She'd learnt a smattering of the Old Tongue for Holy Day rituals, but that was the extent of her language skills.

Daemon dropped her pack onto the ground and fished the stone she'd dug up from her pocket. She held her fragment against the crumbling base of the pedestal, trying to match it to one of the broken spaces. It didn't fit, its finish was much finer, and the writing more densely packed. The stone itself invited stroking; the smooth finish of the curved edge drew her fingers. She used the corner of her shirt to rub clay from the surface and was delighted when her ministrations revealed rainbow sparkles glittering under the muddy coat.

Pretty, but not edible. She dropped her find back into her pocket and stepped up to the pedestal, hoping none of the strange symbols around the base had been warnings for the uninitiated to stay away. The basin was filled with dark orange viscous liquid. Though every other surface held years of dust, the surface of this liquid was pristine. Daemon took a deep breath; the odour of old magic emanated from here. She leant over, her reflection clearly lit by the glow of the basin's internal rim. Her mirrored image exhibited a clarity at odds with the coloured surface, almost as though it were painted on. Her face was thin, making her eyes huge, one emerald green, one sapphire blue, and wisps of dirty white hair stuck out like a nimbus around her head. She'd lost her comb weeks ago and with only her fingers to keep it tidy, her long white locks had soon become a tangled mess; too hard to manage. She'd hacked off her braid, and now if any hair got into her eyes, she hacked that off too.

Daemon ruffled the liquid with her blood and berry-stained hand, smudging her confronting counterpart. The fluid felt thick and oily and she wiped her fingers on her trousers, adding more history to their patchwork of stains. Disturbing the surface had released a sulphurous smell and Daemon wrinkled her nose. Turning from the basin she stepped back down the plinth and gave Nellie another scratch behind her ears.

'Just some stinky old oil.'

Nellie bleated her unease and Daemon agreed. 'Let's sleep somewhere else.'

Daemon bent to grab Nellie's short lead rope and noticed a bright orange mist curling around her ankles and over her feet, its tentacles almost sentient. She spun around, stumbling over the uneven stones. Viscous amber light poured over the edge of the basin. Daemon and Nellie retreated as the light began to intensify. It brightened till Daemon had to shield her eyes. The goat dragged on her lead trying to escape the cave. The glare abruptly softened and they both looked up to find a beautiful golden woman with shoulder length dark hair looking out of the mist.

'Oh, Mother's moss!' Daemon took two steps back.

The woman wore black, her robe belted with a twisted gold serpent at her waist. She noted the ruins of the temple, the dust covered rubble strewn across the ground. When she

glanced back, the orange mist had dissipated but the woman still appeared in the glowing basin, her feet lost in the dark murk of the amber liquid.

‘A mage,’ Dee whispered. The sharp gaze found Dee, Nellie trembling at her side.

‘Who are you? What happened here? When is this?’ the mage demanded.

Dee’s shoulders tightened, her anger kindled at the peremptory tone.

‘What day is it? What year?’ The mage’s scrutiny intensified, her black hooded eyes narrowed at Daemon’s silence. Daemon had seen enough hostile stares in her time to know this mage, or whatever she was, was prepared to get what she wanted at any cost. Daemon felt around her feet for her pack and eased it onto one shoulder, nudging the goat to get her moving.

‘Answer me, girl. Where is this?’

Daemon’s Grace simmered. The mage was using powerful Lore to compel an answer from her. But something made Daemon hesitate to expose her tainted magic to this mage. Kalinda loomed ominously in her mind. Daemon took a deep breath and elected to placate rather than strike. She narrowed her gaze and tried to see the aetheric weave that held the mage’s image together.

‘Who are you?’ Daemon lifted her chin and asked again, hoping to distract the mage’s inquisition.

‘Who are you, girl?’

Names held power and Daemon didn’t intend to give away any more of that if she could help it. Threads of spirit wafted towards her, woven with water and air. Daemon took a step back. The mage’s eyes narrowed. ‘Who’s in charge here?’

‘Of what?’ Dee’s belligerence was rapidly wearing down her strategic intention.

‘The country, the continent, the world. Pick one. Who leads the government?’

‘The king of Millanthrone.’

‘Millanthrone?’

‘From the coast to the foothills, north to the Wilds, south to the sea, west to the edge of the Red Centre—Millanthrone,’ Daemon explained.

‘What’s the king’s name?’

‘William.’

‘William what? Does he have a number to go with that?’

Daemon shrugged, bored with the interrogation. It was time to leave. She hadn’t been able to catch the secret of the weave the mage was using. It was inverted, the threads and knots woven in an unfamiliar style.

The mage planted her hands on her hips. ‘How can he have let my Temple fall into such disrepair?’ She hissed her displeasure and glanced around the space again.

A foreboding augury erupted into Daemon’s mind; her Grace stirred at the magical threat lacing the mage’s tone. Kalinda clamoured for attention in Dee’s head. She shoved her

down. The mage was surely not a goddess, even though she'd said *my Temple*. 'I haven't have touched anything. I was only looking for somewhere out of the cold for the night.'

'Well, it's obvious you did touch something or I wouldn't be here.' The mage paused and scanned the ruins again. Daemon backed up another few steps. A squirm of fear rippled across her chest. The mage's weave was strengthening, seeking to undermine Daemon's resolve. Her anger stirred at how quickly a little intimidation had frightened her. She took a cleansing breath and focused her disgruntlement. She hated bullies. Trickle of fire stirred in her Grace. She placed a hand on Nellie's head, reassured by her friend's solid presence. Her other hand eased towards the dagger tucked into the side of her pack.

'Where are the Gate Guardians? Who watches the Timegates?' the mage asked.

Daemon remained silent, the dagger safely in her hand and held behind her back.

'Well?'

'I've never heard of any Gate Guardians, or Timegates. Perhaps they're in Raya City,' Daemon said. Her suggestions did little to appease the mage. If anything, her irritation increased with every word.

'Never heard of it. Where did you go, Gatekeeper? And when?' She seemed to shake herself a little, smoothing her already neat hair back from her high forehead with one slim-fingered hand. While she was distracted Daemon backed away further. Nellie needed no encouragement, she turned to trot out.

The mage looked up at the goat's clop, clop, pinning Daemon in place with fierce dark eyes.

'How did you activate the water window? Only those with magic can trigger it.'

'It wasn't me.'

The mage's eyes narrowed. 'Did you touch the water?' She loomed towards Daemon.

'Anyone could have opened it. Everyone on Reverie has magic.'

'Everyone has magic here?' The mage's eyes glittered in the orange light. 'Well, come here girl, I want a closer look at you. Why is your skin blue? Is it cold in here?' Her voice sharpened when Daemon didn't move. 'Come here now!'

Dee's hands began to tremble, her grip on her dagger slipped as the compulsion in the mage's voice bit deep. Daemon still couldn't feel the edges of the mage's weave. She felt the embers in her belly spark in defence. 'No. We're going.' Daemon pushed Nellie behind her and started to edge the final steps towards the opening.

The sunset glow of the basin began to darken. The mage's hair began to stream out behind her as if a great wind was blowing.

Mother's moss! Now I'm in trouble. Dee's anger warred with panic, she couldn't compete with a mage of this skill, regardless of Wyak's tainted gift and her untapped talent. Though, if there ever was a time for fire magic, now would be good. She hadn't sensed any fire threads in the mage's magic. Daemon tried to bring the fire beings into her hands, the sprites gathered below her skin, but refused to emerge.

The mage raised her hands and black lightning shot from her fingers, twisting towards Daemon. Daemon ducked as the lightning morphed into coils and grabbed her body and one arm, twirling and tightening around her, dragging her towards the basin.

‘Help me, Nellie, help.’

Nellie dug her hooves in and tried to drag on Daemon’s shirt, pulling her back towards the entry. Another black coil leapt out, grabbed Nellie around her middle, and flung her against the far wall with a sickening thud.

‘No! Stop! Stop!’ Daemon screamed. She thrashed and kicked and managed to wedge her feet under a large chunk of broken black stone. With her free hand she stabbed at the restraining coils. Unmarked by her tiny blade, the slippery coils hardened, squeezing the breath from her body.

‘Come closer little one.’ The mage beckoned and with a tug, the coils pulled Daemon free and dragged her towards the basin. She grasped for anything to slow her; her free hand hurled her dagger at the mage. It went straight through the mage’s head, her image untouched. ‘You’ll have to try a little harder than that child. Perhaps you don’t have much magic after all. No matter. I’ll drain you dry of the spark and then you’ll have none.’ The mage gestured, impatient.

Daemon kept struggling, gasping, certain these were her last few moments of life. The coils tightened painfully. She cursed her fickle Grace and prayed for help, calling on every deity she knew, even the nefarious Wyak. As she was drawn almost within the reach of the woman she managed to gasp aloud, ‘Cosmic Mother help me!’ Somewhere in her head she heard an audible click as though a gate had opened. The world in the cave slowed as an ocean of stars surged through her mind. She remembered pain, so much pain, and fear, and then falling. Her mind lurched back. Before the falling she remembered something else; someone warm and strong, holding her close.

Mumma.

Tiny red sparks raced from Dee’s belly up through her heart and down her arms towards her fingers. They absorbed the fire sprites and multiplied a thousand fold. Her body twitched and was still. The world of the cave refocused. The coils contracted one more time, sensing surrender.

Daemon *shimmered*.

Her skin turned deep ochre red, black talons emerged from her fingertips, scales rippled from her talons and up her lengthening arms. Her jaw cracked and stretched, dagger-like teeth emerged, her body creaked, and her bones grew and warped, easily snapping the constraining coils. From her back huge, segmented wings sprouted and flapped, washing the stone debris across the cavern floor with each mighty thrust.

At last!

The enormous red dragon leant down to the basin. Her large black eye watched a host of emotions roiling across the mage’s face.

‘Your eye has stars in it, galaxies of stars. You’ve captured the heart of the Timestream,’ the mage whispered, awestruck. She recovered her poise as the dragon’s vertical pupil narrowed on her. ‘Shape-shifter. Dragon. Your magic must be mine. I will have it. I will have you.’

The dragon threw her head back and roared, fire streamed from her jaws to blacken the roof of the cavern, and she trumpeted again and again, feeling the potency of her form. She was free.

I am Kalinda. You will never have me.

The mage flinched as the dragon’s voice screamed directly into her mind. Kalinda stomped her foot; three more Temple pillars tilted and took the remaining roof with them, crashing to the ground in ruins. The dragon ignored the noise.

‘Stop. You’re ruining the Timegate.’ Raising both hands, the mage sent out the black coils again, thicker this time and many more. With a snort Kalinda burnt the coils to ash. She advanced on the mage, crushing rock with each massive hind foot. Fear replaced cunning on the mage’s face.

Kalinda lifted her foot and smashed the basin. The mage disappeared, and the dark orange liquid sprayed out in a million sparkling droplets. She tramped and stomped until the basin and the plinth were dust. With the demolition of the water window, the glowing light winked out, the only illumination came from the sliver of moonlight visible through the cave opening.

‘I think she’s gone dear,’ a new voice said dryly from behind her. ‘For now.’

And that’s all you get for now.

I hope you enjoyed the sneak peek. 😊