What readers are saying

online about

Epiphany
THE
GOLDING

'Sweet, whimsical and visionary...brilliantly done.'
S D Anderson PhD – Visionary Fiction Author
USA

'...Like a delicate piece of lace
...masterfully looped and twisted into intricate patterns...'
Marta Tandori—Mystery/Suspense Author
Canada

'...The writing is nothing short of spellbinding.'
Rosey
UK

'Absorbing and atmospheric.'
Cancerian9
Australia

'For those who wish to explore thought-provoking possibilities in relation to a better world, interwoven with mysteries, romance and humour, this is the book.'
Robyn Kelly
Australia

'A deep, gripping and wildly creative plot.'
Veritas Vincit "Bill"
USA

'...The book of tomorrow. It will become a classic.'
Cilla Wilson
Australia

'Warm, humorous, intuitive and imaginative...'
Grady Harp - Top 100 Hall of Fame Reviewer
USA

'...Brilliantly enchanting...I thoroughly enjoyed reading it.'
Payal Sinha
India

'I was never bored...a fresh, unique plot.'
LA Howell
USA

'The best I can say is "Wow!" Great story with wonderful characters. Tremendous!'
Melinda Hills - Readers' Favorite Reviewer
USA

'Ms Terry's writing style is creative, highly descriptive and powerful.'
Stephen Fisher - Readers' Favorite Reviewer
USA

'Kindness as a currency is a remarkable plot vehicle, and it's enjoyable to see that measured out...This is a book we want to stay in for as long as possible.'
Writer's Digest
USA

Accolades

GOLD MEDAL
Global Ebook Awards U.S.A.
SILVER MEDAL
Readers' Favorite International Book Awards Contest U.S.A.
GOLD AWARD
Literary Titan Book Awards U.K.
BRONZE MEDAL
The Coffee Pot Club Book of the Year Awards U.K.
MEDALLION
Book Readers' Appreciation Group U.S.A.
RED RIBBON
The Wishing Shelf Awards U.S.A.
FINALIST
Best Book we've Read all Year U.K.

Epiphany
THE
GOLDING

SONYA DEANNA TERRY

SEAHORSE
ST
TALES

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Copyright © 2014 by Sonya D Terry

Print edition first published 2016

This edition updated and maintained throughout 2026

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ISBN: 978-0-9942167-9-3

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Published by Seahorse Tales
an imprint owned by Sonya D Terry

Structural edit by Deonie Fiford
Copy edit (partial) by Abigail Nathan, Bothersome Words
Front cover image by Sergey Nivens
Front cover design by Jesh Snow of Jesh Designs
Back cover & spine design by Lorie DeWorken of Mind the Margins
Additional elements by Vecteezy

Here in the fairy wood between sea and sea
I have heard the song of a fairy bird in a tree
And the peace that is not in the world has flown to me
ARTHUR SYMONS

All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream
EDGAR ALLAN POE

Not everything that can be counted counts
and not everything that counts can be counted
ALBERT EINSTEIN

Character List

18th-Century England

CORNWALL

Edward Lillibridge ..... Documenter of *Our True Ancient History*

Ned Lillibridge..... Edward Lillibridge's son

Prehistoric Norway

Portrayed as 'Norwegia' in Lillibridge's

Our True Ancient History

ELYSIUM GLADES

The elfin Brumlynd clan

Nature spirits of devic origin (sprites)

Maleika..... Clan Watcher

Pieter ..... Maleika's firstborn son

Kloory..... Maleika's younger son

Croydee ..... Maleika's nephew

Zhippe ..... An adopted water sprite orphan

Carlonn..... Zhippe's twin

THE GRUDELLAN PALACE

Gold's Kin

Known to the sprites as 'body kings'

Eidred ..... Princess of Grudella

The Solen ..... Gold's Kin Emperor/Eidred's father

Storlem ..... Gold's Kin guard and crystal keeper

Zemelda ..... Palace soothsayer/former bewitcher

Rahwor ..... Grudellan sorcerer

Forest creatures

Fripso ..... A young rabbit

Karee ..... Fripso's mother

Sluken ..... Croydee's dragon

The Dream Sphere

A celestial dimension featured in Lillibridge's

Our True Ancient History

Dream-Sphere dwellers

Passed-over beings of devic origin

Orahney ..... A passed-over autumn faerie

Alcor ..... The Brumlynd clan's Dream Master

Wallikin ..... Maleika's passed-over husband

Modern Australia

SYDNEY

Rosetta Melki..... Shop Assistant/Cleaner/Card Reader

Rosetta's Friday Fortnight book study group

Craig Delorey..... Lawyer/entrepreneur

Edith Derby (Eadie)... Beauty Therapy student

Royston Leckie..... Youth Counsellor

Lena Morris..... Health foods shop proprietor

Darren Eddings..... Former Hairdresser

Rosetta's employers

Caroline Trent..... Proprietor of Crystal Consciousness

Jack Barnaby..... Commercial cleaning proprietor



Izzie Redding..... Rosetta's daughter

Glorion Osterhoudt... Exchange student at Izzie's school

Charlotte Wallace..... Izzie's school friend

Diondra Wallace ..... Charlotte's mother

Dominic Wallace..... Charlotte's father

Matthew P. Weissler .. Investment Bank Trading Manager

Matthew's work colleagues

Charlie Samson..... Director/Matthew's boss

Adam Harrow..... Trading Manager

Paul 'Davo' Davison... Trading Manager

Celia Owens..... Matthew's assistant



Bernadette Weissler (Dette)...Matthew's wife

Sara Belfield.....Dette's elder daughter

Laura Belfield.....Dette's younger daughter

Grant Belfield.....Dette's ex-husband/Sara and Laura's father

ALICE SPRINGS

Conan Dalesford....Author of *Thoughts on Tomorrow's Tycoon War*

Jannali Dalesford....Conan's Wife

Prologue

Address by Nikolaus, King of Perelda

Delivered at the Annual Sonic Unity Gathering, Stockholm, 2031

Quoting a high-school student's speech given twenty-three years prior

Imagine a world that rejects the wheel of suffering—a world that refuses to perpetuate war.

Imagine a world free of corruption.

Imagine a world whose every inhabitant is ensured a life of comfort, nourishment, vitality, security, respect—a place where wellbeing is paramount, where all experience contentment through work that is purposeful, energising and rewarding.

Picture a world that has forgotten what it is to feel ailments such as fear, envy, grief.

Picture a world whose many varied peoples have learnt, after having weathered the storms of deception, to trust one another once more.

My dream is to help create a world whose people enjoy vibrant health, a safe, peaceful space in which to reside, expedient travel through air that carries no burden and across oceans returned to glass, a daily life that involves nurturing the local community, and interaction based solely on kindness.

This, I believe, would have every possibility of coming about upon rejecting money in favour of a system I shall refer to as *merit accumulation.*

The accumulation of merits, a measurement of generosity, would allow each and every one of us to prosper...

Chapter One

Spring, 2008

ROSETTA flicked on the windscreen wipers, staring out at the procession of umbrellas and smudged reflections.

No green light for ages.

Just red after red.

Could she have missed a signal before falling so swiftly for him?

Some kind of warning: *Slow down! Stop! Don't go any further!*

Caution flickering everywhere, yet she'd blissfully waved aside doubt. Qualms, to her, during those rose-tinted weeks, were little more than pebbles on the Path of Perfection.

The path had been strewn with spring flowers. It meandered past a river of champagne and disappeared into a forest smelling of campfire hazelnuts...and a certain divine aftershave.

She pictured that metaphoric trail again, wondering where it might have led, and her eyelids fluttered closed, weighed down by a memory too heavy to hold.

The road blurred for a beat. She sharpened her focus.

A rustle of feathers emerged from somewhere far away, misted and faint yet vividly alive. The image of a royal guard tore through the memory, an eagle-winged trooper with golden skin.

The frantic sense of danger.

Life and love in jeopardy and the searing grip of dread.

Her breath escaped in a whoosh. In her imagination, she shouted his name.

'Storlem!'

The agonised cry of a bewitcher as her lover turned to stone.

She shook herself free, hands tightening on the steering wheel to anchor herself back.

'Why am I seeing this?' she wondered aloud. *'Why does it feel like I'm inside the story?'*

It wasn't just any story. It was the novel Edward Lillibridge wrote in 1771 about ethereal forest dwellers and a legendary kingdom.

Empathising with characters was fine at Friday Fortnight gatherings, but this differed greatly. The flare of sounds, feelings, and images while steering through a heavy September downpour felt all too real.

Not disturbing enough to quit reading or disband the book club. The mystique of hidden ancient history never failed to entice. The rumours too. Speculation that Lillibridge's tale was closer to truth than imagined had coloured each meeting with a subtle tinge of awe.

The green blinked on dubiously, a squashy emerald ripple through the rain-smeared windscreen.

Four weeks now.

Four weeks of falling into a bottomless pit of despair.

Four weeks of treadmilling like a mouse on a wheel and abandoning the apartment in a frenzied rush once Izzie left for school. Solitude was no longer quiet. It had morphed into an anguished roar. Weekends at home turned silences into storms.

She'd kept herself exhaustingly busy. Took a course in remedial massage at the Neighbourhood Centre and got scarily absorbed in her law degree, having even drummed up a Wednesday afternoon study group with eight fellow students. She'd kept strict tabs on everything the business consultant did towards glamorising the Crystal Consciousness store and made a point of visiting at least one of her friends daily.

Earlier that afternoon, when Izzie left to catch a Sunday matinee with a couple of schoolmates, she paced the living room, seized by a restless impulse. The need to escape was fierce.

There was no-one she could realistically arrange to see. She'd already called in on book-club buddies Eadie, Royston and Lena twice during the week. If she cropped up any more they'd be boarding up their doors.

A crate of DVDs had then caught her eye, a glut of bad comedies bound for the bin. In a flash of inspiration she'd whispered, 'Grant!'

And now she was on her way to Grant Belfield's, hoping he'd be home.

Seeing her former neighbour again would be a wholesome tonic. Honest-cop Grant always had a way of making her laugh, even if his jokes were more groan than gold.

But that was the point. Relaxing into warmth, instead of chasing the dazzle of wit, felt like the only sane choice. And Grant—with his cheesy charm and easy grin—offered the kind of sturdy presence she could trust after all that had happened.

She surged the car forward, peering through the spattering torrent.

A sign sailed past.

Welcome to the suburb of Punchbowl

'My old stomping ground.'

Her mind flashed back to the barking blue heeler, the overflowing garbage and that nightmarish encounter with a psycho intruder.

She shivered, softly grateful.

'Thank the stars I'm not still there.'

She leaned against the headrest of her new car—same model and colour as Craig Delorey's—and switched on the stereo. A plaintive voice rang out in impressive trills, lamenting the loss of trust.

Feeling her heart start to weep, she changed the station.

'Gimme,' a voice boomed in an unmelodious chant. 'More. More. *Moooo-wah!* More, more, *more!* More, more, *more*, more!'

She gritted her teeth. The angry tones never ceased to remind her of a certain someone's obsession with Doctor Cyanide songs.

'Moooo-wah!'

'Put a sock in it, Doc.'

She again changed the station. *'..Stock market crash is wreaking havoc on thousands of lives,'* a reporter blared.

'Hasn't wreaked havoc on mine,' she reasoned, then felt instantly ashamed of her complacency.

She'd managed to retain all she had, but how many in the world hadn't?

Poor old Craig was one such example. The punishing effects of a crisis experts were referring to as 'the GFC' had cost him a quarter of his superannuation.

'I'm not too worried,' he'd told her. 'These gems are gonna bring me good luck, so my future'll be fine. I'm stoked you're distributing them through Crystal Consciousness, Rosetta.'

She veered into her former street and slowed to a stop.

The rain had eased. She reached for her maroon and silver umbrella, the one Eadie talked her into buying, the one Matthew always referred to, in his irresistible English way, as a *brolly*. 'Got your brolly, beautiful?' he'd say.

The leaden ache of sorrow returned.

Wrenching the crate from the boot, she brushed a strand of dark hair away from her line of vision, a side-effect of keeping it long, and clunked down the concrete path.

She passed the outdoor laundry, now brightened with roughly painted daisies. The exterior looked small. Friendly. Safe. For a while it had been a symbol of doom.

The prowler, a hollow-eyed ghoul who had later emerged in a far more appealing form, still lurked in dreams that descended into terrors.

At Grant's door, she knocked while hugging the crate with one arm.

The door opened.

'Matthew!'

Her arms weakened. She adjusted her hold on the crate.

Matthew P. Weissler stood there, staring out at her.

HIS EYES, THE EYES SHE loved, grew wide with shock.

He was wearing an old T-shirt that contracted into wrinkles across his broad chest.

Ragged shorts, bare feet. Unshaven. Still heartbreakingly gorgeous, but slight hollows had formed beneath his cheekbones, and his shoulders had slumped. He looked older somehow. Defeated. Vitality seemed to have left him.

Why here? He'd lived on the harbour, in luxury.

Why was he opening the door here in Punchbowl?

The crate dragged heavily. Without thinking, she pressed it into his chest.

Her mind raced to catch up with her heart. 'For Grant,' she said.

Saying nothing, he accepted the crate. Stood holding it absently. His lips moved as though to utter something. He stared at her some more.

Her pulse was pounding. The skin at the nape of her neck prickled with perspiration. The sight of him had thrown her into a swirl of emotions.

Disbelief.

Elation.

Fury.

Outweighing all else was curiosity. Wanting to know why he'd gone—and whether the depth of her feelings had ever been mirrored totally.

He glanced back into the flat.

'Er...I'll...I'll join you there on the landing,' he said.

He placed the crate on Grant's worn kitchen bench, and she noticed from the doorway he was leaner than before.

She surveyed the living room in search of Grant.

Everything about the flat was brown or grey. Plastic timber-look slats lined one of the walls. A corduroy couch made up of mediocre neutrals sat grumpily against the corner. The threadbare carpet was the dreary shade of an overcast sea.

Matthew, smiling now, stepped onto the landing.

'I'll get you a tea,' he said in words that tripped over themselves. 'Wou-would you like a tea, or...? Ah no. It's raining.'

He swung round and looked back into the flat again as though checking for ghosts.

'Um...well, why don't you come in then? Come in and—'

'I just dropped by to give Grant some old comedy DVDs. If he's not there I'll...' Reluctantly she added, '...call round some other time.'

A part of her wanted to stay right there with Matthew. A part of her hoped he would repeat the offer of stepping inside, that Grant would stay out long enough for Matthew to explain why he'd fled.

She turned.

'Rosetta, don't go.'

Matthew's voice had taken on a quiet urgency.

'Stay.' He motioned towards the doorway. 'Please. Just for a little while. Grant doesn't live here any more. I'm...looking after things for him.'

Thankful to remain with him a few moments more, she drifted into the grey and brown grimness. Still dazed at having encountered Matthew, she moved to where he'd gestured, and sank into the couch.

She continued to sink.

'Sorry about the seat,' he said. 'It doesn't take kindly to being sat on.'

She watched as he perched on the armrest.

Turning to her, he smacked his hands together.

'Tea then? I don't think I have any of that cocoa you love.'

Cocoa? That she loved? So he still remembered things about her. Hadn't completely blanked out their time together.

Resentment welled up like a simmering ocean, dark and deep, churning beneath her skin and threatening to fracture the calm.

'No thank you, Matthew.' Her voice was gravelly with tension.

He sank into the couch alongside her, so near that if she were to lean to the right, her elbow would connect with his.

She gazed at Matthew, thoroughly amazed that she was in the same room after the certainty of never hearing from him again.

Would he have anything to say about it? Anything at all? Or were they just going to sit there on Grant's sagging couch like pebbles swallowed by quicksand?

Matthew drew in a laboured breath.

'You have every reason to hate me, Rosetta,' he said. 'I can't even begin to say how sorry I am.'

His head was bowed and his eyes were locked on the floor.

She turned her gaze to the kitchen window, distancing herself from his silence.

'Try,' she said.

Matthew pushed a hand through his ash-brown hair and groaned.

'I've lost out on the GFC,' he said, 'and I've been embezzled. The guy I hired turned out to be shifty.'

She straightened. Matthew's confession sounded promisingly like a reason. 'Matthew, that's terrible,' she said.

Thought about it.

Still felt hurt.

Wondered if he'd ever felt the sting of abandonment.

'And were you left in free-fall when no-one explained?' Her sarcasm had seeped through before she could stop it.

'I've been a bastard to you.'

He thumped his fist down, rattling a cup on the coffee table.

'There's no denying that. I can't explain what happened. The money disappeared, and I ran. Panic, I guess.'

'Are you saying this is why you turned your back on me, Matthew? Panic over money?'

His eyes—the eyes she would always adore—met hers in recognition.

He conceded with a nod. 'I didn't know how to face you.'

'Surely you didn't think I'd be upset! There's no way—'

'No, no. Not at all. I just...I'm just...not capable of dating anyone now that I've failed. I'm a financial liability, Rosetta.'

He was covering his eyes now.

'There,' he said grimly. 'I've said it. Not the words you'd expect from a senior finance exec.'

'How can that change anything?'

The impulse to move closer and comfort him was strong, almost unbearable, but she wouldn't be risking another rebuff.

'Finances don't change a thing. Money just isn't important.'

Matthew gave her a sceptical side-glance.

'I'm serious, Matthew. It's awful you feel this way! I've never placed importance on who has what. You could be lying in the gutter, muttering softly to yourself, with....scraggly Doctor Cyanide hair, *ha-ha!* Right down to your waistline. Bitter and grimy and drugged out. And I'd—'

'Never,' Matthew said. 'Never will you find me in that state. It's...' His face broke into a grin. '...It's short back and sides or nothing.'

She grinned along with him, remembering the deadpan jokes they'd shared. 'But whatever happens, Matthew, I'd still...'

She replaced that risky word 'love' with something milder.

'I'd still *like* you.'

Matthew appeared unconvinced.

'So if that's all it is, I'll lend you whatever you need. I wouldn't care one iota if you kept it. And if you need somewhere to live...'

She eyed the peeling paint on the ceiling. 'Well, you can stay in the investment property. It's over in Wollstonecraft.'

'Thanks for the offer. But I couldn't. These issues are mine alone to resolve.'

A sudden glimpse flew to her: Matthew as benefactor, the quiet giver, defined by his ability to provide.

In the short time she'd known him, he'd collect the bill in one subtle sweep on dinner for a table of twelve before anyone could think beyond dessert's last spoonful. Money was his identity. The stately home with its elegant *Sound-of-Music* staircase; the waterfront penthouse and clump of acreages he'd mentioned in passing.

'Have you always been well-off?'

'Until now, yes—I mean, no. I had a pretty modest upbringing. It was the inheritance at twenty-three that changed everything.'

'Matthew, you're still the person you were before you turned twenty-three and bought all those properties. You don't need any inheritance to—'

'Yeah, I know.' He brushed the words off as though he hadn't heard them. 'So. Rosetta. What have you been up to since we last spoke? How's the Crystal Consciousness venture going?'

'Good! Really good.'

'Keep a close eye on that business consultant of yours, won't you. If my experience is anything to go by, you're better off on your own.'

'He seems okay so far,' she said. 'And I review all the costs with an accountant before approving them.'

He was turned three-quarters on, watching her. 'You look different,' he said at last.

Had he noticed the recent weight loss? She would never be slender of course. Waifish limbs and narrow ribcages were exclusive to the likes of Lena, and Matthew's ex Dette, and the gymnast who ensnared Izzie's father.

'Different in a good way?'

'Don't know.'

She rose from the couch—fighting its determination to hold her captive—and spun herself into a twirl by the coffee table.

'Notice anything?'

'No.' Matthew's voice had turned melancholy. 'Still beautiful.'

The smile he gave was sheepish.

She found herself smiling back. 'Can you see that I'm not so big-rig bulky?'

'No,' he said.

Disappointed, she shrugged. One of her Greek mama's scoldings returned in a long-ago echo, screechily accusing and as sharp as lemon rind.

...Not skinny enough...

Matthew spoke again. 'You were no such thing.'

'Huh?'

'You were calling yourself bulky. I'm protesting that claim. Might even file a Notice of Dispute under the Emotional Misrepresentation Act.'

'Ah, Matthew. Sweet of you to say that, but we both know I tend towards weighty.'

'And how's that a problem?'

Oh, it was a problem all right. Always had been.

A scrap of the past floated back, those teenage years ablaze with unproven ideas, when *Baba,* her adored foster father, despaired—as he often did—of her grand aspirations.

'Rosetta-Rosetta,' he'd said. 'What are we gonna do with you, huh?'

She'd been guilty of voicing her hopes for the world, beginning with an end to all poverty.

'You don't have to be Mother Louisa, okay? Just be a good person. Be good to your mama and baba and sister and brothers, and when you marry, be good to your husband and kids. That's it.'

'But I want to be more than that. I want to be part of a team that addresses global suffering.'

Her baba shook his head. 'That takes a lotta money, Rosetta, to build up something like that.'

'Then I'll make sure I have money. I want to initiate community programs.'

'Better find a rich husband then.'

Her mama eyed her critically. 'She's not skinny enough to marry a rich man. A rich man wants a woman with a good figure.'

Her baba chuckled and said, 'Better lose weight, then, Rosetta,' before murmuring something in defence of her *child-bearin'* hips.

'But her voice isn't soft or sweet enough,' Mama shrilled.

Baba winked. 'So that's why your mama's with a man as poor as me!'

She had assured them she would never rely on a man for money.

'I'll be wealthy in my own right,' she'd said, and marched to her bedroom, head held high...



NOT SKINNY ENOUGH.

She blinked, returning to the room with its grumpy couch, and Matthew.

His voice warmed the stillness.

'You were perfect.'

She froze. Had he honestly said that? 'I was *what?*'

'Not bulky. Not hefty. Perfect. Just you being you.'

Typical of him. Ever the diplomat, master of compliments, but did he believe his own words?

The tension in her shoulders melted away, and she breathed a comfortable sigh, heartened, she supposed, by the nostalgia in his tone. In some small way it reflected her own. He was the ideal, and in her eyes, *perfect* in every way. Not that she'd admit to it. A dream made true until...

She turned and made the precarious weave between a chest of drawers and the coffee table, back towards Grant's couch.

Matthew's next comment was barely audible.

She asked him to repeat it.

'Your curves are smaller.'

She sat down again. The couch encompassed her in a corduroy clinch.

'But I've just realised what the difference is,' Matthew said. 'It's the smile. You're not smiling so widely. My actions have troubled you.'

He reached out and caught her hand. A feeling of breathlessness overcame her. The familiar warmth of the hand she loved enclosed her in a dizzy blend of desire and relief.

She longed to nestle into him, to brush her lips against his, to slip her arms around his shoulders and hold the moment forever.

He was showing her affection, looking at her as if he still cared.

Was this fragile moment real, or just a dream she dared to believe?

Perhaps this wasn't where the story ended.

Perhaps she and Matthew did belong together.

Perhaps the card Molly Carr hid under a pillow was about Matthew all along.

Molly's prediction about a man with green eyes echoed back.

It could be any day. Any day or night.

You might be hurrying down the street...and there he'll be.

Hurrying after a disappearing rabbit. Stopping Matthew Weissler in the street. For some inexplicable reason, they'd been fated to meet.

'Rosetta,' Matthew said softly.

'Yes?'

His thumb was sliding over her fingers, tracing her nails in gentle arcs.

She closed her eyes, savouring the champagne happiness, a wash of whirly tingles.

King of Hearts. Her very own Green-Eyed Guy.

She would tell him everything.

About how she'd been a struggling shop assistant and novice fortune teller;

—how she'd avoided giving him one of her flimsy home-made business cards for fear of being viewed as 'unsuccessful';

—and how she'd worked as a cleaner at his offices.

Status was just illusory. They'd been kept apart by an empty definition of worth.

A thump stirred the silence.

She opened her eyes—drowsily reluctant—surfacing from another world.

Matthew released her hand and turned.

She followed his gaze to a door off the lounge room, a door that was creaking open.

She rose to her feet. Stared at Matthew aghast.

Behind the door was her very worst fear.

'Rosetta...' Matthew said. 'I...was just about to tell you.'

Six months earlier…

Autumn, 2008

A LITTLE AFTER midnight, Rosetta threw down her tapestry and rescued the screaming kettle.

Cluttered kitchens, she decided, were an unrivalled comfort.

Earthenware, hanging copper pots...this latest home an echo of the last, complete with mottled assortments that brightened the emptiness between stove and sink.

Smoothing a strand of long hair aside—a lighter shade of brown now that the burgundy had washed out—she refilled the teapot and reached for the carton of almond milk.

Izzie dawdled in. Snatched up a slice of French loaf from the tray. Hacked away at it absent-mindedly.

'Teenagers,' Rosetta said with an affectionate smile. 'Always hungry.'

Izzie wandered out.

What she did these days, Rosetta could only wonder. Giving the girl space, though, was paramount. Stern Greek upbringings were helpful in that way. Those frowns on fun during her own flighty teens had sparked a resolve to pair safety with a good helping of freedom once little red-haired Isobel arrived in the world.

She returned to the couch with her mug, aware of the hope she was harbouring, that her tea leaves might cluster into hearts and flowers, and inwardly laughed at how strong the hope was.

Her previous night's brew had only resulted in a bird with a ginormous wingspan.

A falcon in the future? Or had it been an eagle?

Nothing romantic about that.

Maybe Izzie was doing homework. Maybe not. Talking to boys, perhaps, on the quirky phone that eight months of skimping produced?

Pencilling-in a new painting?

Rosetta's last boyfriend said it wasn't surprising the girl was artistic. One glance around the sitting room's cosily crowded gallery walls, and guests assumed artists lived here. Or Gypsies. There was something faintly boho about the crimson rugs and vases of fake Spanish orchids. Lamps glowed ruby in the corners, illuminating a scattering of Victorian prints that spoke of dancing feet and caravans.

Yes, he'd been lovely—the one who thought the way she arranged things was arty—a welcome antidote to Benjamin who called her taste *tawdry* and dropped her with the explanation that drifters weren't his style.

Poor cautious Benjamin.

If he'd understood the treasure status she'd given her belongings, he mightn't have been so harsh, although 'treasure' was probably too mild a term.

These were more than that. They were magicians, able to spin out contentment to quell the strangeness of each new tenancy.

Izzie emerged from the hall, settled herself down at the edge of the rug and sorted through a pile of newspapers by the fireplace.

The girl's mood was anything but sunny tonight. For this reason, Rosetta abandoned the idea of asking about her day. Instead she sipped her tea and cuddled Sidelta, the silvery moggy they'd discovered in a thunderstorm and had struggled to soothe throughout every address-change trauma.

She scrolled through her mental checklist for the Lillibridge website.

Blog page:

Now set up.

Homepage:

Almost done.

Background on the author and his eighteenth-century life:

Lena to write it by tomorrow.

Lena's research on the literary creator of a dimension-crossing elf named Pieter had prompted speculation amongst the book group.

'Imagine if the time-travel in *Our True Ancient History* actually happened,' Lena said at the group's last meeting. 'I know it sounds outlandish, but what if Lillibridge somehow got a glimpse of a forgotten past? The title says *true* after all.'

'Bunnies in bonnets. *Sooo* adorable.'

Izzie held up a clipping of three live white rabbits decked out in beribboned hats, a news item promoting The Royal Easter Show. She leafed through more of *The Sydney Telegraph*—and Rosetta heard the hint of a worried sigh.

'You haven't told me how your day was, Izzie.'

'Hm, well, it wasn't all that interesting.'

Sidelta curled into a spiral of softness, the faint oceanic rumble of her purr rising up amid the papery swish of turning pages.

Warmth. Safety. Izzie was sure to feel more protected here.

The recurring images flew at her then, sudden and uninvited as always.

Punchbowl, 2007.

A lonely outdoor laundry, whitened by moonlight.

Her feet on the path...a decisive trudge toward the dryer...Mellow nip of autumn mixed with wafts of sudsy hush.

And then...

Him. The leering stranger. Emerging like the shadow of a cloak on cobblestones.

The hiss of a snarl...a hand clawing through the darkness...a sweep of terror prickling her skin.

Rosetta clutched a cushion and softened her breath. It had quickened with the flashback's chill.

She slowed each exhalation into a barely audible hum, closed off the memory with a restless shrug, and switched focus to the incense smoke: clearly at odds with post-midnight stillness in its frenetic rise to the ceiling.

The scented plumes climbed and whirled, clouding the amber glint of an ornamental crystal ball.

Izzie's page-swishes were gaining energy.

Rosetta watched her busy-bee daughter in amusement. 'Well, I had an interesting day.'

'Mm?'

'Did five card readings. Three of them new clients.'

'That's nice.'

Her daughter's tone was condescending. Ignoring this, Rosetta went on. 'Ooh, and that guy I like came into the shop again. You know who I mean...um...'

'The Geg?'

'Yeah! The gorgeous Green-Eyed Guy. Looked like something out of a business-suit catalogue.'

Rosetta smiled into her tea, enthused by the memory of her afternoon's work at Crystal Consciousness Books & Gifts in the city when the man whose name she could only dream of knowing had wandered into the shop. He'd thrown a packet of wrapping and some loose change on the counter, grinned at her and then sauntered out.

On his way to the parking station he'd made another stop, to buy a finance paper at the news stand opposite.

He visited the news stand every evening.

Every evening, when she was due to shut shop, Rosetta looked out for him.

'Did you talk at all?'

'Say again? That rustling's drowning you out.'

'Did you find out anything about him?'

'Yes! That he's now the proud owner of polka-dotted wrapping paper and gives the exact amount in coins.'

The cat blinked at her. She ruffled Sidelta's silken fur.

'I had trouble enough managing: "That's three dollars eighty please", "Thank you", and "See you later".'

Izzie jumped to her feet, fluttering the newspapers in each hand with the gusto of a fledgeling impatient to fly.

'Why is everyone so scared of rejection these days? I don't see why you can't just speak to him, Mum.'

'And die of embarrassment?'

Izzie, flapping thin arms again, spun round to go, swung back and shook her head, twin braids quivering like flames.

Rosetta half-chuckled. 'Try the magazine rack in my room, hon. The Canadian travel brochures might be good for the autumn part of your collage.'

'Geez, Mum! We're in another millennium, not the twelfth century. Girls *do* talk to guys they don't know.'

Izzie gathered the papers together, tucking the corners into crooked alignment.

'And it's not like you're someone who's low on confidence.'

Rosetta gave a nod of agreement. Try as she might, hiding behind potted palms at parties or staying silent when someone endured an injustice was near impossible for someone like her.

'But I make life hard for myself with that big mouth of mine. I'm way too chatty at times.'

Cheeky according to her Athenian mama. Rosetta's habit of chatting freely to visiting tradesmen, the postie, the owners of the corner shop, had rarely escaped the foster mother's hostile attention.

At this stage in life, she'd come round to seeing Mama's grouchy point of view. Thinking out loud was risky at best, but her innermost thoughts still tumbled out on occasion in a series of grand announcements.

Tonight, for instance.

Blabbing about one's workplace crush to one's fifteen-year-old daughter was probably something a shrewder divorcee thought twice about. And now she was going to say more! But she needed to address Izzie's comment on the confidence thing.

'It's kind of refreshing being lost for words...but maybe I'll speak to him when I've lost a few kilos.'

She circled the mug with her finger and winced at the chips in her nail polish. 'Just waiting for the right time.'

'Like when Venus contacts Jupiter,' Izzie sing-songed, 'or the cow jumps over the moon.'

The cynical teen skittered off to her room.

'He's probably married. And even if he isn't, he's way too young for me.'

A slight delay.

Then from Izzie's room:

'Anyone would think you were a great-great-granny the way you talk.'

'At the end of the year I'll be thirty-*nine.*'

She said it rather than called it.

Izzie didn't answer. It wasn't Izzie's problem. Izzie was still a bright flower bursting with life, a pretty little beach gazania blooming in the sunshine.

What does that make me, Rosetta wondered as she eyed the 1983 Shiraz on the shelf.

A wilted flower.

A withering rose.

Exotic and full-bodied and old, like the wine she was contemplating opening.

Book-club buddy Craig might have argued with that. Often insisted she could pass for someone younger and zippier if the velvety richness of her voice didn't give her away.

Nice of Craig to comment, of course, but ever since Angus declared the marriage over and dashed to a getaway car where his fine-boned female accomplice awaited him smugly, she'd felt toneless and tame and out of the game.

What would a man of ambition want with a fading raggedy rose?

Nothing, probably. She emptied the rest of her tea into a potted fern and considered searching for the bottle opener.

Royston's copy of Lillibridge's novel lay open on the coffee table.

She'd set it aside earlier when rushing to answer the phone.

She picked it up.

Its yellow-edged pages held the familiar woodsy fragrance of antique books, although Royston Leckie's edition was nowhere near as old as those from original print runs. She glided a hand across the first page.



Our True Ancient History

A tale from the People of the Sea

Retold by Reverend Edward Lillibridge
In the Year of Our Lord, Seventeen-Seventy-one



'The People of the Sea,' Rosetta whispered. 'Wish we could find out what Lillibridge meant by that.'

The cat opened an interested eye, then closed it again.

The book fell open where the narrative was musing on *body kings,* a rather disgruntled lot who made their presence felt in a number of antisocial ways.

...In the rubble of unjust philosophies, they found comfort.

In the ashes of a once flourishing faerie nation, they revelled in that race's diminishment.

When the sun roamed their waking hours, searing its way through a brazen sky, body kings took to their temples to honour that sphere, which lent their gold its seductive sparkle.

When the moon dared to float through twilight's hush, they sank into lethargies and spat words of hatred.

Within their solar shrines, they threw silver discs upon a central flame in a misguided effort to weaken lunar grace. The moon, unharmed, continued to bathe their realm in her soothing beams.

Their only escape from that peaceful purgatory was sleep.

And sleep they did, cancelling out an invitation to heal...imagine...dream of the future...reflect on the past...regard each other with an affection that held no lecherous intent.

Upon each of the body kings' sleeping-chamber walls and emblazoned with gilded lettering was this Tribute in Reverse, a grudging ode to the luminary that presided over their death-like slumbers.

> Hideous Luna
> Causes recline
> Silvers a world which is no longer mine
>
> Sleep I cajole for its cold clawing clasp
> A thrill to the body to die without gasp
> I 'waken to fire where Sol slathers Need
> And gold, solid Solar, indulges my Greed

Suffice to say, all in the empire enjoyed their terrors—both real and imagined, thrived on the gift and receipt of punishment, and cherished each nightmarish repose.

While powerless to cast Luna out, they devoted themselves to killing off their conscious existence throughout her silvering hours, and nightly rest allowed them the verve to welcome each dawn with fervour.

Those who woke to the day could only be pitied.

At this stage in their evolution, they knew no better than to mock, uproariously, the silent glow of goodness.

Rosetta flicked through the novel's first few pages. She'd already read the beginning of *Our True Ancient History*–and more than once: firstly as a teenaged fantasy fiction fan and again at the initial book study meeting. Despite this, she turned back to Edward Lillibridge's opening chapter and settled into the cushions of her couch.

I

The modern world in which you and I live, this flicker in time we call reality, was once an unimagined fancy in the Scandinavia of old.

In place of fields and villages, and within the heart of prehistoric Norway, lay Elysium, an ethereal forest whose dusk-wreathed silhouettes evoked spidery tendrils enmeshed in joy.

Here, colour would move in unison with mood.

Crimson and magenta, the shades of passion, melded with violet sunshine over the wind-tickled surface of meandering streams.

Beneath lay a pristine silence, a mile long and heavy with the whispers of the water sprites.

Woven through Elysium's mood of serenity was the crystalline *whoosh* of a waterfall. Its music often masked the step of approaching predators.

A little way off from this rushing cascade, an elf woman by the name of Maleika stood at the foot of an oak tree, troubled by a friend's delay.

Truth be said, Maleika was unsettled over meeting the autumn faerie so near to the body-king palace.

Maleika turned to the oak.

Within its boughs pixies were immersed in their work. Tiny hands sculpted and smoothed the acorns. Minuscule asterisks of light, quiet effects of beauty-creation, filled the air at intervals in dancing, perfumed sparks.

Remembering scenes in contrast to the one before her, Maleika shuddered.

Body kings—icy-eyed, golden-skinned, despising of devic heritage—had attacked and killed trees with their axes the day before, causing her fellow elves to flee or expire from shock.

Sacred medicinal plants had been callously uprooted. Pastel-hued blooms, exquisite creations of the flower faeries, were now little more than severed ribbons of sadness.

Be at the oak tree by the caverns at dusk on the morrow, Orahney's sonic code had said, a code sent to Maleika in a Dream-Sphere memory and deciphered with the consumption of Remembrance Essence upon waking.

There is an important task I must ask you to carry out.

Maleika had woken well before dusk mellowed the sky. As the evening clouds faded to apricot, her certainty dissolved into doubt. Had she deciphered the code correctly?

A flutter of fiery colours emerged from around the trunk of the oak. Orahney, swathed in her signature autumn tones, a tall and stately Clan Watcher responsible for many other sprites, greeted Maleika serenely.

Gladdened by the faerie's safe arrival, Maleika asked Orahney if she'd journeyed far. 'It has occurred to me,' she added, 'that I know not where you live.'

'Earth is no longer my world,' Orahney said. 'I died of a broken heart one hundred season-cycles ago.'

'If only these body kings would move elsewhere. So very many of you are passing on before your plans are fulfilled.'

The ghostly faerie managed a courageous smile. 'My life was lived in the Pre-Destruction Century.'

Maleika voiced her envy for the faerie's uninterrupted stay in the Dream Sphere—a world sprites visited during sleep and passed onto when their earthly lives ceased—and Orahney expressed her lament for the locks body kings had placed on Dream-Sphere memories.

'I pity you and your earthly clan,' Orahney said. 'Having access only in your slumber is limiting, to say the least. Remembrance Essence must be a comfort to you though. The power of crystal-infused Wondalobs water was still undiscovered when I lived here.'

Maleika lowered her tone to a whisper. 'Essence Bearers must be especially mindful now. Body-king courtiers have set up camp in the valley.'

She gave thought to The Wondalobs, great rock surfaces deep within the Forest of Ivy.

Purple, jelly-like, brimming with springwater and almost alive beneath their lichen covering, each Wondalob bore a resemblance to the rounded back of a sleeping marsh monster.

'The Wondalobs appear no different to other rock surfaces,' Orahney assured. 'Take heart, Maleika. They are nondescript enough to go unnoticed.'

The elf woman hoped Orahney was right. Faerie clans, whose duty it was to plumb the essence, kept watch during the day in place of slumber. Fatigue had weakened their earthly life force: sacrifice indeed in their service to Elysium's sprites.

Orahney called forth the oak tree's dryad, a moss-coloured fellow with solemn eyes.

She asked the dryad to uncover a wand deposited there a little under a century ago, a bewitcher's sceptre embedded in the oak's mighty trunk. The dryad waved about his gnarled hands, then vanished back into the tree.

Within a ray of angelic light appeared a rod made of briarwood, crowned with a crystal of palest rose. Part of the wand was swathed in dark fabric.

Orahney gestured to the floating manifestation.

'This, Maleika, was left for you by your future son.'



'I AM TO BECOME A MOTHER?'

Overjoyed, Maleika beamed at the news.

'In three season-cycles, you and Wallikin will sing a boy into existence.'

'And so you are acquainted with my future son in the Dream Sphere!'

'Not quite.' Orahney retrieved the wand from its place in the air and passed it to Maleika. 'I knew him in the Elysium of the past. After the twelfth anniversary of his birth, he will be trapped awhile in the Pre-Destruction Century.'

Maleika's grip faltered. The wand slipped from her grasp, landing lightly among the oak's fallen leaves.

'A time-traveller in an earthly body? Is this possible, Orahney? I'd thought the body kings had no place in our Dream Sphere.'

'The boy will not travel to the past through any power of his own. The gold ones will force this upon him.'

'How I shall miss him! Promise me he'll come back,' Maleika implored, rescuing the fallen wand from the curling leaves at her feet. 'Please promise me that.'

Orahney's eyes softened, yet her words remained firm. 'I cannot say. To reveal such knowledge would unravel the spiral of fate.'

Silence settled between them.

Orahney spoke again, her voice urgent. 'Now listen closely, my friend. I'm to make an earnest request. If it goes unheeded, many will suffer.'

The fabric the wand had arrived in unfurled into a hooded cloak. Orahney passed the garment to the elf woman who accepted it uncertainly.

'You must become a Grudellan Palace bewitcher. You must attend a Crystalling.'

Maleika blinked, hastening to understand. 'A Crystalling?'

'An infant-naming ceremony. You must bless the child with this wand.'

Orahney acknowledged the wand with a single tap-tap against its rose-hued shard. The crystal chimed at her touch, regaling the dusk with silver-bell clarity.

'It is the only way to protect the one who will call you Mother.'

Maleika contemplated the request, drawing a slow breath.

Infiltrating the palace would not be without risk, yet could she afford to turn from this task?

She gazed at the glowing wand. Its twilit warmth seeped into her skin.

'I shall carry this out then,' she said. 'For him.'

II

FIFTEEN SEASON-CYCLES ON

By the fire, cloaked in silver, Pieter of the Brumlynds stared listlessly at the clouds. He'd not known how tired a boy of twelve season-cycles could become.

'Always sleep when the sky lightens,' Maleika told him. 'The nights here in Elysium Glades are sad imposters of the Dream Sphere.'

Pieter wriggled out of his silver cape to take another cup of berry cider.

'But I can never get all of it done,' he said.

The boy, an impatient one, supposed he could return all of Elysium to its former tranquil safeness within the flap of a bluebird's wing. The body kings would be led elsewhere and then, he promised Maleika, he would sleep all the slumbers missed in one.

He could wake to the Dream Sphere forever once this was achieved.

Maleika sighed. 'One day, my son, you will fully understand the importance of rest.'

When sun-up brought a glow to the hillside, Maleika sent off the fireflies and insisted Pieter accompany his clan in their journey to the Dream Sphere.

Pieter was less reluctant that morning. He stepped into the circle of candle canes where the sleeping wagons were stationed, as did his mother Maleika and the other four of their clan, then made a wish that courtiers clad in sprite-seeing cloaks would fail to notice his otherwise invisible haven.

Once asleep, the Brumlynd clan floated in spirit-form up to the world that was theirs before birth and arrived at an ethereal twisting staircase and the sparkling gates of the Devic Great Hall.

The first in the Dream Sphere to greet them was Wallikin, Pieter's passed-over father, who was taken by force to the Grudellan Palace when the youngest of the Brumlynds was an infant.

Body kings in sprite-seeing cloaks had stolen the elfin father from his clan nine season-cycles earlier and attempted to make him solid like themselves and unmagical.

They were unable to drain him of heart-centred beauty-creation entirely, and so he escaped the mesmerising illusion of lack and greed.

The sand dunes of the Grudellan Palace, in which Wallikin was forced to mine gold, were rife with docile elves who believed themselves fortunate to be presented with tiny gold discs at the close of each season.

In his frustration with the other prisoners' misguided loyalty, he'd expired of a broken heart.

Pieter had marvelled over the story many a time. 'The gold had to be offered back to the gifter,' Wallikin was wont to say with incredulous brow. 'Failing to give up our gift was considered worthy of malnutrition and death.'

'And so you had no choice other than to toil exhaustively and relinquish all rewards for your labours,' Pieter would say, as though puzzling over this would somehow deem it justifiable. 'You could not do your own work, you had to do theirs! And all for the fleeting privilege of holding gold droplets in your hand.'

A punishment indeed. Useless, flat pebbles traded for the life-needs that Wallikin already had in plenty before his imprisonment: nourishment and shelter! It was a currency born of the crudest ignorance.

Alcor, a silver-bearded Dream Master, floated swiftly towards Pieter. Those not fully aware of the Dream Sphere's hierarchies might have distinguished him as a father of the gods, and yet Alcor was but a guide.

Pieter observed the jewel in Alcor's crown, which emanated soothing light, and contemplated the anklets he wore, splendid cylinders of a metal unknown in the earthly world.

Radiating the entire spectrum's colours, and then some, the anklets symbolised a humbleness to serve those of devic heritage: sprite clans of the Earth such as the elfin Brumlynds; and angels—passed-over sprites—of the celestial Dream Sphere such as Wallikin and the autumn faerie Orahney.

The Dream Master was not fully rid of his recollections. He'd once lived a life as a body-king trooper. Although his conversion was oftentimes harrowing, the more dark realities Alcor left behind, the further he progressed through the devic hierarchy.

Within the Corridor of the Dawntide, far-flung sunbeams lined the floors.

Ceilings, although there were none, were made feasible by projected coverings: cobweb veils of aqua sea spray.

At the end of the Devic Great Hall were three doorways.

Maleika chose the left this time. Undecided about stepping towards the one in the middle as he usually did, Pieter turned to a different door.

Who was behind it, and why?

Who was he called upon to assist?

'The right-hand one, please, Master,' he said.

Alcor opened the door.

'You are to visit the future.'

Rosetta placed *Our True Ancient History* back on the coffee table. The book fell shut with a muted thump.

She knew what lay ahead on the following pages, descriptions of a timeframe that could easily have been her own.

How the author, a British reverend born in 1730, could have envisaged the digital age with such astounding accuracy was a topic of interest within the book club.

Maybe Lena was right. Maybe the author witnessed today's world somehow, along with a magical Scandinavia from aeons ago that had left no trace for historians. Intuitive visions, perhaps? Was he an unacknowledged prophet?

Considering he hadn't initiated *Our True Ancient History,* this seemed unlikely. Lillibridge was a scribe, a documenter. He'd attributed his storytelling to those elusive People of the Sea.

She yawned. Time to turn in. The Shiraz could wait another night.

And Lillibridge's elf would have to step through the door without her.

II

The elf stepped through the door.

His spirit self was now embroiled in a state of affairs he had never thought possible, all while his physical self lay slumbering in the forest! Dream Sphere journeys were full of surprises.

Here Pieter was, within a structure of sorts, pondering over numerals that flashed like glow-worms on upright black squares.

The atmosphere was dank and angry and offended his senses.

Colour seemed not to exist, save for the odd splash in cloth strips that descended from each future man's collar.

Did they fear colour so terribly that they doubted its inspiration?

A haze, which Pieter took to be tainted oxygen, swirled densely around him.

Heads popped out of this grimy mist and waggled stiffly, heads that roared nonsense, fists that punched the air.

Taut necks, hunched backs, cropped hair, foreheads crumpling with a dull brand of concentration...

Pieter mimicked this stance to align himself with the future men's hopes, strove to decode the symbols that triggered their militant cries and felt the hunger behind their hope of foreseeing events, a desire for winning that gnawed at them.

The brightly lit symbols sharpened in significance. Understanding now, Pieter snapped his fingers. He seized up a coil-tailed apparatus beside one of the squares, held it to his ear and then shouted at the numerals.

He had become one of these men, a willing participant in a game of shadows that hung upon decisions and held him in survival defence mode.

Every heartbeat balanced on the flashing information; each breath another gasp of life force for screaming down a price.

And at the end of his day in that sordid cavern, after locating the man Alcor expected him to assist: a man whose heart was muddied with anguish, Pieter followed the wretch, invisibly, into the cool night air and deemed him impervious to the moon and stars.

The fellow marched towards a chariot, quite assuredly, Pieter thought, his mechanical glare traded for a happy-chap sort of alertness so as not to eye passers-by with the intensity of a currency slave.

Upon reaching his chariot—an astonishing contraption of shining red that cocooned him roundly—he jabbed it with a golden key, and it snarled like a cornered beast.

Hence, he returned to his dwelling, through streets awash with artificial luminaries.

Alcor's sapphire eyes.

The chime of sylvan bells.

Spirals of aquamarine starlight.

The Dream Sphere's Devic Great Hall had summoned Pieter back.

'That was utterly horrible,' Pieter told Alcor. 'Tell me, Master, that I never have to return to that place and those creatures.'

'That place,' said Alcor, a wistful smile touching his eyes, 'is your world, the world you dwell in during your waking hours.'

'The earthly realm!'

'And those creatures aren't unlike you, less the devic wisdom of course.'

'Hampered joy! Limited peace! A wild, voracious race that feeds on itself? I have heard untruths in my time, but...a species like ours? From our forest in the world below? 'Tis almost an insult, Master.'

He thought awhile, however, remembering Elysium's gold-obsessed invaders, the species which chose to clash violently with nature, and wondered if his notion of their warlike ways ensuring their own extinction could have been naive.

Would these meddlers *flourish* in a world grown older?

Alcor asked if he wished to complete his assignment.

Pieter admitted he couldn't be sure and mulled over what sort of insight he could offer a being such as the haze breather, insight that wouldn't be ignored. He would arrive at a decision before his next journey.

On waking, he joined his clan by the campfire, gazed at the dusk-streaked heavens, sipped Remembrance Essence and recalled only vaguely his visit to the Dream Sphere.

He knew he'd visited the timeframe of someone discontented but couldn't remember a great deal more. He did remember a vast walled-in expanse with a ceiling...and within the vastness, horridly artificial objects.

Earth's future had gleamed with pretence.

Many a time throughout the morning, squirrels had scampered over Pieter's sleeping wagon and nibbled at acorns in the still-warm ashes. Now that their day had drawn to a close, they nodded good evening to him and dashed to their treetop homes.

Pieter spent his night rambling Elysium's forests. At the first hint of daylight he returned to the campfire, now dissolved into a stream of smoke.

When the robin trilled her herald to the dawn, he settled into his sleeping wagon once more and surrendered to the Dream Sphere's luminosity.

'And what is your decision?' Alcor asked upon ushering Pieter into the Devic Great Hall. 'Will you continue with this assignment?'

Now free of his earthly mind and able to glean memories of the last Dream Sphere visit, Pieter promised Alcor he would.

'I hope to do all I can to assist this fellow's evolution.'

Although Pieter's wish to earn Kindness Merits was strong, his motivation lay in the compassion he felt for the future creature. The assignment was his to make what betterment he could to another being's existence. Whether he could help, he wasn't at all certain.

Through the Dream Sphere's wheel of transcendence he went.

Whirl of colour.

Clatter of shade.

Laughter of snowdrops.

Taste of stars.

And there again was that dutiful trooper...



...marching towards revolving glass doors. Matthew P. Weissler, as his credentials and credit cards confirmed, paused at the threshold, breath held.

Lean-bordering-on-lanky physique.

Hair the colour of perished leaves.

Pallid complexion which bronzed in summer—and a passion for golf, mathematics, swimming, and any music capable of giving him goose-bumps. He was Matthew P. Weissler, his presence neither striking nor displeasing, and he was in this building to get things straightened out.

Today Matthew wanted to see those shares hiking. He'd be giving Gillings good news. Stable news. Perhaps not megaton lightning news, only because mega expectations weren't forecast on today's money scene.

He called a meeting, discussed the impacts of the Champion meltdown and told Plimpton on the trading floor to roll up the Gallilani deal.

A nod from his assistant and he was in there with Charlie Samson, straightening his tie while Charlie yelled into the phone.

The tie, a particularly slippery form of silk, was far from his favourite shade of green. Were his eyes really that colour? Bernadette seemed to think so. She'd dolled-up the house, and her renovator's eye had now zeroed-in on him.

We've got to get you less conservative. Bernadette's current motto.

It was then, while he waited with toe-tapping impatience, that he discovered the art piece.

It sat on one side of Charlie's desk, pushed up against a cluttered clump of papers and supported by a bottle opener and an autographed football.

Comfortable, yet regal, even in Charlie's nest of mess, as though it had landed there deliberately, mid-flight.

Despite its mundane—even forgettable—appearance, Matthew couldn't take his eyes off it. An eagle. Nothing unusual about that, but the thing somehow beckoned him as if it had a life of its own, inviting him to examine its texture.

Placing a hand on the eagle, he glanced at Charlie, who gestured as he barked orders to his caller for Matthew to pick it up.

It was cool to the touch. Earthen.

Iron and white gold studded its back and tail.

Quite possibly a memento collected on a trip to the islands.

He trailed his fingers over the smooth undulating wings and felt strangely comforted.

A memory came whirling back to him, something he couldn't be sure he'd ever replayed until now.

It seared like an angry sunbeam, gripped him in a wild, fearful, free-falling state.

Charlie was still booming into the phone, and the traffic and the yells of the guys on the bank's trading floor rumbled on.

He remained undistracted—eyes closing without intent—engulfed in a rollercoaster wooziness.

It drew him backwards out of 2008 and plonked him into his childhood. Early childhood. Infancy more like it.

He was looking down at two fat little bare feet that were still unsteady at each step, and he could see a puffy plastic bubble surrounding his hips. In place of the familiar neck-tie on his chest was a bib with green and blue building blocks listing the alphabet.

Here he looked up, way up into the jacaranda tree, flowering light purple and sprinkling the grass with shadows, and noticed the faint circling of a bird.

The bird zoomed into the jacaranda.

Perching in the bough closest to him, the bird lifted its wings and began to...talk?

No! A memory?

But yes, the bird had spoken, although not by opening its beak to babble like a cartoon character.

Communication through thoughts.

Words came to him in another's voice, and although only two years of age, Matthew understood completely.

What the bird said was where the memory went vague.

Had the bird told him something important?

Something pertaining to now?

Matthew didn't know why he'd supposed this.

Another hurling of colour. Another random memory.

Winding wheels, fortress gates...velvet cloaks...pebbly roads. Way before his time though. Medieval almost, and yet he knew it well.

How? What was going on?

'It's a great little artefact that one,' said Charlie, putting down the phone. 'Got it when I was in Oslo last month. Not cheap. Not too new either.'

Waking to present-day, Matthew returned the sculpture to Charlie's desk, willing the strange images to leave along with it.

'How old do you think?'

'Dunno. Over a hundred-and-fifty, I'd say. At least. Why do you ask? You planning on appraising it, Weissler?'

Matthew looked one last time at the bird. He shook off a shudder. Robbed of his sense of the present, he had almost forgotten his whereabouts. How could a crummy little carving do that?

The reports were received good-naturedly. For all Charlie's compliments, Matthew should have been pleased with the outcome.

The emphasis was to be on the *should.*

Irritated with his boss and not knowing why, Matthew stalked from the office.

His annoyance grew throughout the day.

Judgements made about colleagues, which he'd normally ignore, today seemed to bite at him.

Even the remark about blond-headed poser Adam Harrow, fuelled by Celia's disgust at the 'forgive me' roses Harrow's assistant ordered for every woman he cheated on, became an aggravation to Matthew, a mite fanging at his throat.

He found himself leaping out of his seat at intervals, grumbling to Celia about the gossip. It wasn't at all characteristic.

In the restroom mirror he noticed the colour rising in his face.

Maybe he had a virus; the prickly temperature increase and dizzy lapse in Charlie's office were enough to indicate he wasn't his usual self.

But sickness prompted weakness, a need for sleep. Matthew felt very much awake, readier than ever to shout down the hyenas that afternoon.

After a highly successful day, he headed home feeling empty.

His breath collapsed into a question-mark of a sigh.

'So I succeeded,' he said. 'But at what cost?'

Before dinner he read Chapter Seven of a self-help book he'd untypically rescued from a garbage bin.

When he got to the chapter that followed: 'The Ritual of Accumulation', he threw the book at the wall.

'What do you suggest we do then, Conan Dalesford?' he muttered. 'Ditch all our worldly possessions and live on buffalo grass?'

He should have left it in the garbage where it belonged.

His narky behaviour continued throughout dinner. He got restless around the kids and snapped at his wife for being 'trivial' about Vanuatu.

He apologised, then went roaming the neighbourhood, numb to everything, very much alone in his people-rich world.

The moon was full and round.

'Explains the anger,' he told himself.

His astrology-mad sister-in-law had told him the full moon triggered restlessness in those with a Cancerian Rising Sign.

'Maybe I should have been born there.'

A regular moon child. Homesick for the planet that ruled his personality.

The silence broke. A flutter of wings ruffled the dreamy calm.

Matthew searched the branches overhead. Gum-leaves of blue parted to reveal...What was it? An eagle?

His heart jumped. He scanned the leaves some more, only to see it wasn't a bird at all, but a bat. A silly little fruit bat, struggling to untangle itself from the branches.

It hung upside down awhile, studying him with cherry eyes.

The bat's gaze was hypnotic. Immobilising. Matthew continued to stare, unable to free himself from the redness.

And then everything turned red—a scarlet haze swallowing the night, even the moon.

When this blanket of colour, which beckoned and caressed and embraced him, finally let go of his vision to vanish, he saw not the bat but a bird.

The bird had a downward-curving beak. It blinked at him suspiciously in the way an eagle would, but there were no eagles in this part of the world.

It spoke to him! Without a voice, it said:

'Do you plan to waste the remainder of your life as well?'

Matthew looked away. Steadied his shaking body. No eagle met his sight when he turned again to the branches. Only the bat.

The bat grunted, angry probably at its lack of privacy, then flip-flopped its wings and soared off, in search of accommodation elsewhere.

'You're delirious,' Matthew said in a gasp. 'And you're talking to yourself as well.'

He sat by the tree and stared at the sky, eyes misting over.

The stars looked better as wet silver blurs.

The moon shimmered laughingly. Maybe he'd finally cracked.

And then...a voice, light and dreamish, whisking through the branches.

'Master, I mean it this time. I will not visit the timeframe of that fellow ever again. Too much ire! He can visit me here in the Dream Sphere, though, if you wish...if you honestly think it would help.'

Sleep overtook.

The tree cradled him, like a mother holding a child, and he transcended one world for another...where everything made sense, at least until it was time to wake up.



SLEEP HAD SOOTHED MATTHEW.

Leaning forward from the tree trunk, he stretched out his arms and blearily observed the playground.

The square face of his German watch glowed an eerie green.

Almost midnight.

He mashed a hand against the leaf-spattered ground in readiness for jumping to his feet, but before he knew it his dodgy left knee collapsed, rendering him motionless.

His body froze. The rollercoaster wooziness returned.

All that he saw faded and swirled, and morphed into a rose-strewn wishing-well built of stone.

He was plummeting backwards into the well, falling listlessly into its depths. And then he was landing, the soles of his shoes sinking into a spongey carpet of pine needles.

Around him grew a magnificent forest, the type he'd hiked through in Bavaria after leaving his village in England—although the trees here were decidedly older.

Peace.

A feeling of been-here-beforeness.

A flurry of movement caught Matthew's eye.

He turned to see someone strikingly small in stature regarding him wordlessly, not unlike a gigantic-eyed child, unruly hair sticking out all over the place.

Proud yet wholesome in appearance, like a Kalahari bushman.

A thin curling mouth twisted into an amiable grin.

'Hiyo!'

A child who still couldn't say 'hello'. Was he really this young though?

The individual before Matthew was a bizarre blend of baby and teenager. Naivety in conflict with wisdom. Innocent trust at odds with a slightly mocking impishness. In no way was the little guy threatening.

So Matthew took a sharp stride towards him and said, 'Where the fu—' then gulped back his words.

What was he thinking? He was speaking to a youngster.

'Where the *frack* am I, who the *frack* are you and what the *frack* is going on?'

The boy wasn't at all taken aback by this form of greeting.

'I'm Pieter of the Brumlynds,' he said, 'and I'm helping you with your destiny.'

'What destiny?'

'Of this I'm uncertain,' said Pieter. 'Where exactly in your life are you?'

Matthew groaned, breath heavy.

'How am I supposed to know?'

The silence that followed compelled him to add more. When he did, he surprised himself with his candidness.

'Gee-zers!' he burst out. 'I'm thirty-four, I've got a demanding career, an extravagant wife and two kids who I doubt even know I exist, and I'm in the throes of a nervous breakdown.

'Obvious, isn't it?

'I mean, you yourself, Peter of the Pumpkins or whoever you are, you illustrate this perfectly, the fact that I'm going mad.'

'I illustrate nothing,' Pieter replied, voice as calm as lake water.

'Unbelievable,' Matthew said. 'I'm hallucinating, and even my hallucinations answer me back.'

He rested his forehead in his hands.

'My boss, the guys at work, my family...everybody! Everybody answers me back. *For chrissake!* Why can't I just live?'

'Excuse me, sir, but I am not the Great One you mentioned twice.'

At Matthew's puzzlement, Pieter added, 'You referred to me as our Saviour. Yeshua, the Christ.'

'Kid, you've got me wrong.'

No-one had ever taken his profanities literally.

'I work for a merchant bank. We bankers are notorious for our—'

'I'm no saviour. Not even remotely. I'm what you would call an elf.'

Matthew turned to him, seeing only an earnest face and resolute stance. The kid was a pretty good prankster. Plenty could be forgiven for thinking he meant it.

The cheery, old-fashioned words, however, and freakish green clothing—ragged at the edges like dandelion weed—Weren't they a tad *otherworldly?*

'Did you just say you're an...No, this is getting too weird.'



THE SELF-PROCLAIMED ELF CONTINUED TO TALK.

'As well as that, I was not *answering* you *back.'*

'You serious?' Matthew snapped. 'Matey, you're doing it again.'

He knew he was acting peevishly, quarrelling with someone no older than thirteen. Self-pity wasn't anyone's friend.

'I was merely asking where you were,' Pieter said, 'to guide you within your destiny. Secondly, I do not like to be referred to as a "hallucination" as I am no such thing. Had I been solid in form, as you are, I would probably have been insulted.'

Cautiously, Matthew lifted his head to study the hallucination.

Who would have thought it might have an opinion? It felt things!

'Sorry,' he mumbled, wondering if apologising to figments of his imagination made him crazier.

'Where do you live?' the boy asked, unfazed by Matthew's confusion.

'Cabarita Heights.'

'Where's Cabarita Heights? Somewhere high in the heavens?'

Matthew snorted. 'It's a suburb of Sydney. Aus-tra-li-a.'

'And the planet?' Pieter inquired.

'Are you out of your mind?'

Matthew paused, realising the question might apply to him.

'I live in the world. The world! If you're inferring I'm off the planet—'

'Which world?' chirped Pieter. 'There are many worlds other than yours, good sir.'

Okay. Why fight it? He would play along and see where it led.

'Earth,' Matthew replied. 'Planet Earth.'

'Uh-huh.'

Could it be true the boy wasn't being impudent?

'And what timeframe? You'd be the kind to have a timeframe wouldn't you?'

'If you're talking about the year, it's 2008, and the month, since we're being fairly particular here, is March.'

'Where are you in your soul connection?'

'Huh?'

'Oh, I see. Never mind that question. All right, now that I have your details, I can finally give you an answer regarding your destiny.'

'And that is?'

'That is that—'

'Yes, yes, what?'

Matthew was suddenly inspired by the meaning of life, or the hope at least, that the meaning of *his* life would have some light shone on it, if only a glimmer.

'That is,' said Pieter, 'that I don't know what you're doing here either.'

'Great.' Matthew kicked the trunk of a tree.

His foot sank rapidly through it. The tree was surreal: elastic and gelatine slimy.

'And let me guess. You can't tell me how to get out of here.'

'Oh, I can,' Pieter said, pleased to be of assistance. 'You're likely a being with little soul connection. I suspect you're slumbering, and your physical self is preparing to wake.'

It all flashed by. Storming out of the house, roaming the neighbourhood...a red-eyed bat...drifting into a misty sleep in the park.

'That's right,' Matthew whispered. 'I did fall asleep. I'm dreaming then!'

'This realm, the Dream Sphere, is as real as the one you left. It simply has different laws. You are restless. You wish to return to what you call a *park,* a *playground,* and you wish to return to your body.'

'You bet.' Matthew laughed hollowly. 'Not much I can do without elbows, knees and eyebrows.'

His *faux* chuckle resounded through the pine-spiced stillness.

Pieter drew a woodwind instrument from his pocket, fashioned from marsh grass.

'Perhaps we'll meet again,' he said. 'If so, I expect you'll be in a better humour. Then we can talk some more.'

Wandering away from Matthew, he proceeded to play an odd little melody.

Low and haunting.

The soft, sweet whistle of a pipe made from reed.

'I've been a jerk,' Matthew admitted, breathing out regret. He softened his tone. 'You'd better get home to your parents, kid.'

Pieter wound up his tune, then sprinted in the direction of a hazy crimson light.

Matthew felt eerily alone in the twilit forest.

'Hey, Peter Piper,' he called. 'How do I get out of here?'

Pieter's voice pierced the silence. 'Wake up.'

The voice echoed, sharp and familiar, like Adam Harrow's condescension:

Wake up, Lewis. There's no way Hong Kong's gonna fix these deposits by Friday.

Pieter's voice again. This time like a murmur from the edge of nowhere.

'Just wake up, Matthew.'

He blinked once...twice...and the colour drained from the forest.

How the kid knew his name was a mystery.

Logic gained upon consciousness alerted him to the obvious. He was *awake* now. The kid wasn't even real.

Dreaming of saucer-eyed leprechauns who claimed they weren't part of his mind. *Huh!* Perhaps someone spiked his drink at the bar.

If anyone were to do it, it'd have to be Harrow. That good-for-nothing loser. Yeah. Drugging drinks. Matthew wouldn't put it past him.

Shaking himself more awake, he became aware of the cold turning him goosebumpy and rain settling into his skin.

Oh joy. He had slept through a downpour. And now he was sitting by a puddle in a saturated playground, as slick and as silly as an overdressed frog.

Matthew strolled back to his pseudo-Georgian eyesore—all grand windows, lustrous drapes and sparkling ceiling lights bouncing through filmy ruffles.

He paused by the fishpond's waterfall, breath slowing in contemplation.

The book he'd thrown at the wall: hadn't there been a chapter in it on supernatural sightings?

Determined to recover Dalesford's *Thoughts on Tomorrow's Tycoon War* he marched down the garden path and up to the golden-lit columned porch.

He jangled his house keys, closing his eyes fleetingly to the chandelier's insistent dazzle on the other side of the window. Its rays blazed forcefully behind Bernadette's prim lace curtains, a flare of crystal brilliance cutting through the night.

IV

Once Maleika woke, she was pleased to discover Pieter had readied the fire. When she asked where he'd journeyed in the Dream Sphere, he couldn't remember.

'Take another sip of Remembrance Essence, Pieter. You've probably travelled far.'

Pieter did so. 'All I recall is a forest resembling this one. And a green-eyed fellow who spoke with impatience.' He took another swig. 'The fellow was dully clad, I think, but I remember no more.'He drained his cup. 'It's no use,' he said. 'I cannot recall it in detail.'

'Ah well,' said Maleika, filling a cup for herself. 'Perhaps you aren't meant to.'

Comforted by the familiar sights around her, Elysium Glades bejewelled with moonlit dew, she turned to the campfire, sipped the Remembrance and allowed her memory of the day's slumber to return.

'Alcor asked me to observe a scenario. I expect what I saw was the distant future, and I expect it was our earthly world rather than another. I observed two people, mother and daughter. They conversed inside a smallish dwelling.'

'What sort of dwelling?' asked Pieter.

'Its interior resembled *that*.' Maleika nodded towards the Grudellan Palace. Its walls had been sharp and square, unlike the gentle curves of their wagons. 'Although I must admit the dwelling was in no way palatial...and truer in style to a gardener's cottage.'

'What colours were in the cottage, Maleika?'

'Sparkling colours of the Earth,' Maleika said, recalling flashes of silver, copper, amber. 'Gold,' she added warily. 'Gold there was.'

'Were the people themselves golden?'

This was asked by her nephew Croydee, another member of the Brumlynd clan who had crept out to join them.

'I hope they weren't body kings.'

'Not body kings, Croydee, no. I assumed them to be sprites because the mother, obviously the Clan Watcher of the two, had skin and eyes like ours, dear, although quite a bit lighter.

'Superiority towards animals was absent too; a feline of grey sat loyally by her side.

'The younger one had a snow-pale face and tresses the colour of fire. Her eyes did suggest royalty, due to their blueness, but with one parent of clan origin, the lineage mightn't affect her so terribly.

'The Watcher had wonderful lights streaming from her heart chakra.'

Pieter and Croydee nodded appreciatively.

'Her aura was warm in tone, which explained the inclusion of red in her environment.

'The youngster, her daughter, became exasperated at one stage and engaged in an odd little bird dance.

'The mother sprite's sense of hope is misted over. Her joy was once a flame. Now it flickers, dimmed by loss.'

'Why is she sad?' Croydee's long-lashed eyes crinkled in concern.

'She's missing a valuable part of herself. It's as though she's been tripped up by the gold-tainted illusion. Her mind has split into thousands of little facets—each yearning for the memory of other worlds—and yet there's little connection to the world in which she resides.'

'Then why, for goodness sake, does she stay?' said an incredulous Pieter. 'Why doesn't she get her Dream Master to mortally finish that silly useless life and go on to something better?'

'Patience, Cousin Pieter,' Croydee chided. 'Not everyone understands how to pass over peacefully. I've heard that those of the future rarely stay in the Dream Sphere permanently during one of their slumbers.'

Maleika agreed. 'And earthly life is the only existence they know. Dedication to the younger one is her reason for living there. A huge commitment ribbon streams from one heart to the other. '

'I wonder why you've been asked to help this one, Aunt Maleika,' said Croydee.

'I wonder too, Croydee. 'Tis all very exciting. I suspect I'm to assist in finding her a suitor.'

An inky blueness was blotting out the twilight. The owl hooted. Crickets sang cheerily. The sprites' waking hours had sprung to life.

The adventure has only just begun...

Discover what happens next in the award-winning full edition of

Epiphany – THE GOLDING

Ready to keep reading?

Simply return to the

***Epiphany Trilogy* webpage offering:**

- **Purchase options; and**
- **A *Four-Chapters-Free* signup form**

https://tale-spinner.com/book-1