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THE  
GOLDING

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USA

## **Accolades**

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### **SILVER MEDAL**

Readers’ Favorite International Book Awards Contest U.S.A. 2017

### **GOLD AWARD**

Literary Titan Book Awards U.K. 2017

### **BRONZE MEDAL**

The Coffee Pot Club Book of the Year Awards U.K. 2020

### **B.R.A.G. MEDALLION**

Book Readers’ Appreciation Group U.S.A. 2018

### **RED RIBBON**

The Wishing Shelf Awards U.S.A.2015

### **FINALIST**

Best Book we’ve Read all Year U.K. 2018

Epiphany  
THE  
GOLDING

SONYA DEANNA TERRY

SEAHORSE



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.

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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**

# Prologue

An excerpt of a letter from  
Edward Lillibridge  
to his sister Meredith

— Written in the autumn of 1760 —

*...The boy has led me of late into an extraordinary situation.*

*Several days ago he traipsed to the wood on the morn, telling me he would return to the cottage in time for dinner. Midday passed, as did the afternoon. Ned was nowhere to be seen.*

*When orange and violet streaked the heavens, and smoke whirled and curled from chimneys in the dale, I stood on my doorstep, paced for a spell and watched the shadows beyond the oak grove, anxious for Ned's return. Ned did not arrive home, and so I donned my cloak and ventured into the darkly mossy sanctum of the towering pines and elms.*

*At the edge of a clearing, I encountered a clue. Ned's wood-cutting axe lay discarded upon a nest of pine needles. My heart became chaotic then. All through my chest and head was the thud of fear. I could not for the life of me see any sign of my dear son, and I thought of my Mrs Lillibridge, peaceful now in her grave, and my thoughts dwelt horribly on the morbid. In my fettered imagination I saw two gravestones side by side and felt the familiar ache of woe that Iona's demise has so thoroughly instilled in me.*

*It is with great relief I report to you, Meredith, that this awful image I had conjured, of my son buried beside his mother at the mere age of one-and-ten years, was not to be a forbidding omen.*

*Presently, I heard the promising sound of rustling leaves.*

*I dashed towards the leaves that alerted me and found my son by a thicket, prone upon the ground with eyes closed. I cried out his name in despair.*

*The thicket's leaves parted then, and there before me stood a woman of considerable beauty, her dark hair not gathered modestly upwards as one would expect of the fairer sex.*

*In an accented voice, she said: 'He fell from the tree.' She gestured to the boughs of an oak above. 'He attempted to chop one of the higher branches.'*

*Ignoring her, I knelt by my son. Trembling and frantic, I listened for a heartbeat. Meredith, I speak the truth when I tell you I am certain his heart had stilled.*

*'Please...' The woman—a Gypsy—persisted with bothering me. Me in my ill-feared mourning! 'Allow me to return this boy to health,' she said. 'Allow me, sir, I beg of you!'*

*One who is immersed in the horror of a loved one's passing is loath to succumb to doubt when a ray of hope offers forth its glorious beams.*

*After consenting to her plea, I looked on dismally as the stranger waved her hands about in the air. She warbled a song—strung together with nonsense—and clutched at a pendant adorning her neck, presumably stolen, for it was an elegant gem of palest rose, one that would more than likely fetch a pretty penny at a London jeweller. She removed the pendant and placed the stone upon my Ned's left ankle.*

*Resigned to exclaiming, 'Cease mocking me, woman,' I was taken aback when I heard the word 'Father?' And there, in the*

*clearing of the woods, was my awakened son: recovered, sitting upright, a startled stare marking his ashen expression, blinking at the Gypsy, who bowed her head and retreated whence she had come.*

*Once I had established my lad was perfectly all right, I hastened after the mysterious Samaritan, intent on conveying my gratitude. Upon reaching her, I was overflowing with questions. 'Where are you from?' I asked. 'How do you know of such... magic?'*



# Chapter One

*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...her 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 soy.

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 a huge priority. The stern upbringing Rosetta had endured—in a Greek foster family who frowned on fun—compelled her as a mother to place freedom on a par with safety.

She returned to the couch with her mug, aware of the hope she was harbouring: for the tea leaves to cluster into hearts and flowers, and felt mildly amused at the strength of that hope. The previous

night's brew had only resulted in a bird with an impressive wingspan. A falcon in her 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 Rosetta had saved up for months to buy her? Pencilling-in a new painting?

Rosetta's last boyfriend said it wasn't surprising the girl was artistic, with Rosetta for a mother. One glance around the cosily crowded sitting room with its gallery-like walls, and guests assumed artists lived here. Or Gypsies. There was something almost bohemian 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 refreshing antidote to cautious Benjamin, who considered her taste tawdry and dropped her with the explanation that drifters weren't his style. Poor precise Benjamin. If he'd understood the treasure status she'd given her belongings, he mightn't have been so dismissive, although 'treasure' was probably too mild a term. These were more than that. They were magicians, able to spin out renewed contentment to quell the strangeness of each new tenancy.

Izzie emerged from the hall and sorted through a pile of newspapers by the fireplace. The girl was not in an amiable mood. For this reason, Rosetta didn't rush to ask how her day was. 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: Lena had phoned earlier to say she'd get that written by tomorrow. Lena's research surrounding the eighteenth-century creator of fictional dimension-crossing people such as Pieter the elf had inspired speculation amongst Rosetta's book-group friends. 'Imagine if the events in *Our True Ancient History* were actually real,' Lena had said at the book group's last meeting. 'I mean, I know it sounds outlandish, but what if Lillibridge based his novel on intuitive visions? What if he'd somehow got a glimpse of a forgotten part of history?'

‘Bunnies in bonnets. *Sooo* adorable.’ Izzie held up a clipping of three live white rabbits decked out in beribboned hats, a news item promoting Sydney’s Royal Easter Show.

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

‘Hm, well, it wasn’t all that interesting.’

Sidelta curled herself into a spiral of softness. The faint oceanic rumble of her purr rose up amid the papery swish of tabloid sorting.

Warmth.

Safety.

She and Izzie were sure to feel more protected here.

The recurring images accosted her then, unexpected, as they always were. A lonely outdoor laundry whitened by moonlight. The intruder’s leer...his hand clawing at her through the darkness...a sweep of terror prickling her skin.

Rosetta calmed her breathing. Closed off the disturbing memory with a shake of her head and switched her focus to the incense smoke clouding the crystal ball that glinted amber on the mantelpiece, its frenetic rise to the sculpted ceiling clearly at odds with post-midnight stillness. ‘Well, I had an interesting day.’

‘Mm?’

‘Did at least five tarot readings.’

‘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 “gorgeous” 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 gift-wrap and some loose change on the counter, grinned at her and then sauntered out. On his way to the train he’d made another stop, to buy a finance paper at the news stand opposite. He visited the news stand every evening. Every evening, around the time 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 gift-wrap 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. She fluttered 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 and swung back, her braids quivering like two vibrant flames.

Rosetta half-chuckled. ‘Try the magazine rack in my room, hon. The Canadian travel brochures there 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 alignment. ‘And it’s not like you’re someone who’s low on confidence.’

‘Nor timid normally.’ Rosetta found it impossible to hide behind potted palms at parties or remain silent when someone endured an injustice. ‘But I make life hard for myself with that silly big mouth of mine.’

*Cheeky* was how her Athenian mama classified her. Rosetta’s chatting freely to visiting tradesman, the postie, the proprietors of the corner shop, had rarely escaped the foster mother’s hostile attention. ‘Being lost for words every so often is kind of refreshing, but I do plan on speaking to him. Maybe after I lose a few kilos.’ She circled the mug with her finger, scowling at the chipped nail polish. ‘I’m just waiting for the right time.’

‘Like when Venus contacts Jupiter. Or the cow jumps over the moon.’ The cynical fifteen-year-old 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, but old, like the wine she was contemplating opening.

Book-club buddy Craig would have argued with that. Often admired her exuberance and insisted she could pass for a glowing-eyed thirty-year-old. Nice of Craig to say that, of course, but ever since Angus fled the marriage with a slender, hipless gymnast, she’d felt toneless and tame and out of the game.

What would a youthful executive want with a fading raggedy rose? Nothing probably. She emptied the remainder 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 woody fragrance of antique books, although Royston’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 a half-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 unjustified 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 screaming sky, body kings took to their temples to honour that sphere, which lent their gold its seductive sparkle, and when the moon floated placidly through twilight's hush, they spat words of hatred.

Within their solar shrines, they threw silver discs upon a central flame in a misguided effort to weaken lunar grace. And yet the moon 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 they could not cancel Luna out, they could at least kill off their conscious existence throughout her silvering hours, and nightly rest allowed them the strength 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 the opening chapter and settled into the cushions of her couch.

## I

**T**he modern world in which you and I now live, this flicker in time we call reality, was naught but 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 was 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 faerie so near to the body-king palace.

Maleika turned to the oak. Within its boughs were pixies 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 fulfil.*

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 sonic 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, 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, and almost alive beneath their lichen covering. Once filled with spring water, each bore an astounding 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.’

Maleika hoped Orahney was right. The faerie clans, whose task 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 the tree. ‘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.’

‘A time-traveller in an earthly body? Is this possible, Orahney?’

‘Not normally.’

‘I would have thought the body kings’ locks on our Dream Sphere access had prevented us from...’

‘Unusual, I agree.’

‘If you are referring to him travelling in slumber, I would understand.’

“The boy will not travel through any power of his own. The gold ones will force this upon him.”

Maleika took in a small, sharp breath and wrung her plump hands in concern.

“Do not let this vex you, Maleika. When he arrives in the Pre-Destruction Century, I will keep him safe. I can promise you this, for it has already occurred.”

“How I shall miss him!” Maleika contemplated the curling leaves at her feet. “Tell me, though, he will return in good time, will he not?”

“I cannot tell you, Maleika. To reveal your fates might harm the natural scheme of events. Now listen closely, my friend. I must ask you to fulfil a task. If the task is not carried out, many will suffer.” The fabric enclosing the wand unfurled into a hooded cloak. Orahney passed both cloak and wand to Maleika. The elf woman accepted them uncertainly. “First of all,” said the faerie, “you must adopt the disguise of a Grudellan Palace bewitcher, and then you must attend a crystallising.”

“A crystallising?”

“An infant-naming ceremony. It is a gathering in one of the body-king temples where bewitchers bless newborns with crystal wands. I implore you to carry this out, Maleika. Infiltrating the Grudellan Palace will not be without risk, but it is crucial to the welfare of your son-to-be.”

## II

### FIFTEEN SEASON-CYCLES ON

**B**y 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. In fact, 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 not happen across their 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 had been 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 many season-cycles earlier and had attempted to make him solid like themselves and unmagical. They were unable to drain him of heart-centred beauty-creation entirely, and so he had escaped being mesmerised by the 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 fellow prisoners’ misguided loyalty, he 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 so that you could momentarily hold 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 Brunlynds; 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 had 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. Pieter, undecided as to whether to step towards the one in the middle as he usually did, 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 the book back on the coffee table. It 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 what appeared to be 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 modern world in psychic glimpses, along with a magical Scandinavia

from aeons ago that left no trace for historians. Considering he hadn't initiated *Our True Ancient History*, this seemed unlikely. Lillibridge had been a scribe, a documenter. He'd attributed his ideas to those elusive People of the Sea.

She yawned. Time to turn in. She would open the Shiraz another night. Lillibridge's elf would have to step through the door without her.

### III

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 supposed was tainted air, 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 that crumpled with a dull brand of concentration...Pieter mimicked this stance in an effort 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, then shouted at the numerals. He had become one of these men, a willing participant in a fatally sombre game 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 having located the one Alcor expected him to assist: a man whose heart was muddied with anguish, Pieter followed the fellow, invisibly, into the cool night air and noticed him to be impervious to the moon and stars. He observed as the fellow switched off his mechanical side and donned a happy-chap expression so as not to glare at passers-by with the cold intensity of a currency servant. The fellow marched to his chariot—an astonishing contraption of shining red that cocooned him roundly—and in this 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 for once if his notion that their warlike ways ensured their extinction might have been naive. Would these meddlers flourish in a world grown older?

Before Pieter could wonder any longer, Alcor asked him 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. It was an ignorant one he would be dealing with after all. He would arrive at a decision before his next slumbering 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. The timeframe 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 back to their treetop homes.

Pieter spent his night rambling Elysium's forests and at the first hint of daylight 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 thirst for growth and desire for Kindness Merits was strong in him, 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 the sign on his office  
and credit cards confirmed, with a presence that was neither striking

nor displeasing; a lean, bordering on lanky, physique; hair the colour of perished leaves; a pallid complexion, which bronzed in summer; and a passion for golf, mathematics, swimming, and any music capable of giving him goosebumps. He was Matthew P Weissler, 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 Sanders, straightening his tie while Charlie yelled into the phone. The tie was a particularly slippery form of silk, not his favourite shade of green. Were his eyes really that colour? Bernadette seemed to think so. She'd dolled-up the house and now her renovator's eye was trained 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.

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. The memory 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 heady rollercoaster sensation. 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 flew closer and 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. Communicating through thoughts. Words that came to him in another's voice. And although not yet two years of age, Matthew understood completely. What the bird said was where the memory went vague. Hadn't he been told something important? Something that might have even pertained 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. Now, where are the reports you wanted me to see?'

Matthew looked one last time at the bird. He shook off a shudder. Snatched of his sense of the present a moment ago, he had almost forgotten his whereabouts. How could a crummy little carving have done 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 ordered regularly for each 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 and a need for sleep, and 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. 'So I succeeded,' he said with a sigh. 'Succeeded at what?'

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. After apologising he 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,' he said, nodding at the moon. A regular moon child. Homesick for the luminary that ruled his personality.

The silence broke. A flutter of wings ruffled the dreamy calm. Matthew searched the branches overhead. Gumleaves of blue, tipped with silver, 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 for a while, studying him with cherry eyes.

The bat's gaze was hypnotic. Immobilising. Matthew continued to stare, unable to free himself from the redness. Now everything had become red, a blur of scarlet blotting out 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.

'I'm delirious,' Matthew said in a gasp. 'And I'm talking to myself as well.'

He sat by the tree and stared at the sky. His eyes misted over. The stars looked better as wet silver blurs.

'I've gone mad,' he growled.

Sleep overcame him. The faint sound of a young voice whisked past. '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.'

The tree trunk supported Matthew's head as 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-strewn 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 spongy carpet of pine needles. Around him grew a magnificent forest, the type he'd hiked through in Bavaria—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 a child 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?'

'I don't know,' said Pieter with a shrug. 'Where exactly in your life are you?'

Matthew groaned. 'How am I supposed to know? Jeezus! 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 am not illustrating anything,' corrected Pieter.

'Christ! I'm hallucinating, and even my hallucinations answer me back.' Matthew rested his forehead in his hands. 'My boss, the guys at work, my family...everybody! Everybody answers me back. Why can't I just live?'

'Excuse me, sir, but I am *not* the avatar you mentioned twice.' At Matthew's puzzlement, Pieter added, 'You referred to me as Jesus, and then you called me Christ.'

'Kid, you've got me wrong.' Matthew couldn't help grinning to himself. 'The Prince of Peace is taller, for a start.'

'I'm no prince. 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 eccentric green clothing he wore, fuzzy in parts like moss, did look 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? I hate to tell you this, matey, but you're doing it again.' Deep down, Matthew knew he was acting peevisly, quarrelling with someone no older than thirteen. Self-pity wasn't anyone's friend.

'I was merely asking you where you were in order to direct 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, unsure whether apologising to figments of his own imagination made him any crazier.

‘Where do you live?’ the strange boy asked cheerily. He was 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 then realised the same question might apply to him, personally. ‘I live in the world. The world! If you’re inferring I’m off the planet—’

‘What world?’ chirped Pieter. ‘There are many worlds other than yours, you know.’

Okay. Why fight it? He would play along and see where it led. ‘Earth,’ he said. ‘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. Its weirdly elastic texture gave him the sensation of having plunged his foot into jelly. ‘And let me guess. You can’t tell me how to get out of here.’

‘Oh, I can.’ Pieter was pleased to be of assistance. ‘You’re presumably a being with very little soul connection, therefore I can safely

guess that right now you are slumbering. I suspect your physical self wakes to the day. Do you remember falling asleep?’

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 said. ‘I did fall asleep. I’m dreaming then!’

‘You want to go now, I see,’ Pieter said, turning.

‘You bet.’

Pieter drew from his pocket a woodwind instrument fashioned from marsh grass. ‘Perhaps we’ll meet again. 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 *have* been a bit of a jerk,’ Matthew admitted. 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 twilight forest. ‘Hey, Peter Piper,’ he called. ‘How do I get out of here?’

Pieter’s voice pierced the silence. ‘Wake up.’ It sounded derogatory in the same way smart-arse Adam Harrow would address him: *Wake up, Weissler. There’s no way Hong Kong’s going to fix these deposits by Friday.*

Pieter’s voice again. This time it sounded well-meaning. ‘Just wake up, Matthew.’

How the kid guessed his name was a puzzle to Matthew. Logic gained upon waking alerted him to the obvious. The scenario had occurred within a dream.

Dreaming of saucer-eyed leprechauns who insisted 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 dampness settling into his skin. Rain. He was sitting in a playground while the clouds showered down.

He strolled back to his pseudo-Georgian eyesore and stood by the fishpond’s waterfall in contemplation. The book he’d thrown at the wall: hadn’t there been a chapter in it on supernatural sightings?

Intent on recovering Dalesford's *Thoughts on Tomorrow's Tycoon War* from the floor of his study, he marched down the garden path towards the chandelier's blaze, a swirl of crystal brilliance glinting in fragments behind the primly veiled windows.